One For the Road

BY JAMES D. WILLIAMS

The other day I picked up a musical magazine and read where one of the large record companies is going to re-issue a memorial album of music that features the magic trumpet of Hank Larkins.

Of course Hank Larkins is not his real name, but perhaps after I tell my story you will understand why I don't use his real name.

Back home I have a whole batch of records by Hank, and whenever I get the blues I sit down and turn off the lights and listen to those records. Listen to that high clear trumpet that's almost like the voice of a woman, crying and moaning for a man that's gone.

That's the kind of music Hank played. The music that creeps down inside you, till it grabs your heart and wrings and twists your soul, until you want to cry.

The first time I saw Hank was in a dingy night club in New York, that had a five piece band composed of some pretty poor musicians. The night I walked into the place, the first person I saw was Hank, leaning on the bar, toying with a glass like he couldn't make up his mind whether to drink the stuff or throw it down the drain.

I asked the bartender "Who's the kid, he looks like he ought to be home in bed."

Mike the bartender just grunted and told me "That's the new trumpet player."

In a pig's eye," I said, "that cat looks as if he couldn't play the first note on the scale."

Mike laughed and said "Bet you ten bucks you change your tune."

"Mike you've got a bet."

When the intermission was over the kid walked up to the band stand and picked up a battered trumpet. He started playing notes and after two notes I knew I had lost my money. He didn't play any real music, just notes, but he laid the notes end on end in a lazy ramblin fashion that was music in itself.

The band started off playing an oldie "Muskrat Ramble" and the kid played Dixieland like his name was Armstrong or Kid Orey. He had the crowd at his feet and he knew it.

Then the band swung into "St James Infirmary Blues." And Lord that's a nasty blues. And the kid played it like it was meant to be played.

"Going down St. James Infirmary
See my baby there
Stretched out on a long white table
So cold so calm so fair."

The kid took that trumpet and he rode up to paradise on it. The notes came out clear and sweet and it was like a lullaby, a mother sings when night lies heavy.

"Though she treated me mean and low down
Somehow I didn't care
Cause the Lord knows she was a good gal
And I'll meet her again somewhere."

And the music took you away from a dingy cheap bar, back to the days when life was good, and you cried for all the yesterdays that were now gone and dead.

"Let her go let her go Lord let her
Wherever she may be
She may look the whole world over
But she'll never find another sweet man like me."

Sweet trumpet play it low and mean, play it and tell the people what the blues really mean. Blues aren't played in polite society, but its real music, music from the heart. And the kid played with his heart.

But at the last chorus something strange happened. The kid stopped reaching for high notes, his head sank up and up until he pressed his lips to it, and he kept moving on. He kept going up and up until he reached a note that wasn't even on a trumpet and pressed it. The tone he trumpted down from his heart seemed to hang in the air as if he had been betrayed.

When he came down from the band stand I asked him why he had tried for a note that no human could make.

"You know," he said, "ever since I was a kid and saw my first trumpet player, I've had the desire to make a note that nobody else has made. It might sound silly but I've got to make that note. It's in my heart, and part of me, and I can never be happy until I get it."

After that I didn't see him for a long time. From time to time I heard reports about him. He got a break with a big name band but his desire to hit that note and the terrible chance he made when he failed caused him to lose that job.

Finally after two years he came back to New York to the same bar where I had first seen him. When I saw him again, I could see that the angel of death was walking by his side. He was thin as a rail, and his eyes were empty and vacant. When we talked he didn't say much, just listened with that vacant look in his eyes.

When it came time to go on the band stand, he told me, "Look Pops, I'm going to do it this time. I've only got this one chance."

The music started and the kid played his trumpet. His tone now was sweet and tender and sadness laughed before. When he started on the "St. James Infirmary Blues" I thought I would cry. It was mournful music, that told of life that's lived rough and hard.

Then when he started to reach for that note I knew he was going to make it. He didn't hesitate at all, but went straight to it. Up and up he went past C, way past C, but he got near his note and I held my breath. And when he hit it all heaven broke loose inside me. It was poetry, it was love, it was life, and the kid had made it. His dream was real.

But when he took his trumpet down it fell from his hand to the floor, and he slumped down beside it." When I reached him he was unconscious. I took him to the hospital, and the doctor said he had a hemorrage and was going to die.

A day later he did died, but before he passed away he told me "Pops I made it, I'm happy now."

Maybe now you can understand why I cry a little when I hear that sweet trumpet, and think about the kid who chased a dream and finally caught it.

"When I die I want you to bury me in a black box and a stetson hat. Put a $20 gold piece on my watch chain. So the boys will know I died standing pat."

LEARNING TO BAKE AN APPLE PIE — Miss Thelma Alfred, student at the Margaret Murray Washington Vocational high school of Washington, D. C., exhibits her first apple pie which she learned to make at the school under the direction of her teacher, Miss G. E. Jones. Now, while apples are plentiful, the school cafeteria serves them in many delicious ways. The U. S. Department of Agriculture encourages increased consumption of abundant crops to help assure their maximum use. — USDA Photo by Forsythe.

WAC RECRUITS ENJOY COMRADESHIP—Young women of the Women's Army Corps, undergoing bivouac training in the field, close their day by singing Army songs and toasting marshmallows.

FEDERAL AID TO EDUCATION IS URGED BY GORE

WASHINGTON, D. C. — The need for federal aid to education is stressed by Dr. George W. Gore, Jr., president of the American Teachers Association, in a statement appearing in the February issue of the JOURNAL of the National Education Association.

In his signed NEA JOURNAL statement, Dr. Gore, who is dean of the Tennessee A. and I. State College, at Nashville, and executive secretary of the Tennessee Negro Education Association makes the following observations with regard to federal school aid: "A significant majority of negro boys and girls resides in state where a dual system of public education is legally required.

"These states are almost without exception, below the national average with respect to such items as income payment per capita of population, income payment per child of school age, current expenditure per pupil for public education thru state and local sources, salary of instruction staff, and value of public-school property per pupil.

"Even when the financial effort of one of these sttes exceeds the national average on the basis of relative financial effort to support public schools, the ratio of children to adults is so high that the resulting service are of necessity spread thin. Without federal aid most southern states are not able to maintain acceptable school systems for the boy and girls of either racial group.

"Altho the states in which a majority of Negro boys and girls attend schools are increasing their financial effort and are improving routines, the accumulated differentials of years can not be wiped out without outside assistance.

"According to a recent tudy, at least a half billion dollars would be necessary in the South to make the school plants available to Negro boys and girs equal to those now available to white boys and girls. In addition to this, there is the rising cost of all phases of the South's educational program.

"Many states making relatively great effort to provide good schools for their children fall far short of the mark because of limited tax resources.

"In 1947, for example, South Carolina's number of school-age children per 1000 total population was 279, for Connecticut, 171. In income from wages and salaries, the people of South Carolina had $4[illegible] of each child of school age, only $2824 as compared with $9475 in Connecticut.

"In the 1946-47 school year, the people of South Carolina expended for pubic schools about $2.12 of each $100 of income and wages, while Connecticut spent $1.52. The much available more funds to raise the state of South Carolina effort pro-educational expenditures for all states an average current school groups and will guarantee a more expenditure of $82 for each public equitable minimum expenditure school child as contrasted with $191 for Nerro boys and girls in dual per child in the state of Connecti- educational systems."

Supporting the American Teach-cut.

"In many states, the Negro boy era Association's support of fed-and girl have yet to receive an eral aid, Dr. Gore has asked heads equitable share of the limited funds of leading national organizations to available for public education. If urge Congressional enactment of S246 becomes law, it will makeS246, or similr legislation, S246, a $300-million school aid bill, has already ben passed by the Senate.

Currently the House Committee on Education and Labor has S246 under advisement. This committee must favorably report the bill before it can be acted upon by the House of Representative. Congressman John Lesinski (D. Mich.) head the twenty-five person committee, of which Congressman A. Clayton Powell, Jr., New York Democrat, is a member.

WACS MARCH WITH FULL PACKS—These young women, WAC recruits taking the 12-week basic training course at Camp Lee, Virginia, are marching back to the barracks after completing a five-day bivouac program in the field. Instruction in tent-pitching, camouflage and concealment, discipline, field sanitation, first aid and protection against gas attack are some of the many subjects being taught.

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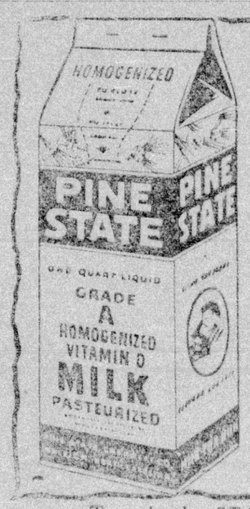

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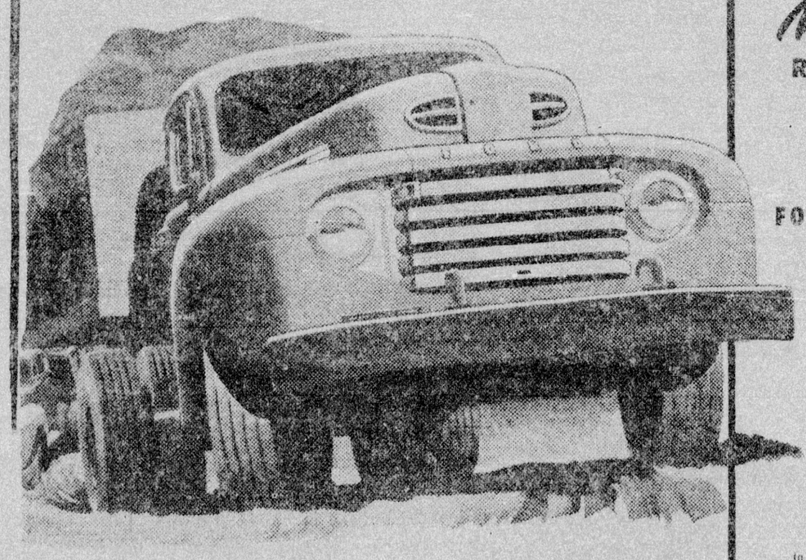

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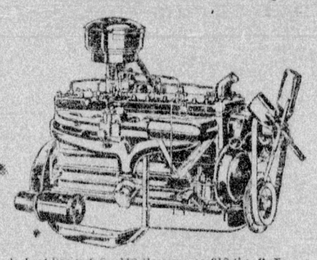

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