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# NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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## OZERIE HALL AND THE HARMONY FOUR

By Amanda Becker



The label of an old record recorded in Rockford by Ozerie Hall in 1924.  
"Let the Rest of the World Go By" Whistling with Piano Acc.

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This is Amanda Becker's third contribution to the *Nuggets of History*. She is a history teacher at Auburn High School where she teaches a unit on local history to her students. Amanda is enthusiastic about teaching young people about their home town and making it interesting. This article is about Ozerie Hall, a little known musician outside his home town, but one who was known in 1920s Rockford. Amanda discovered him while going through some old 78's owned by her grandfather. Ozerie Hall was a professional whistler, a bit of a lost art today! As Amanda always does, she did a great job researching the life of this long forgotten man.

We all remember special teachers who inspired us and sparked a special interest in a particular subject. After reading her article, I felt that Amanda is one of those special teachers who inspire their students.

Amanda attended Auburn High School in the late 90s, graduating in 2000. She attended Rock Valley College, graduating with an Associate's Degree in 2002. She went on to Rockford College, graduating in 2005. While at Rockford College she wrote her senior seminar paper on Rockford Industry. Since graduating she has been teaching at her alma mater, Auburn High School.

## NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 986-4867 (evenings) or 987-5724 (day).

Thomas Powers, Editor

## THE ANNUAL HISTORY FAIR

The annual History Fair at Midway Village is coming up on January 12, 2013. The 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes at St Peters School will prepare projects on local history that will be judged by volunteers from the Rockford Historical Society. The winners from this competition will go on to the regional History Fair in Dekalb. The winners from Dekalb will go on to the State Fair in Springfield. We are looking for volunteers to judge the projects. If you have never participated in this I would encourage you to come. You will be surprised at the quality of the work these young people do.

## Ozerie Hall and the "Harmony Four"

By Amanda Becker

Ozerie Hall, much like many other African Americans after World War I, moved from the south to the north during the Great Migration. It is unclear as to what exactly were Ozerie's motives to move, but his reasons may have included job opportunities, less discrimination, and overall freedom from the Jim Crow South. He served in the army in World War I from October 29, 1917 to March 7, 1918. According to e-mails from Terry Dyer,

"There were no less than 7,000 Black Soldiers stationed at Camp Grant at any one time beginning November 3, 1917 with another 7,200 arriving within the next two weeks. They would make up twelve per cent of the camps population. They would become part of the 92nd and 93rd Divisions. Unfortunately they were not well trained, as our army did not want them and intended to use them as a labor force but the French did use many in combat late in the war. The soldier [...] could have been stationed at Camp Grant. Large numbers were sent up from South Carolina as well as other southern states and after the war were discharged here. It was this group of draftees that would unquestionably alter the character of this area after the war, choosing to remain here rather than return to the south."

Unfortunately, most World War I service records that were kept in St. Louis were burned in a 1973 fire, so complete confirmation of Ozerie being trained at Camp Grant is difficult.

Ozerie first appeared in the Rockford area in the 1918 City Directory. He was then listed as married to Martha and worked at Love Manufacturing as a molder.<sup>1</sup> He was still listed as married to Martha in 1919, but nothing else can be found about her.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, Martha was out of the picture by the end of 1919 because he married Rosa S. Ferguson on January 26, 1920.<sup>3</sup> Rosa was born in Georgia in 1898, and Ozerie was born in either Florida or Georgia in 1889.<sup>4</sup> Rosa worked as a domestic servant in 1920, and accepted laundry between 1925 and 1927 in her own home.<sup>5</sup> Ozerie, according to City Directories, worked at Williams Motor Company as a mechanic, janitor, and as a washer beginning in 1921. The couple rented a home at 608 Houghton Avenue (which was located just before the Winnebago Viaduct, northwest of Tinker Swiss Cottage).<sup>6</sup> The Halls were

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<sup>1</sup> The Love Manufacturing Company was originally incorporated in 1886 as the Love and Bristow Novelty Works. "A New Manufacturing Enterprise." *Daily Register*. Pg. 3 October 7, 1886. The company later merged with the Ward Pump Company in 1921. Malcolm Love, one of the original owners of the company, owned land that eventually became Loves Park.

<sup>2</sup> Martha may have only been a girlfriend of Ozerie's and not his wife. Census data continually listed Rosa as his only wife.

<sup>3</sup> *Rockford Morning Star*, page 2, January 27, 1920

<sup>4</sup> According to the 1920 and 1930 Federal Census Records.

<sup>5</sup> *Republic*, page 13, July 25, 1925. *Daily Register Gazette*, page 14, June 25, 1927. Many advertisements were taken out, and Rosa's business catch phrase was, "Work done neatly and carefully." In a 1926 *Daily Register Gazette* paper, she must have lost a client's clothes because there was an article that stated, "Lost- Suitcase of clothes on Gregory Street between Third and Kishwaukee Street. Finder call Main 5701 or return to 608 Houghton St. Liberal Reward."

<sup>6</sup> By the 1930 Census, Ozerie was listed as owning the property. The house at 608 Houghton Street burned down in 1983, and the property is now vacant.

members of Allen Chapel and of the Booker T. Washington Center.<sup>7</sup>

Allen Chapel had a quartet of singers known as the "Harmony Four." The "Harmony Four" of Allen Chapel (there was another group of singers known as "The Harmony Four" at the time) first appeared in the Rockford newspapers giving performances in 1922.<sup>8</sup> The original members included Lola Robinson (who was director of the Booker T. Washington Center in 1926), Ethel M. Blake, Deserette Blakely, and Thomasine Payne. This group of four women continued to perform as the "Harmony Four" until 1924. In that year, Lola was the pianist/reader, Ethel Blake-Conwell (she was now married) was an assistant and soprano; and men such as Ozerie Hall (tenor and whistler), Uriel Ross (baritone), Roland Smith (tenor), and Tom Taylor (bass) comprised the group.<sup>9</sup>



Members of the Harmony Four in the photo from left to right are: Thomas J. Taylor, Uriel Ross, Lola Robinson, Ozerie Hall, Roland Smith.

<sup>7</sup> Rosa Hall helped organize dinners and children's programming at the center.

<sup>8</sup> "Harmony Four at Belvidere." *Rockford Republic*. Page 12. July 21, 1922.

<sup>9</sup> Lola Robinson became the Director of the Booker T. Washington Center in 1926. Roland Smith was a World War I veteran and was Rockford's first African-American mail carrier. Uriel Ross was the first African-American employee of Illinois Bell Telephone Company as a janitor, and was also an artist trained by the WPA. Some of Uriel's works were hung at Illinois Bell's office, and he had exhibitions in Rockford. Bernard Carl Ware was also a member of the Harmony Four, and appears to have replaced Thomas Taylor as bass.

The 1920s was known as the "Jazz Age," but other varieties of music were popular as well. Whistling was a highly popular form of entertainment from the 1890s to the 1940s. One of the reasons for its popularity was the fact that whistling was easily recorded by phonographic technology.<sup>10</sup> J.M. Schlitz explains on his website dedicated to whistling, "While whistletainment [Well-known songs are whistled instead of sung.] is no longer a popular phenomenon, it is still by far the most common variety of performed whistling and features regularly in television talk/variety shows, circuses, and amateur whistling contests." Therefore in modern terms, Ozerie would be known as a "whistletainer."

The group continued to sing at Church gatherings, special events, and at dance halls throughout the 1920s. Ozerie even gave a one-man whistling performance at an all-school assembly at Roosevelt Junior High.<sup>11</sup> On February 13, 1924, the Republic reported that,

Officials of the Rockford Entertainment Co., a newly formed local organization, claim to have a real treat in store for local radio fans. They will broadcast a program from station WIAB, Joslyn Automobile Co., Friday evening, Feb. 15, with nationally known entertainers giving numbers. The Harmony Four, assisted by Ethel Blake Conwell and Mrs. Lola Robinson, will contribute well known vocal numbers and whistling solos. With the Harmony Four is Ozerie Hall, who whistles three distinct parts of a song at the same time and is claimed by some to rank among the greatest in his art. Entertaining before the radio microphone is not new to Mr. Hall and he has consented again to perform for the Friday evening program.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Schlitz, J.M. *Dictionary of Whistling*. <http://synthonia.org/artwhistlingguide/dictionary.html>. Accessed on August 26, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> "Roosevelt Row." *Morning Star*, page 5, November 4, 1924.

<sup>12</sup> "Hawaiian Musicians Give Joslyn Program on Friday." *Republic*, page 2, February 13, 1924. WIAB was Rockford's first radio station that gave its first broadcast in 1922.

A few days later, on February 26, 1924, the Morning Star reported that, "He [Ozerie] has recently made a series of records for a phonograph company." Ozerie recorded two songs for "Special" Records. The record itself has a mostly red label and written in golden lettering underneath the brand name was, "Let the Rest of the World Go By, Ozerie Hall, 111 South Avon St., Rockford, Ill., Whistling with Piano Acc." On the other side of the record was the song, "The Sunshine of your Smile."

The exact recording date of the record is unknown. The address of 111 South Avon Street was a residence.<sup>13</sup> The pianist is undoubtedly Lola Robinson. According to Bob Olson, on the Website, "Tim's Phonographs and Old Records,"



Homer Rodeheaver

Homer Rodeheaver was the most prolific music evangelist and gospel singer and recorder of sacred songs in the acoustical recording era, singing before the recording horn of most major companies, most of which was on Gennett. In late 1920 he founded his own record company, Rainbow Records. [Some Special Records have Rainbow Record Sleeves.] The Gennett Company produced the Gennett, Starr, Champion, Superior, and Van Speaking labels, and also produced some Supertone, Silvertone, and Challenge records under contract. The firm pressed most Autograph, Rainbow, Hitch, CCC, Our Song, and Vaughn records under contract. Rodeheaver also put out private recordings on a "Special" label--the word "Special" is on the label itself. Discs were not assigned record numbers. The label was red, the print gold. Price was a dollar. These were not restricted to sacred material.<sup>14</sup>

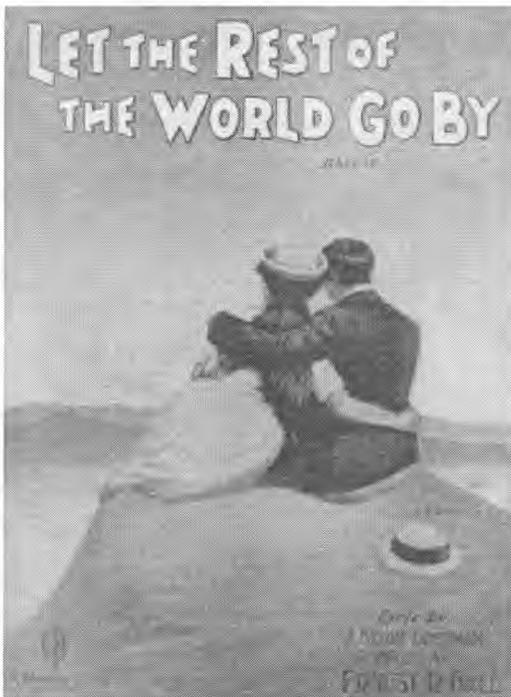
<sup>13</sup> Hallowe'en Parties." *Rockford Morning Star*. Pg. 6. October 25, 1924. Merton Jenkins was the manager of the Rockford Entertainment Company and lived at 111 South Avon Street. "The article stated, "Miss Kathleen Jenkins, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. M. E. Jenkins, 111 South Avon Street, will entertain 14 guests at a Hallowe'en party Tuesday evening." The property is now a vacant lot.

<sup>14</sup> Olson, Bob. "Homer Rodeheaver, Pioneer of Sacred Records." <http://www.gracyk.com/rodeheaver.shtml>. Accessed on June 26, 2012

The songs, *The Sunshine of Your Smile* and *Let the Rest of the World Go By*, were popular tunes since they were originally recorded by other artists and were harmless. The lyrics were:

***The Sunshine of Your Smile, Written by Leonard Cooke and Lilian Ray, 1913***

*Dear face that holds no sweeter smile for me,  
Were you not mine, how dark the world would be  
I know no light above that could replace  
Love's radiant sunshine in your dear face.  
Give me your smile, the love light in your eyes,  
I could not hold a fairer paradise  
Give me the right to love you all the while,  
My world forever, the sunshine of your smile.<sup>15</sup>*



***Let the Rest of the World Go By, Words & Music by J. Keirn Brennan & Ernest R. Ball, 1919***

*With some - one like you, a pal so good and true,  
I'd like to leave it all be - hind and go and find  
A place that's known to God a - lone,  
Just a spot to call our own.  
We'll find perfect peace where joys shall never cease,  
Somewhere beneath the kind - ly sky;  
We'll build a sweet little nest somewhere out  
in the west,  
And let the rest of the world go by.<sup>16</sup>*

By August of 1924, the group performed almost daily. They could be heard every day at the Winnebago County Fair, and at the Trask Bridge

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.spiritofsinatra.com/pages/Lyrics/s/Sunshine\\_of\\_Your\\_Smile.htm](http://www.spiritofsinatra.com/pages/Lyrics/s/Sunshine_of_Your_Smile.htm)

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/folk-song-lyrics/Let\\_the\\_Rest\\_of\\_the\\_World\\_Go\\_By.htm](http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/folk-song-lyrics/Let_the_Rest_of_the_World_Go_By.htm)

Picnic. Charles Burke, a Chicago agent, came to Rockford in order to hear the Harmony Quartette perform.<sup>17</sup> The group's popularity gained momentum and Burke wanted to book the group for appearances outside of Rockford.<sup>18</sup>

In 1929, the advertisement seen below was printed in Rockford newspapers from April 2 to August 3. Ozerie continued to work at Williams Motor Co., but he also had a hauling company located at his home. Smith is

**HAULING** ashes, cinders and general  
trucking of all kinds. **Smith and**  
**Hall, 608 Houghton st. Call Main**  
**5701.**

not identified in anymore detail, but could have been Roland Smith who was a member of "The Harmony Four." In 1931,

Ozerie was elected as the senior vice commander of the Henry Boger Negro American Legion Post which met at the Booker T. Washington Center (Ozerie is farthest right in the picture below).<sup>19</sup> Rosa was a member of the American Legion auxiliary. After 1931, there are no longer any references in the newspapers made about "The Harmony Four" Quartet Group from Allen Chapel. From 1934 to 1944, Ozerie was listed in the city directories, but did not have his occupation listed after his name. He had mostly likely lost his job at the Williams Motor Co., and was unemployed throughout these years. Ozerie Hall's wife, Rosa, died on July 9, 1941. As stated in the Rockford Morning Star, she, "...died at a local hospital at 8:30 o'clock Tuesday night

<sup>17</sup> "'Harmony Four' on County Fair Program." *Daily Register Gazette*. Pg. 14. August 8, 1924.

"Thousands Flock to Trask Bridge Outing." *Republic*. Pg. 2. August 26, 1924.

<sup>18</sup> "Chicago Impresario Seeks local Quartette for outside Bookings." *Daily Register Gazette*, page 12, August 19, 1924.

<sup>19</sup> "Negro Legion Takes Name of Henry Boger. Captain John Fairley First Commander of Post Meet in Week." *Morning Star*, Page 2, April 21, 1931. Roland Smith led the effort to change the Post name from the Henry Boger Post, to what it is now- the Jefferson-Horton Post. The name was changed to honor two local Rockford World War I soldiers Alonzo Jefferson and Van Horton.



after an illness of eight weeks.<sup>20</sup> Rev. G. I. Holt from Allen Chapel officiated her funeral and she was buried in Greenwood Cemetery. After Rosa's death, Ozerie no longer appeared in the newspaper except for a property assessment in Robertson's Addition in 1951. His last entry in the Rockford City Directories was in 1944. According to Ancestry.com, an Ozerie Hall filed for Social Security in 1965 in Iowa, but it is not completely clear whether or not it was the same Ozerie researched in this article. What he did after 1944, why he left Rockford and why he returned to Rockford is unknown. Ozerie Hall does not appear in any Rockford records after the 1950s until his death.<sup>21</sup>

His obituary was simple: "Ozerie Hall. Funeral Services for Ozerie Hall, 100, 321 Arnold Ave., who died Tuesday, Oct. 16, in Forest Plaza Nursing Home, will be at 6 pm today in Carl E. Ponds Funeral Home. Burial will be in Cedar Bluff Cemetery. A World War II [sic.] Army veteran, he lived in the Rockford area for 45

<sup>20</sup> "Mrs. Hall Summoned." *Rockford Morning Star*. Page 2. July 10, 1941.

<sup>21</sup> He may or may not have been in Rockford at that time. *Register-Republic*. October 30, 1951. Pg.34.

years."<sup>22</sup> He was only one month away from his 101<sup>st</sup> birthday. He was too old to have served in World War II; he served in the Great War. No one must have known that his wife was buried in Greenwood Cemetery, not in Cedar Bluff Cemetery.<sup>23</sup> Ozerie's story simply faded into history because he must not have shared his past with others. However, unlike many of the obscure citizens of Rockford, we can literary still hear Ozerie whistle to us from the 1920s.

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<sup>22</sup> *Rockford Register Star*, page 8, October 23, 1990.

<sup>23</sup> There are people buried on each side of Rosa. There would not have been room around her to bury Ozerie next to her. The entire row she is buried in has people who are not related to each other, and they also all died in 1941. This led me to believe that the area was reserved for people who could not afford services very easily. Forest Plaza Nursing Home is now called Fairview Nursing Home. An e-mail from Mark N. Thompson, an administrator at Fairview, stated, "After searching through our records, we could not locate any information on Ozerie Hall."

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