

**SIDNEY COX TELLS THE STORY OF WRITING,  
“I WAS WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS”  
(Also known as “In The Wilderness”**

*Editorial Note: Sidney Cox likely recorded this in the early 1970s. He envisioned an effort to record the stories of him writing his most well-known songs. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, he only recorded one other, “You Can Tell Out The Sweet Story.”*

*This story is found on Side 1 of the reel-to-reel tape. The quality on Side 1 is good, with a minor amount of noise. Side 2 is blank.*

*J. Douglas Cox, grandson of Sidney and Violet Cox. January 2009.*

This is a recording of the story of the second of my songs written shortly after the first one.

You will recall that my first song was, “You Can Tell Out The Sweet Story” and it was written in 1914 and published in 1915.

My second song was, “I Was Wandering In The Wilderness.” You may recall the words of this little lilting chorus that seemed to take wings and within a very short time was being sung all around the Army world.

I was wandering in the wilderness far away.  
But, Jesus sought me in tenderness.  
Happy day.

This was a very simple song and it carried with it an expression of an experience, and it was written in order to do that very thing - to express an experience. To tell folks what God had done for me.

The circumstances back of the song which was written in 1914 and again published in 1915, the circumstances back of the song were something like this.

In the corps to which I belonged, the Winnipeg I Citadel, we had on our local officer staff, an unusual “recruiting sergeant.” He was, I sometimes think, about the only “recruiting sergeant” I ever met. I’ve met a lot of folks who had the name and did something along that line. But, this man really did the job. The main thrust of his work was to look after the converts, and to teach them as best he could how to become fine Salvation Army soldiers, both in life and in service. One of the things he did was to call the converts together every Tuesday night and have a time of Bible study and prayer and exchange of confidence and instruction, etc.

One Tuesday night he asked me if I would come down and talk to this little group of men and women, I believe, perhaps 7-8 of them all together, and tell them what God had done for me. He wanted them to hear my testimony.

As I was sitting in the old divisional office on the second floor of the Winnipeg Citadel building, just a few minutes before going down to speak to this little group and thinking about the assignment that had been given to me, I was wondering what could I say, and suddenly as I was thinking, the words of a little chorus with a melody came to my mind. I had no idea of writing anything, until suddenly I felt the impulse within my heart, and I found myself again humming a little melody to which the simple words that we have quoted a few moments ago attached themselves, "I was wandering in the wilderness far away, but Jesus sought me in tenderness. Happy day."

I wanted to get it across to these folks that this was the key to a real Christian life, whether it is lived in The Salvation Army or anywhere else. It was based on what God has done for us. What God did in sovereign grace when he came and lifted folks who were as deep down as I was, and you.

And so here I was with a little chorus on hand, and I went down and talked to these folks, and we sang together for the first time in a little quiet room in the Winnipeg Citadel the chorus, "I Was Wandering In The Wilderness." And as I could hear their voices catch the melody and repeat the words and sing it together, I had the feeling that would become what we sometimes think of as "Popular".

I shall never forget that particular evening because there was an unusual young man who had been converted at our Citadel Penitent Form a few days before. He was one of this group. He was most unusual, both in appearance and in character, and remained so until the day when the Lord took him home years and years afterwards. He lived a life and left an impression that will last forever. I'm wondering if any of you could remember the name of the young man to which I refer. His name was quite unusual. His name was Percival Leroy Debavoise,<sup>1</sup> and to those of us who knew him and loved him, he was "Colonel Debs", and there was never anyone just like him.

And so that was the way in which the little song, "I Was Wondering In The Wilderness" originated, how it was started. It was speedily written into a full-length gospel song and published in *The Musical Salvationist*,<sup>2</sup> and it went around our Army world very rapidly. And folks from England and elsewhere visiting in Winnipeg would bring with them the

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<sup>1</sup> Debavoise ultimately became a Salvation Army officer. As with many Canadian Salvationists, he joined the movement into the U.S. South when the Army expanded its work and formed the new Southern Territory in 1927. He went on to become a beloved Salvation Army figure and a great friend of the Cox and Wilkins families. He is buried in Westview Cemetery in Atlanta. On a personal note, he presided over my infant dedication in 1951. J. Douglas Cox, grandson of Sidney and Violet Cox. January 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *The Musical Salvationist* is a periodical publication by The Salvation Army Music Department in London. They review new compositions of Salvationist composers from around the world, select the best and include them in this publication. It is then distributed literally around the world to Salvation Army posts for utilization in their local music programs.

little chorus, that was now the popular thing within Army circles, and introduce it to us without knowing at all that it was written right there in that building in a little room down in the lower floor of the Winnipeg Citadel.

Now once more, you will hear the sound of the music of the song, "I Was Wandering In The Wilderness", but that was the way in which it was written.

I hope you'll enjoy it and that it will bring back memories to you, and add to your little bit of instruction or information as to how these songs came to be written.

You listen to the music, please.

(The audio of the music to this song was never subsequently added onto the tape by SEC.)