

## **SIDNEY COX TELLS THE STORY OF WRITING, “YOU CAN TELL OUT THE SWEET STORY”**

*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, “I Was Wandering In The Wilderness.”*

*This story begins on Side 1 and continues onto Side 2 of the reel-to-reel tape. The quality on Side 1 is good, but the quality on Side 2 is poor.*

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

This is the first of a series of tapes on which we shall seek to tell the story back of some of the Sidney Cox songs. We are doing this for two reasons. One, that the story may be on record, and then to answer the questions that come to us so frequently from friends here and there, when they say, “How did you write this song, or what’s the story back of it? Under what circumstances did you write this song? Where did you introduce it? When was it written, etc?” And so, we are putting these stories on record and this will be the first of them.

And of course, as you would expect, we shall commence the series by telling the story of the first song that was written, when it was written, under what circumstances it was written, where it is found in our Salvation Army Songbook, etc. I’m referring to the song, “You Can Tell Out the Sweet Story”. You’ll find it in the Salvation Army Songbook - #316.

And it is the first of the songs that the Lord gave to me, one of a series that has been enlarging and increasing for more than 50 years, for this song was written in 1914. It was written in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and at that time I was a soldier of the Winnipeg One Corps. And, from the time of my conversion in 1908 in the city of Calgary, Alberta, I had been more than interested – I think fascinated would be the correct word, with the beauty and power and loveliness of gospel songs. It seemed as if the Lord gave me such a revelation of it, for my own heart, at the beginning of what we call our Christian experience.

The corps officer at the Winnipeg Corps gave me a job to do that I like, and I was glad to say, “Yes”, and glad to do the job. You can always do a task very much better when you like to do it. And this was something I liked to do – rather unusual, especially in these days, for my job was to lead the testimonies in the Saturday Night “Free and Easy” meeting.

Now for the sake of any “modern” Salvationists who may listen to this, you will forgive me if I explain what a “Free and Easy” was. I don’t say “is” because I doubt very much if there is such a thing in these days. But, it was a meeting held on a Saturday Night where the emphasis was not on preaching or in Bible exposition, it was on testimony. And it was the time when Salvation Army soldiers could gather together and release that which was in their hearts for their own satisfaction, and for the glory of God and for the blessing of those who may be listening.

This was my job, and as you know, in a testimony meeting, the testimony of one person is usually followed by a chorus sung by the congregation, and then we wait for someone else to give his word of witness. This was the pattern.

I used to prepare a series of choruses that I would have on hand for such a meeting, and one of the things that rather disturbed me was that there was always some of our friends, a group of them, who would sit silently while the testimony meeting was progressing, and not give the word of witness that I knew was in their hearts. I knew these folks. I knew the lives they lived. I knew the influence and blessing of them. But there was evidently some blockage there that prevented them from saying publicly, that which was quite obviously in their hearts. And I wanted to encourage them with the thought that it would be a blessing to someone if they would say in just a few words, the word of witness and praise and testimony and thanksgiving that was so obviously within their hearts.

As I was thinking about this, I found myself humming a little melody. This was new to me. I had not done this before. But I found myself humming a little melody, and as the melody seemed to unfold, so the words attached themselves to it. And, I found myself singing, and at the same time thinking about these dear friends who for some reason or other were silent in the matter of their witness for the Lord. Thinking about them and singing a little chorus, and the words that seemed to fashion themselves with the tune were, "You can tell out the sweet story. You, yes you. Somebody's life will be brighter. Somebody's care will be lighter. You can tell out the sweet story. You, yes you."

And as I sang the little melody over and over to myself, I could almost point to this one and that one and another with the thought and hope in my heart that perhaps a little melody of this kind might help them to release the loveliness and beauty of their Christian experience for their own sake and for the benefit of someone else.

And so, this was the way in which the first of my songs was written. It was written with the thought in mind of encouraging a little group of fine, beautiful Christians to release something that was in their hearts even though they might have the thought that whatever they could say would be very inadequate and not of any particular value. But my thought was to encourage them to release it, let it go, because somebody's life would be brighter, and somebody's care would be lighter. And they would be sharing some beautiful thing with somebody who may need just that word of witness.

So, this was the way in which the song began. We sang it in the meeting that night and afterwards somebody said, "That's a good chorus. Why don't you write verses for it?" Well, I took them seriously, and went home that night, and after the folks in the home where I was living had gone to bed, I sat down at the piano and wrote the verses of, "You Can Tell Out The Sweet Story. You, yes you."

Tell out the wonderful story,  
Tell it where 'er you go,  
Tell of the King and his glory,  
Tell how he loved us so,  
This is the story most precious,  
Jesus has died to redeem us,  
You can tell out the sweet story,  
You, yes, you.

After the song was finished, I mailed the manuscript to the [Salvation Army] Music Department in London and promptly forgot all about it. But, almost a year later to my surprise, I received a

copy of *The Musical Salvationist*<sup>1</sup> and the first number in it was this song of mine, “You can tell out the sweet story. You, yes, you.”

I’ve always been so deeply grateful to the men in the music department at that time, wonderful names in the Army musical circles – Colonel Hawkes, Colonel Goldsmith<sup>2</sup>, these were the men. And I thought many and many a time, they could have taken that bit of faulty manuscript coming from someone quite unknown, and possibly dropped it in the waste paper basket, but they didn’t. They could see something in it, and I’ve been so very grateful ever since.

One of the things that I constantly remind my friends about is that when I write a song, I do not have in mind the soloist, or the songster brigade and certainly not the band. The thing I’m thinking about are the folks who sing the chorus. The thing that I’m so deeply moved and interested in is the value and power of congregational singing. And my hope in all of the songs that I’ve been writing is that I might make a contribution, not only to the soloist particularly, or to the songster brigade, but to the congregation – that I might give something to a congregation that together and unitedly they might hold on to and release from their hearts, and perhaps hide away in their hearts. And this was the thought.

But to my delight and astonishment, I found that the song was being used by soloists, it was being used by songster brigades here and there, and presently began finding its way into the band music of the Army in selections here and there – I’m thinking of one particularly called, “Songs of Testimony” that was written by Major Norman Bearcroft of Canada, at that time the National Bandmaster in England, and the first number in that interesting little selection is “You can tell out the sweet story. You, yes, you.” And just to remind you of it, not only the words but of the music, you listen please and you’ll hear the sound of the music of the first song written by Sidney Cox in 1914 and still sung all around the world in our Army circles, “You can tell out the sweet story. You, yes you.” And here it is.

(He then plays a band arrangement of this song by The Salvation Army International Staff Band.)

You have just listened to the International Staff Band of The Salvation Army playing, “You can tell out the sweet story.” The selection, “Songs of Testimony” appears on the recording entitled, “An Evening at the Citadel.”

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<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</sup> Reference here is to Colonel F.G. Hawkes and Colonel Arthur Goldsmith, two Salvation Army music icons. Among other things, they in essence edited *The Musical Salvationist* and were responsible for including many Sidney Cox songs into the publication.