

INTRODUCTION

In the middle of the 19th century, gold and silver were discovered in the mountains of central Idaho, at that time a part of Washington Territory. Miners from California and other places in the West flocked to the new diggings. When gold was discovered in 1861 at Florence, just north of the Salmon River, that town quickly acquired a reputation for murder, robbery, gambling, wild women, and disorderly saloons. South of the Salmon River, Warren's Diggins became the next boomtown in 1862. Warrens was a far more peaceful community, noted for the absence of robbery and violence compared to other mining camps.¹ Since it was the time of the Civil War, the miners established two separate camps: Camp Richmond for rebel sympathizers, and Camp Washington for Union sympathizers. Ironically, Camp Richmond was soon torn down because it had been built on top of a rich vein of gold! Idaho Territory was established in March 1863. At the end of the summer the population of Warrens was 660. In 1869 Chinese miners were allowed to buy or lease mining claims, and by 1870 they had become the largest demographic group in town. Warren's Diggins soon became known as Warrens, and is now officially named Warren.

In the mid 1860's a Warrens miner and musician named Peter Beemer wrote down music for a hundred and twenty four instrumental tunes, and arranged them for a small dance orchestra. He ruled his own music staves and wrote out tunes that he and other musicians knew, and added to the collection by having other area residents whistle, hum, or sing their favorite dance tunes for him to write down. Some apparently came from published sheet music, some are traditional, some are opera airs adapted for dancing, some are popular songs of the day. There are mazurkas, polkas, a polka-mazurka, waltzes, quicksteps, schottisches, varsoviennes, longways set dance tunes, and quadrilles.

The conductor and flute player was Peter Beemer, who may originally have come from Pennsylvania. The violinists were Charles Bemis from Connecticut and Rube Besse from Massachusetts. Nate Jenkins, also from Massachusetts, played banjo; both he and Besse made their own instruments. The accordionist was Charles Brown, who may have been from England.

For the dances in Warrens, Charles Bemis's saloon, which normally offered "Pure Whiskey, Wines, Liquors and Cigars,"² was converted to a dance hall. So that respectable ladies could attend, the bar was closed and covered with a canvas, the pictures were turned to the walls, the tables and chairs were stacked out of the way, and smoking or drinking were forbidden. On a typical Saturday night seventy-five to a hundred people would attend, about five men to each woman. At midnight the ladies served a buffet supper, after which the dancing resumed and might continue until dawn. This was a typical pattern for community dances in pioneer settlements.



Charles Bemis

The manuscript that has survived is a melody part that also includes some flute duets. It was written on standard ruled foolscap paper commonly used for writing tablets and ledgers, and sewn into a canvas cover which may have been from an old account book (see Appendix A for a more detailed description of the manuscript).