**Introduction & Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to examine the multiple components of minstrel shows that were performed annually at UW-Eau Claire during the late 1920s and early 1930s, as well as other theatrical performances on campus featuring characters in blackface. In both instances, these characters were often comical and portrayed as having low intelligence. This falls under the umbrella of musical exoticism, a facet of musicology frequently and thoroughly studied. The campus Periscope, an annual publication of student events and organizations, has provided numerous cast photos and lists of repertoire performed at minstrel shows, as well as the campus organizations that staged the performances. Additionally, early issues of the Spectator provided specific names of the individuals involved, as well as a more comprehensive list of repertoire. Consulting these two archival sources provided insight into the complexity and intricacy of each minstrel show, and helped to explain their overwhelming popularity on campus. This project also focuses on the production of “Penrod,” a play by Booth Tarkington performed by the campus group Strut and Fret during the 1933-34 school year, and examines how elements of minstrelsy contributed to the play’s warm reception and overall success.

**Minstrelsy at UW-Eau Claire**

Minstrel shows at the Eau Claire State Teachers’ College were primarily staged by the Crusaders, described by the 1935 Periscope as “an honorary men’s club organized for the purpose of encouraging good athletes and prominent students, graduating from high schools in this vicinity, to attend Eau Claire State Teachers’ College.” Founded in 1922, the Crusaders performed their first documented minstrel show on March 18, 1925 as entertainment for high school students at a sports tournament. On April 20, 1928, the club performed their first documented minstrel show for the student body, and the following year began performing in surrounding towns as a recruitment technique for the college. Annual performances continued on campus through the 1936-1937 academic year, which was the last year minstrel shows were mentioned in either campus publication. In an article about the minstrel show from the February 12, 1937 edition of the Spectator, it was noted that “the old plantation scene” and a regular circle with end men, features of last year, will not be utilized this season.” Although musical numbers were still the basis of the show, this description suggests a shift away from the blatant stereotyping common in minstrelsy, and may explain why records of performances ceased to exist in the subsequent years.

**“Penrod”**

Throughout the 1933-1934 academic year, the Strut and Fret theatre group performed Booth Tarkington’s “Penrod” a total of seven times at various locations around Eau Claire, as well as in Chipewa Falls and Fall Creek. The four-act play centers on the title character, a mischievous boy bent on tormenting his elder sister’s new suitor. His antics are supported by his friend Sam, as well as two boys named Herman and Verman, who are described as two ‘darky boys and faithful followers’ in the Nov. 3, 1933 edition of the Spectator. The play was an overwhelming success, and the portrayals of the two African-American boys were cited in high regard. In particular, the “incorherent jargon of Verman was one of the high points of the play,” according to the 1934 Periscope. Children from the primary school attached to the college were enlisted to play the young roles in “Penrod,” and the actors portraying Herman and Verman donned blackface. It is interesting to note that a cast photo of an earlier production in New York includes two African-American boys in the roles of Herman and Verman, suggesting that neither Tarkington nor the playwright originally intended for blackface to be used. Furthermore, the boys’ race is rarely brought up throughout the play. Verman’s “incorherent jargon” is the result of him being tongue-tied, not a stereotyped African-American, as his brother speaks intelligibly and can translate on his behalf. With a few edits to the script, both characters could have been convincingly portrayed as white without any loss of comedic value. The decision by Strut and Fret to incorporate blackface in their performance not only reflects the lack of racial diversity in Eau Claire, it reflects the popularity of blackface in other forms of entertainment on campus during this period of time.

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