

*From the Lou Holtz/Upper Ohio Valley Hall of Fame:*



### **Will L. Thompson**

Late in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, East Liverpool could boast that it was home to one of the most prolific and popular songwriters of the times – Will L. Thompson.

Son of Sarah and Josiah Thompson, a prominent entrepreneur and pottery manufacturer, Thompson wrote his first two published songs, (Liverpool Schottische and Darling Minnie Gray) at age 16. In 1874, Thompson published four songs, including “My Home on the Old Ohio” and “Gathering Shells from the Sea.”

Like his father, the younger Thompson proved to be of strong entrepreneurial stock and sent copies of “Shells” to the various minstrel organizations throughout the country. It soon caught on and by 1879, it ranked third behind Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home” and “Silver Threads Among the Gold” – the most popular songs in the United States.

Using a number of pseudonyms, Thompson wrote several secular and patriotic songs. His song, “Housekeeper’s Complaint,” for example, was penned under a woman’s name.

Thompson once said of his music, “. . . my aim has been to write good, elevating music with words and melodies pure and clean, but not so difficult as to be beyond the ability of the masses.”

He is perhaps best known, however, for the hymns he composed. Still a favorite today, Thompson’s “Softly & Tenderly, Jesus is Calling,” had at one time been translated into more languages than any other hymn. Upon his deathbed, Dwight Moody, a popular evangelist of the time reportedly told Thompson, “Will, I would rather have written ‘Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling’ than anything I have been able to do in my whole life.”

The hymn was sung in the 1985 Academy Award-winning movie, *Trip to Bountiful*.

Thompson was educated in East Liverpool schools before continuing his education at Mount Union College, where he was

graduated in 1870. He attended the New England Conservatory of Music in 1873 and later continued his music studies in Germany.

He opened a small music store where he sold instruments and reed organs. Additionally, he also peddled sheet music door to door throughout many small Ohio communities, earning a sizable income for himself.

Eventually, he built the W.L. Thompson Music Co. store at the corner of Fourth and Washington Streets, which still stands today housing the Pottery City Galleries Antique Mall. During the 1880s, his store was one of the most prominent in the United States with more than 4,000 music teachers ordering songs and supplies from him.

In 1888, Thompson opened a public “reading room” stocked with newspapers and periodicals in a section of the store.

In addition to the music store, Thompson also began a music and publishing company in Chicago.

Beside his interest in the music business, Thompson also was a land developer and owned property throughout the city of East Liverpool, as well as the townships. Among the many properties he owned was a lot on Fifth Street, which for many years housed the J.C. Penny Co., before being sold to SkyBank.

Although an astute businessman, Thompson also was a man of philanthropy. He was the first and most generous donor to the downtown YMCA. He donated the land, stone and half of the funds for the Emmanuel Presbyterian Church.

With regard to his land donations, Thompson is probably best known for the acreage he deeded the city for use as a public park, which, today, continues to bear his name. In the fall of 1899, he offered to donate 100 acres of land northeast of the city. At that time, he also deeded to the city the boulevard, which connected Calcutta Road to the park. Additionally, Thompson established a trust fund and stipulated that the city must expend \$2,000 for a driveway throughout the park and \$600 annually for beautification of the area.

He stipulated that no alcoholic beverages or intoxicated persons be allowed in the park and that no sports or gambling of any sort be permitted on Sundays. In November 1899, city council accepted his terms and the land. Thompson Park opened to the public in the spring of 1900.