

## Chapter 1

# Singing His Song



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**T**he year was 1872 and the word on the street was, “Go West, young man.” This had first been uttered by a newspaperman back East, while in his cozy office. Minnesotans wondered about his remark. Though they knew that beyond where they lived was more land and space, they thought they were quite West already. At the edge of the frontier. And when they turned their faces into the wind and looked in that direction, what did they see? Not the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains of the West, but North Dakota. Or, if they looked a little lower, South Dakota.

They had heard the stories. One step over the border and those big spaces swallowed you up. The wind carried you away. Indians made off with your hair and left you lying staked out in the sun, slowly becoming a meal for the vultures circling overhead or whatever

wild animal came along. You'd consider yourself lucky if, anywhere in the midst of this nowhere, you came across another human being. And it would be a miracle if that human being were from Minnesota.

Minnesotans had gotten themselves as far west as Minnesota, and they thought it was a good place – plenty of room, more trees than you could shake a stick at, ten thousand lakes, a big river and weather. It wasn't the best weather. They noticed that the summers were hot and, in the evenings, the mosquitoes took over. They also noticed that the winters were a little long, but they had come as far as they were going and they weren't going any farther. It was West to them.

Gus Johnson didn't think about the West or North and South Dakota or anywhere else. He was a busy guy and he had a job. What he thought about mostly, were girls, beer, music, and some of the more tender emotions. His job included all of these, and in this, he considered himself lucky. He was a musician and singer in a polka band called "Oscar and the Blue Gills." They were a popular band and, though Minnesotans were a hard-working bunch and should have been in bed, it seemed that the band was playing somewhere most nights of the week.

The Blue Gills oompahed their way up and down Hennepin Avenue in Minneapolis, and in and out

of doors on 7th Street in St. Paul. They played train depots in little towns on the prairie, where families danced and raised dust, and they played saloons deep in the woods, where they were surrounded by tall men with beards, carrying axes. They played grand houses out at the lake, where the boys were on their best behavior and hardly anyone fell down.

Life for Gus was one party after another and that made what was to come all the more upsetting. He thrived on this life. He sang. He shouted. He put beer away with the best of them. He winked at the girls, who blushed and turned away and then shyly looked back, and he winked at their mothers, who did the same. When he sang the words:

*Oh my beautiful one  
How can you leave me?*

he meant them and sometimes he got so worked up that the song would end with Gus looking at the floor, just sighing the words, with tears on his cheeks. Oscar Olson, who was older and played the banjo, would lean over and put his arm around Gus and nod at the applauding crowd, as if they were all family.

Gus had a good, clear voice. He could belt out a drinking song, of which there were many, in a voice

that could, and had, tapped kegs. He could sweetly warble a love song in such a way that each woman listening suddenly found herself alone, in soft focus, thinking of her sweetheart. And if she didn't have one, thinking of Gus.

Between the drinking and the girls and the music, Gus felt that no one could be as fortunate as he. He liked the life he led and tried to put his feelings into words and music. He was nineteen years old and he had written his first song.

It was called, "My Sweet Flower." The lyrics went like this:

*Growing in your garden  
Where you once were sown  
Feeding on the sunshine  
Soft and all alone*

*By breezes drifting softly  
I catch a whiff of you  
My heart pounds like the tuba  
Oom pah oom pah doo*

*Soon we will be married  
I wonder what we'll do  
My heart sounds like a tuba  
Oom pah oom pah doo*

It was his first song. Don't judge it too harshly.  
There would be others.

Besides singing, he could play a mean accordion. His fingers flew over the buttons and keys and, when he pumped the box, he put his whole body into it. His eyes were closed in rapture on the ballads, and on other songs, they rolled wildly as he sang, arms pumping:

*I don't want her  
You can have her  
She's too fat for me*

He also played guitar and harmonica, though not as well or as naturally, so he practiced all the time. This both delighted and annoyed his neighbors. In the beginning, it had delighted them and then, when they realized that he might never stop, it began to annoy them.

The future that spread out before him was always soft in the darkness of the evening and shaded by clouds of foam. It never occurred to him that things could change. He pictured himself growing old, playing in the band like Oscar, and winking his way through life and romance. He was confident that his world would spin in three-quarter time and any sad times would quickly be replaced by an upbeat, happy song and a cold glass of beer.

Gus looked in the mirror and saw a tall, handsome young man, whose eyes were green, whose dark hair parted on the right, and whose ears were unobtrusive. His long arms hung at his side and he tilted his head and wiggled his eyebrows at himself in a way he thought might be debonair.

As he examined himself, he thought, 'I'm young, I'm good looking and I can dance. This was as deep as his philosophy went. He smiled widely at his reflection. He glanced out the window and saw the great Mississippi rolling by and thought, 'What exciting thing is going to happen next?' He thought, 'I'm a Minnesotan and I like it here.' He thought, 'What was her name?' and began to scratch his head.

There was a lot to think about. Things were good and the thought, which never entered his mind, was the one which said, 'Go West, young man.' As far as he knew, he was here to stay.