

# The San Francisco Minstrels

## Raquel Gibson

### Abstract

The San Francisco Minstrels were a blackface minstrel troupe that became exceedingly popular in the decade and half following the Civil War, led by three of the greatest talents of the day Billy Birch, Charlie Backus and David Wambold. The troupe's mix of physical comedy, intelligent wit and spontaneity appealed to a wide diverse audience of all social classes, including popular public figures such as Mark Twain. They were the highest paid minstrel troupe of their era and one of the very few that managed to survive by not traveling from city to city; instead they found success in New York City for nineteen years. Their show was known for incorporating the traditional three act minstrel show and characters such as Jim Crow and Sambo. Such characters were portrayed as childlike buffoons that lacked intelligence, which did catered to a widely accepted belief of the day that the black man was inferior to the white man. However, the troupe's comedy came by using these simple, clown-like characters that were believed not to be very smart and allowing them to articulate intelligent contemporary rhetoric. Many members of the troupe including Billy Birch and Charlie Backus also had a great ability of physical comedy and mimicry. The physical comedy mixed with the intelligent wit is what appealed to such a diverse audience and what ultimately made them very successful in the highly theatrical city.



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When looking at entertainment in the nineteenth century it is very hard to ignore Blackface Minstrelsy as it became a large part of the popular entertainment. Today the topic is considered sensitive and controversial, after all blackface minstrelsy was a black delineation performed by white men in a sense of mockery. Such racial portraits do not abide well in society today, although the use of the blackface minstrelsy has never completely disappeared. One of the most recent examples was in the 2010 Broadway season and the musical *The Scottsboro Boys*, which featured as its finale a blackface musical number.<sup>1</sup>

Though in the nineteenth century it was a chief form of entertainment and widely popular, particularly among white audiences primarily found in the Northeast. The first blackface performances in America probably will never really be known, though an advertisement in a Boston newspaper dated December 30, 1799 stated that an actor Mr. Grawpner sang negro songs in character make-up. This is typically credited as the first blackface minstrel performance in America.<sup>2</sup> The blackface minstrelsy that was well known in the nineteenth century however, had its beginnings in the 1830s when a man named Thomas “Daddy” Rice took the stage after he witnessed an old black man sing and dance to a negro tune. His impersonation of the old man created the character Jim Crow the first of many blackface stereotypes that would be created and it became Rice’s signature act.<sup>3</sup>

In 1843 Dan Emmett and his Virginia Minstrels took the stage not to perform a mere novelty act but an actual full length show and they were an immediate success.<sup>4</sup> This was the beginning of the minstrel troupe, and they were quickly followed by the Christy Minstrels (1843) in upstate New York, led by the famed E.P. Christy, who collected many of the popular minstrel songs and created a songster that was sold to the public. The Virginia Minstrels (1843) and the Ethiopian Serenaders (1844) along with many other troupes quickly formed began performing in every major city in the Northeastern U.S. and, thanks to the California Gold Rush and Western Expansion by the 1860s, minstrel troupes could be found in

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Brantley, “So Hard to Put Into Words (and Music)” NY Times March 11, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> *Boston Gazette* December 30, 1799. Dailey Paskman “Gentlemen be Seated” A Parade of the American Minstrel.

<sup>3</sup> Charles White “Negro Minstrelsy: Its Starting Place Traced Back Over Sixty Years” *New York Clipper* April 28, 1860.

<sup>4</sup> Paskman, 13.

Sacramento and Seattle and other cities along the West coast.<sup>5</sup>

For a low cost the masses could attend a performance that included a variety of elements including dance, jokes, songs, instruments, skits, mock oratory, satire, impersonations and even gender cross-dressing. Performers became recognized celebrities and popular songs first introduced on the minstrel stage were printed and distributed to the home. It is considered an American original and it proved to be the first popular American musical export to the theater world.<sup>6</sup>

Simply said blackface minstrelsy is a complex topic. This paper will only attempt to dive into a small window of this complex history, specifically looking at one troupe called the San Francisco Minstrels. In early 1864 in San Francisco, California three men named Billy Birch, Charley Backus, and David Wambold came together to form this minstrel troupe, all three performers already had approximately fifteen years of experience on the minstrel stage and were considered masters in their respective fields. Birch was known for his comical end man antics, Backus for his impersonations, and Wambold for his tenor singing voice. Their partnership proved to be one that could be rivaled by few in their industry, and one that would span the majority of the troupe's eighteen year existence. After just one year of performing in California they moved to America's theater capital, New York City. They arrived in the spring of 1865, and for the next subsequent 18 years they performed and entertained to great success. It was sickness that caused Wambold to retire in 1879, and death is what finally took Backus from the stage in 1882. Final one of the last famed minstrel performer J.H. Haverly bought them out and the troupe disbanded in 1883.

Looking at blackface minstrelsy after the Civil War very few troupes stand out as much as the San Francisco Minstrels do, and very few troupes found the success that this particular troupe found. A reporter named Joe Howard described the troupe and their success in this positive manner; "Their mission was to please the people, to drive away dull care, to make a laugh, and to earn a living. They worked hard."<sup>7</sup> Looking at the Reconstruction Era in which they performed, they had to work hard, Minstrelsy was faced with increased competition from other arts in the entertainment such as the Variety shows which offered a wider assortment

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.14, Toll, others.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Lott, William Mahr, Robert Tollman.

<sup>7</sup> Joe Howard "Negro Minstrels" *Niagara Falls Gazette* January 6, 1884.

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of entertainment that appealed more to families. Extravagant musical comedies became more and more common as the eye-catching effects, costumes and staging dazzled audiences away from the much simpler wares the minstrel show offered.<sup>8</sup> In 1877 the Brooklyn *Eagle* reported that there was only twelve recognized minstrel troupes in the country, this is in contrast to the sixty troupes that existed approximately ten years earlier.<sup>9</sup> Competition also came from within Minstrelsy in the form of black performers who garnered more authenticity than their white colleagues.<sup>10</sup> Minstrelsy became the median that allowed blacks for the first time to become entertainers.<sup>11</sup>

One change that was evident in the years following the Civil War was the transformation of the traditional minstrel structure. It was a simple structure consisting of three acts that was created in the 1840s and quickly became the standard in which minstrel shows used. It included a cast of traditional characters such as Jim Crow and Sambo as well as a program devoted to singing, dancing and imitating the “plantation darky’s” way of life. Many troupes move away from the simple setting to larger troupes and productions. More acts were included with the purpose to not offend anyone and when faced with black competition many white troupes began to move away from “negro subjects.” Instead more and more acts began to satirize political and social figures and issues.<sup>12</sup>

During this time of transition the San Francisco Minstrels took the traditional structure and its characters and used them to convey their political and social satire, in a comical fashion. Their constant contemporary commentary on issues and figures that surrounded them and their New York audience resulted in a show that was familiar but fresh, while the minstrel characters and format made it humorous. This allowed the San Francisco Minstrels find their niche and make their mark on the blackface minstrel scene becoming one of the most prominent groups of their era. They managed eighteen successful years both financially and critically becoming largely known for their use of political

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<sup>8</sup> Garff B Wilson *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc.1982.), 138 Felicia Hardison Londre, and Daniel J. Watermeier, *North American Theater: The United States, Canada, and Mexico*, (New York City: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), 168-171.

<sup>9</sup> Brooklyn *Eagle*, Jan. 14, 1877, clipping.

<sup>10</sup> Toll, 135, Sharon McCoy “The Trouble begins at Eight’: Mark Twain, the San Francisco Minstrels and the Unsettling Legacy of Blackface Minstrelsy.” *American Literary Realism*, 41, no. 3 (2009), 233.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, 115, Toll, 164.

<sup>12</sup> Toll.

and social satire. It is their use of such satire that their performances are described as being as spontaneous and witty.<sup>13</sup> They also claim the recognition of being New York's last residential troupe.<sup>14</sup> The fact that they could stay in one place for so long is amazing considering most troupes in the same era traveled widely, playing to new audiences frequently in order to survive.

As a disclaimer this paper will in no way be a comprehensive study of the racial implications or ramifications of black face minstrelsy.<sup>15</sup> There will be some discussion of the racial stereotypes created by minstrelsy however, because without a doubt, the San Francisco Minstrels portrayed the black man in a grotesque and stereotypical manner. In this sense it will be argued that such use of the traditional stereotypical characters actually plays a role in the San Francisco Minstrels success. There is no justification for their use of such stereotypes, but despite the feelings of today it must be remembered that they performed in 19<sup>th</sup> century and times were different from our own.

The San Francisco Minstrels became well known and loved for their ability to portray such grotesque stereotypes of the black man as well as their exceptional ability to satirize political and social current events and figures. Their unique use of wit and their spontaneity allowed their shows to be fresh and new for every performance.<sup>16</sup> Nothing was beyond their reach, they lampooned everything from corrupt politics to class pretensions.<sup>17</sup> Add on the fact that San Francisco Minstrels were performing in the theater capital of America pitted against admirable competition and still managed to draw crowds every night and make a profit, makes them exceptional and worth examining.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> For a more comprehensive look at the ramifications of black face minstrelsy upon society a suggested reading is Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*.

<sup>16</sup> *Clipper*, June 10, 1871, *Spirit of the Times* Oct. 25, 1884, *New York Tribune*, Feb. 5, 1884.

<sup>17</sup> Sharon D. McCoy, "Trouble Begins at Eight" Mark Twain and the San Francisco Minstrels, and the Unsettling Legacy of Blackface Minstrelsy. Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up The Minstrel Show in the Nineteenth Century*.

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This being said, this paper will look at the troupe, its members and their audience. It will look at what the traditional minstrel format was, who the traditional characters were, and how the San Francisco Minstrels used both format and characters in their show will be addressed. Then the analysis will look at several pieces performed by the troupe that highlights their use of political and social satire and how their use of the black face enhanced or undermined the commentary.

The past few decades there has been a tremendous out pouring of research accomplished concerning blackface minstrelsy. Despite all of this there are many areas within the topic that have not been thoroughly studied. The San Francisco Minstrels prove to be one those particular areas, although an English professor from the University of Georgia named Dr. Sharon D. McCoy is trying to remedy this. Needless to say primary sources, particularly plays, skits, acts, music, and any other kind of performing material, are few. Much of what can be learned about the San Francisco Minstrels is through playbills, programs, and newspaper reviews.

Secondary sources about the troupe then, are minimal. Dr. McCoy provides the only essay available about the San Francisco Minstrels specifically. Her essay entitled “The Trouble Begins at Eight”: Mark Twain, the San Francisco Minstrels and the Unsettling Legacy of Blackface Minstrelsy,” is written to explain Mark Twain's infatuation with them. Her main objective is to soothe modern preconceived notions about the blackface performance and to shed new light on Mark Twain's actions and words as there are several passages found in his writing about the San Francisco Minstrels.<sup>18</sup> This does lead to an essay that explores the talent within the troupe and she analyzes several plays and music that were performed by the San Francisco Minstrels. In this regard McCoy's essay is useful to this paper as she does provide some insight to several primary sources as well as introducing evidence of the San Francisco Minstrels success given by Mark Twain himself.<sup>19</sup> Her use of the evidence though, is analyzed to provide justification for Mark Twain, and really for anyone else, to appreciate the San Francisco Minstrels.

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<sup>18</sup> Many of his references of the troupe can be found in his book entitled *Travels with Mr. Brown*.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

The study of blackface minstrelsy after the Civil War is not a thoroughly comprehensive one either. Most historical scholars reflect upon minstrelsy in its prime which most would agree was between 1840 to 1870 and very little research can be found on the white blackface troupes in the post-antebellum years. At most a researcher will dedicate a paragraph or two about the changes taking place before moving on to the topic of blacks taking over the minstrel stage.

Robert C. Toll is one of the few scholars who really looks at both black and white troupes after the Civil War. In his book *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in the Nineteenth Century*, particularly chapters 5 and 6, he addresses the changes that minstrelsy underwent the years following the Civil War. Chapter five is entitled “The Grand Transformation: Minstrelsy after the Civil War” and as the title suggest is specifically dedicated at looking at minstrelsy after the Civil War.<sup>20</sup> While he does mention and analyzes several reasons why such transformation occurred, his main purpose in the chapter is to explain how the minstrel show changed and adapted to the times. He also looks at the different measures certain troupes undertook to essentially stay alive. He does talk of the San Francisco Minstrels and provides a little commentary on their success though the analysis is brief.<sup>21</sup>

Chapter 6 is entitled “Social Commentary in Late Nineteenth-Century White Minstrelsy.” Toll uses this chapter to essentially prove that after the Civil War blackface minstrel troupes began to move away from their attention to “Southern Negroes” and concentrated more on national issues and development.<sup>22</sup> This helps place the San Francisco Minstrels into context as much of their material and wit was directed into social and political topics.

Toll’s and McCoy’s writings are really the only two major secondary sources for this paper, though Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, deserves some mention. It’s a particularly good read regarding the complexity of minstrelsy and its impact on the American public.<sup>23</sup> He claims that it brought about a fascination of blacks and their culture while at the same time reasserting their image as

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<sup>20</sup> Toll, 134.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>23</sup> Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and The American Working Class*, (New York: Oxford University Press. 1993), 6.

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inferiors.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, it was this inferior image that created much of the humor within the minstrel shows. It is why the San Francisco Minstrels kept the traditional structure and characters as it softened their biting satire. Together the traditional show and the political and social satire created the right medium to keep the show new, comical and successful.

The traditional format that emerged was comprised of three parts. The first part consisted of the members of the troupe parading out onto the stage and forming a semi-circle with the middle man or interlocutor who the master of ceremonies sitting in the middle. On either side of him are various members of the troupe typically with instruments in their hands such as the banjo or violin. The two outside seats held the two end men known generally as “Bones” and “Tambo” because of the instruments which they played.<sup>25</sup> This act typically consist of a running dialogue full of jokes and light banter between the interlocutor and the end men which is interrupted frequently with a set of songs, which usually involved the entire company. Some typical dialogue would go something like this example.

*INTERLOCUTOR: Gentlemen, be seated. Well, Mr. Bones, how are you feeling this evening?*

*BONES: Very well, Mr. Interlocutor, and how are you -- how are all your folks?*

*INTERLOCUTOR: We're all well, excepting my brother. You see, a team of horses ran away with him, and he's been laid up since.*

*BONES: That's a very strange coincidence, same thing happened to my brother.*

*INTERLOCUTOR: You don't say.*

*BONES: The only difference is, it was my brother who ran away with the team of horses; he's been laid up ever since, but they'll let him out next month.<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>25</sup> Bones were typically animal bones usually taken from the ribs or the lower leg bones. At times two pieces of hardwood were used as well. The bones were played in the same fashion as playing spoons is today, the two pieces are held between the fingers and the hand is waved around force the bones to hit each other producing the clicks.

<sup>26</sup>“Gentlemen, Be Seated!”, by Dailey Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928).



The second part or the Olio typically comprised of a series of short theatrical acts or specialized acts. Such acts included stump speeches (comic monologues), dance routines, skits, and it almost always featured a ballad or a popular song sung by the troupe's star singer. The third part presented an afterpiece. The afterpiece took various forms, including one-act plays, farces and burlesques and at times a comic opera. Burlesque in this context meaning the mockery or parody of a serious subject or work to achieve a humorous purpose.<sup>27</sup> The resulting show was one that if desired could be full of playful humor from beginning to end.

An ample part of this humor was due to the fact that the Negro show specialized in imitating the southern plantation "darky," creating characters such as Jim Crow and Sambo, who portray more immature and childlike characters as well as more "dandified city darkies" such as Zip Coon, a uppity urbanized character. With these characters they would sing catchy songs many of which are still known today, such as "O Susanna," "Turkey in the Straw" and "Dixie." They would dance, play instruments, make jokes and quite simply do everything possible to look and behave like clowns and fools. With the ideology in place that blacks were an inferior race, such portrayals added to white superiority which in turn gave blackface minstrelsy its humor.

Slavery, abolitionist, and women's rights were really the only serious subjects that minstrelsy dealt with before the Civil War, and even then, minstrels dealt with them in a cheerful, comedic atmosphere that would often downplay the commentary.<sup>28</sup> With the outbreak of the Civil War, most minstrel troupes for the most part remained neutral; both sides North or South were open to ridicule. Though as the war continued, more minstrel troupes included more somber songs and skits and as a balance more patriotic themes and acts that celebrated historical figures such as the Founding Fathers. It was during this time that social commentary became a more prominent feature within the minstrel show.<sup>29</sup>

After the war minstrelsy faced several challenges particularly as several changes happened in the theater world and new grander entertainments such as the musical comedies and variety shows. Thanks to new and better transportation systems, touring companies were able to reach new areas and new audiences. Stepping up to these new challenges many minstrel

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<sup>27</sup> Paskman "Gentleman be seated, 14-16.

<sup>28</sup> Toll p 162-163, McCoy p 236-237.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 109-112.

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troupes took to traveling extensively, enlarging their size, and adding new specialty acts. It moved from small troupes that stereotyped “the negro way of life,” to large companies staging grand extravaganzas. All to no avail however, by the 1880s the minstrel show was quickly dying out and blackface performances were integrated into the vaudeville shows as novelty acts.<sup>30</sup>

Mark Twain wrote years after the San Francisco Minstrels had disbanded wrote, “Birch, Wambold and Backus are gone years ago; and with them departed to return no more forever, I suppose, the real nigger show, the genuine nigger show, the extravagant nigger show.”<sup>31</sup> The “real nigger show,” meaning the old time, “genuine” minstrel show that the Christy Minstrels, or the Virginia Minstrels managed to master decades before. The San Francisco Minstrels did not discard this style or the characters unlike many other troupes of their day. Instead they continued to embrace the three act model already described and the established characters, with great success.

The San Francisco Minstrels use of this basic 3 act model to structure their show defied one of the changing trends of their times. While their troupe did grow in size they kept the simple staging, continued to sing the plantation songs and dance the grotesque jigs that many white audiences knew and loved, and continued to portray the traditional blackface characters as buffoons. Instead of amplifying their performances to create a spectacle they strove to simply amuse in an “unobtrusive and even in an artistic manner.”<sup>32</sup>

The previous experience of the three founders of the troupe is probably why they chose to embrace the traditional structure rather than push it away. Joe Howard of the Boston Globe said of the troupe, “[t]he trade's a trade always, and this business was easy to them because they mastered it.”<sup>33</sup> The traditional style is what they knew and within it they excelled. Specifically about Birch and Backus as end men, Howard stated that “laughter holding both sides is the rule when Backus or Birch hold the stage.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Twain *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper and Row 1959), 58-59.

<sup>32</sup> *NY Times* September 3, 1979.

<sup>33</sup> Howard. “Negro Minstrels.”

<sup>34</sup> “San Francisco Minstrels” *The New York Times*, December 17, 1875.

Billy Birch was born in Utica, New York in 1831 and was only thirteen years old when he made his first appearance on the blackface on an amateur stage. His first professional appearance was just two years later in 1846 in Connecticut and by 1855 he was working with George Christy one of the most famous performers in blackface minstrelsy.<sup>35</sup> Birch was a gifted verbal comedian and was said to have the ability to wield language as a weapon in a lazy, even clumsily way.<sup>36</sup>

Charley Backus possessed a gift of mimicry and was well known for his ability to impersonate public figures. Advertisements show that his specialty act included a variety of “Inimitable Imitations,” including an imitation of Charles Dickens, John McCullough and others.<sup>37</sup> He was a physical comic and proved equal to the task of playing opposite Birch as the San Francisco Minstrels' second endman. In an interview given by Billy Birch he said “[Bakcus] movements were a constant source of merriment... spectators never thought me as funny as Backus when I wasn't saying anything.”<sup>38</sup>

To offset the humor of Birch and Backus was the troupe's third partner, David Wambold who possessed a tenor voice that was described as pure and graceful,<sup>39</sup> He sang a solo song in the middle of the show, typically a serious and sentimental ballad that created a contrast to the comic frenzy created by his partners. He was hailed as an accomplished performer and before he joined the San Francisco minstrels was one of the highest paid ballad singers of his day.<sup>40</sup> Birch said, “In his line Wambold has never had an equal. There is something magnetic and electrical in his personality aside from his wonderful voice and his wonderful management of it.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Rice, 203.

<sup>36</sup> Randall Knoper, *Acting Naturally: Mark Twain in the Culture of Performance*. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press 1995.), 45 and Mark Twain. “The Lick House Ball” in *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, & Essays 1852-1890*. (New York: Library of America, 1992), 45.

<sup>37</sup> Rice, 70, “Death of Charlie Backus” NY Times June 22, 1883, San Francisco Minstrels Programme, February 17, 1868, and advertising posters, May 15, 1876, and May 12 1865 (Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library.)

<sup>38</sup> “Old Minstrel Days” *Daily Alta California*, October 12, 1890.

<sup>39</sup> “David Wambold is Dead” *The New York Times* November 11, 1889, and *Times* November 27, 1877.

<sup>40</sup> Estavan, 170-171, “David Wambold is Dead” NY Times November 11, 1889, *NY Times* November 27, 1877.

<sup>41</sup> “Old Minstrel Days.”

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By the time the three performers had come together in 1864 each individually could claim at least fifteen years of experience on the blackface stage, and all three had experience with creating and touring with their own troupes. Wambold and Backus had even taken their troupes on tours across the seas to Europe and to Australia and New Zealand.<sup>42</sup> With all the experience that each had gained, they had a good sense of the minstrel business and what appealed to audiences and what didn't.

Keeping the known and remembered type characters such as Jim Crow or Zip Coon that minstrelsy is famous for, provided the means for which the actors could exploit their particular talents. Charley Backus for instance, had an exceptionally large mouth in which he joked was expanded by a glove stretcher, and it was described as being large enough to swallow a church. By simply opening his ample mouth he could send audiences into laughter.<sup>43</sup> In minstrel make-up Backus made his mouth appear even larger as he created a large outline of his mouth with the burnt-cork and filled it in with red make-up. He especially delighted in finding a group of children seated near him as he could plunge them into peals of laughter by causing his mouth to distort in many shapes<sup>44</sup>

When blackface minstrelsy began to become more and more popular in the 1840s it introduced to many northeastern white people the black man. In many ways the black man was a mysterious, unnatural being that was far inferior to the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant and blackface performers delineated the black man with grotesque characteristics that encouraged this image. Charley Backus' unusually large mouth was a perfect vehicle to give his characters a feature that was abnormal and outlandish, and to his white audience such exaggerations on a black man were funny.

The traditional style also gave the troupe characters that were already well established as fools that were likable. This attributed greatly to the performances of several of the San Francisco Minstrels' afterpieces where the plot line was thin and the buffoonery was great. An example is "Scenes in front of a Clothing Store" a farce that depicts two characters Monroe and Job, being recruited to stand as mannequins in a shop window

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<sup>42</sup> Monarchy of Minstrels.

<sup>43</sup> "Death of Charlie Backus" *The New York Times*, June 22, 1883. Howard "Negro Minstrels."

<sup>44</sup> Lawrence Estavan. Ed *San Francisco Theatre Research: Minstrelsy* (San Francisco: Works Project Administration, 1939), 170.

to showcase a pair of suits. The plot focuses on Monroe and Job breaking their silence and their unmovable stance to interact with potential customers while at the same time fooling the clothing shop owner. In the character description of the two main characters Monroe and Job, they are to be simple and seedy individuals.<sup>45</sup> Within the first few lines of the play they are induced to play the part of dummies showcasing the shops clothing but later in the play the proprietor's line "[h]ow nicely they represent the dummies, and how well they carry it out" implies that the word could have an ambiguous meaning.<sup>46</sup> Though the irony and humor comes from the fact that while Job and Monroe are far from dumb when it comes to fooling the proprietor to nature of their real actions, which is anything but staying still and being quiet.

The characters are simple and from all of their looting from the passing potential customers they are seedy, but they are likable. The expectation of them when they first appeared in the play is to be poor, ignorant troublemakers, that lack manners and common decency expected of most human beings. This does reinforce the image that was fairly common of the day projecting that blacks were less than human.

This idea is projected again and again as the blackface fool stopped all questions as to why a particular character was acting in a stupid manner and simply let the audience enjoy the actors who humorously romped about on stage. An example is seen in the black sketch called "Whose Baby Is It?" This sketch is about two drunken men, Sampson and Ebenezer, breaking into their boarding house where they have been locked out of their rooms do to the lack of payment for rent. Sampson and Ebenezer who fully intend to sneak out early in the morning settle down to sleep only to be interrupted by the landlady's screaming baby, who refuses to stop crying.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Frank Dumont "Scenes in front of a Clothing Store." (New York City: DeWitt Publishing House 1881), 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. Frank Dumont "Scenes in front of a Clothing Store." (New York City: DeWitt Publishing House 1881.)

<sup>47</sup> Frank Dumont "Whose Baby is It?" (New York City: DeWitt Publishing House 1881.)

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The act focuses on Sampson's and Ebenezer's desperate attempts in their drunken state to quiet the baby which includes feeding it glue, and giving him alcohol. In the end the two men begin to fight using the baby as the weapon and eventually they tear the baby in half. The play ends with the landlady chasing the two drunks about with a broom screaming that they murdered her poor little Charley.<sup>48</sup>

The plot is distasteful as the ending implies the murder of a child at the hands of two drunks that intended to skip town so as not to pay rent. Yet, in the nineteenth century the two drunks in blackface were simply immature and mentally inferior fools, in which such behavior is explained away. The slap-stick antics of Backus and Birch whom play the two drunks which were the focus of attention as such a play would have highlighted their ability to take such material and make it into a playful comedy that amused their audiences greatly.

By keeping the traditional three act structure and the traditional minstrel characters the San Francisco Minstrels had an act that was well known by their New York audience and well loved. It allowed the troupe to take advantage of the humor that the minstrel characters generated, whether they were a simple minded and childlike plantation “darky” or the bumbling urban “dandy.” The established blackface minstrel fool also explained away foolish actions because such actions were simply expected of these characters.

While many stereotyped characters with certain characteristics were used over and over again within blackface and a traditional format created and used, minstrelsy was largely unscripted. Such characters and the traditional minstrel set up also allowed the San Francisco Minstrels to create improvised and spontaneous performances, and they were considered unrivaled masters at creating zany and unpredictable performances.<sup>49</sup> Their performances weren't all about the physical comedy though; much of their unpredictability came from their spontaneous wit.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Frank Dumont “Whose Baby Is It?” (New York City: DeWitt Publishing House 1881), 5.

<sup>49</sup> Toll., 150, McCoy, 189.

For the troupe, much of their improvisation came in the style of social and political satire. The San Francisco Minstrels dominated the New York blackface stage from 1865 to 1883, the post-Civil War years when America struggled with its own recovery. Times were tense, as Reconstruction was instituted to reunite a torn nation, falling well below its expectations. Voter turnout was near 90% of all eligible voters and elections were close contests between the Republicans and Democrats with an occasional fair showing by a third party.<sup>50</sup> It became the era laced with political scandals and fraud, found from city political machines to federal administrations.<sup>51</sup>

Economically the country suffered from an economic depression that lasted from 1873 to 1877. Though despite this, the country saw the greatest growth in its history, largely thanks to increased industrialization and technological advances.<sup>52</sup> There was a population shift from rural to urban as well as a mass immigration of new immigrants, the greatest the nation had seen to date, causing rapid growth in the cities that required new transportation technology as well as increased poverty. Such poverty forced many new immigrants to live in the poorest areas of the city that were ripe for crime and corruption.

Being attuned to their audiences and the tense times surrounding them, the San Francisco Minstrels adapted to the shift of minstrelsy and began to ease away from carefree topics that related to the “plantation darcy” to vent frustration and ease tension through political and social satire. Their biting satire was the feature that the troupe became largely known for and how they are primarily remembered.<sup>53</sup> When asked in an interview about what make the San Francisco Minstrels so successful Billy Birch replied:

*“...our impromptu work. We didn't addle our brains to get off puns. We bit hard at the follies of the day and made comments on passing incidents. Every night we would introduce new jokes and new business.”<sup>54</sup>*

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<sup>50</sup> This number while it looks impressive still only constitutes about half the population as women were still not allowed the vote. Black men were given the vote by the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment, but many states began implementing their own laws restrictions that made it increasingly difficult for black men to obtain this vote. Most of these laws are known today as Jim Crow laws, or Grandfather clauses.

<sup>51</sup> Joel Silbey, *The American Political Nation*.

<sup>52</sup> Silbey, Toll and McCoy.

<sup>53</sup> Toll, p 161, McCoy, 333.

<sup>54</sup> “Old Minstrel Days” *Daily Alta California*, October 12, 1890.

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While incorporating the use of more political and social commentary they did not forsake playing the minstrel fool. Instead they used it to keep the humor which is what allowed the troupe to “hit hard” at the happenings of the day. A story that is told of Charley Backus illustrates this, as it tells of how Backus was censored by the Speaker of the California house legislature because he made fun of the assembly. Backus' response the censor was to join a minstrel troupe where he could indulge in such humor without anyone complaining.<sup>55</sup> The blackface mask served as a front to deliver the actors opinions in a comical manner.

“Governor” Add Ryman was a member of the San Francisco Minstrels throughout the majority of the 1870s and was the author of several of the troupe's burlesques and plays.<sup>56</sup> He proved to be quite masterful at taking the minstrel character and commentating on contemporary issues and public figures. He was born in Indiana and raised in Ohio where his father was a judge on the Ohio State Supreme Court, before his minstrel career Ryman himself became a lawyer.<sup>57</sup> This may account for his ability to have a firm grasp of the political and social scene as well as provide him with his skill of oration. This skill was put to great use as he became primarily known for his stump speeches. A stump speech in the minstrel sense is a comic monologue full of malapropisms and puns about topics that varied in subjects about pure nonsense to parodies of politics, new innovations and social issues.

The stump speech became Ryman's primary claim to his popularity and he touched upon topics that ranged from something as inconsequential as fish, to social issues such as polygamy and education. He was extremely good at keeping an eye on the political arena and those involved in it. No matter what the topic proved to be Ryman proved to be ingenious about lampooning some issue or public figure into this speeches.

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<sup>55</sup> Melvin D. Landon [“Eli Perkins”]. “Scaring a Connecticut Farmer.” *The Library of Wit and Humor, Prose and Poetry: Selected from the Literature of all Times and Nations*, Volume 3 (1884) A[insworth] R[and] Spofford and Rufus E[dmonds] Shapely, eds. Philadelphia: Gebbie & Co., 1892, 191.

<sup>56</sup> “Minstrel Ryman's Suicide” *NY Times*.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*.



For instance while orating about the insignificant topic of fish; Ryman manages to integrate into his speech reference to Denis Kearney, a California politician known for his stance against Chinese immigration.

*“Fish is a proper substantive derived from two Chinese laundries— Fi and Sh. Both when combined form a substance called Fish. Fish, my dear friends, was discovered in the year 4-11-44, B.D.K.--that is, before Denis Kearney.”<sup>58</sup>*

His also includes mention of Robert Ingersoll a political leader who was known for his defense of agnosticism.<sup>59</sup>

*“As a member of the Society of the Prevention of Fish-eating on Friday, I've been asked who were the first to institute that historic custom. By looking over the pages of Hoyle, I find they were gentlemen from Jerusalem named Moses and Aaron. [T]hey were two people of whom Bob Ingersoll makes a thousand dollars a night trying to prove that they did not exist at all.”<sup>60</sup>*

Ryman's ability to weave such figures into a speech about fish is an excellent portrayal of a minstrel stump speech. It also shows the scope of Ryman's ability to lampoon contemporary figures into his speeches as well as his scope of knowledge.

One particular speech simply entitled “Stump Speech,” provides a very good example of Ryman's commentary on political issues and in this speech he is specifically looking at Congress. Taking on the character of a black minster preaching about evil Ryman states:

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<sup>58</sup> Add Ryman “Fish” 4-11-44 is a phrase that is traced to an illegal lottery known as “policy” in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Numbers were drawn on a wheel of fortune, ranging from 1-78. A three-number entry was known as a “gig” and the popular 4, 11, 44 bet became known as the “washerwoman's gig” and the stereotypical player of the “washerwomen gig” was a poor black man. Preston Lauterbach *The Chillin' Circuit: And the Road to Rock 'n' Roll*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2011), 22.

<sup>59</sup> Add Ryman “Fish.”

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. “The reference to Hoyle is a play off the saying “According to Hoyle” which means to be in accord with the highest authority or with a strict set of rules. The saying is believed to come from *Hoyle's Short Treatise on the Game of Whist* which gives the rules and ways to win the game. It was a highly sought after book in eighteenth century and became the authority when disputes arose of the rules of the card game Whist.

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*“Woe be unto you, publicans and sinners, ye reprobates of boff houses, dat had robbed de trezury ob a million an a haff, and divied it among yoursefs. Not sassified wid five toutsan dollars a year-- dese reprobates ob de people in Kongress, in whom we hab intrusted our pollytical libes, our gold and green-backs, and de berry eggistance obe de nashun, hab cum de grab game ober Unkil Sams trezury to de tune of a millyon an a haff.”<sup>61</sup>*

The purpose of this particular speech can be found in the nonsensical way Ryman throws out the names of Harlan, Patterson, Brooks and Colfax, all whom could be found in Congress during the day and all whom were involved in the Credit Mobilier Scandal. This scandal was exposed in 1872 and would be only one of many scandals that are linked to the Grant Administration.<sup>62</sup> Ryman in character expresses frustration that while many members of Congress start out as good and honest in the end they fall to greed.

*“De moss morul, de moss temprate, de moss piens, de moss relijus obe de wite race wen dey hab been roun beah bout a yeer, a yeer an a haff or two yeers, dey becum so mammonized, an dey am so greedy ater de fifty lucor dat they am willin de debble shal hab dar soles, if dey can ony fill dar coffers to de brim.”<sup>63</sup>*

In some very strong language he continues:

*“De best ting dat you can do, for yourserfs and de community, am for you all to emmygrait to Lasky, or some desart ilean, an dar skain each oder until der aint enuff leb ob you to feed a sick crow”<sup>64</sup>*

As clear as the verbal lashing is Ryman gets away with it, as he took advantage of the minstrel character. The speech is delivered in the black vernacular English, or in heavy southern dialect and Ryman takes on the persona of a clergyman the humor arises from the fact that his character, a black clergyman, could not have been able to display such wit or possess such an opinion as to condemn those in Congress.

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<sup>61</sup> Add Ryman “Stump Speech” 9 paragraph 2.

<sup>62</sup> Edward W Martin, *Behind the Scenes in Washington Being a Complete and Graphic Account of the Credit Mobiler Investigation*, (New York: Continental Publishing Company, 1873), 260.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 paragraph 4.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 paragraph 5.

Had the biting marks been made in normal white English and without the blackface it would of not have portrayed the sense of humor that Ryman was essentially vying for. The topic would have been a bit too serious to find any kind of home on the minstrel stage and it would have undermined the goal of the show, which was to entertain and get a laugh. However, this speech and other material written and performed by Ryman show that it could be a medium where frustration could be expounded. The wording is too strong not to suggest that Ryman was disgusted about what was occurring in the federal political arena. He was able to vent his frustration because the black characters simply couldn't be taken with too much seriousness, providing a great vehicle to get away with some heavy commentary about the contemporary happenings.

In this sense the San Francisco Minstrels used the minstrel fool to openly ridicule public figures, or enhance a folly and create an atmosphere that relieved tension over certain issues. In February 1876, the San Francisco Minstrels performed a burlesque entitled *Julius the Snoozer* a parody of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* that gave a local flare to the themes of corruption and conspiracy. The character of "Julius the Snoozer" described as an ambitious politician plainly depicts the infamous William "Boss" Tweed one of the leaders of the New York City's Tammany Hall political machine and who was said to have swindled through various networks of corruption approximately in 200 million dollars.<sup>65</sup> In December 1875, Tweed while on parole fled to Spain and the following months saw the papers filled with stories and rumors about Tweed's location. The anger over his crimes were only added to by the happenings in the national scene. At the time the play was performed the nation saw a decade of what became known as the Reconstruction era, a time that had become synonymous with the federal government's involvement in fraud and corruption. The year 1876 was an election year that signified the final year of the corrupted Grant Administration and the election of someone new.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Kenneth D Ackerman, *Boss Tweed: The Rise and Fall of the Corrupt Pol Who Conceived the Soul of Modern New York*. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005. 264.

<sup>66</sup> Carter Goodrich, *Government Promotion of American Canals and Railroads, 1800-1890* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1960), 19.

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Within the tension of this setting, the burlesque in reality expressed frustration at politics as a whole, as seen by various characters within the act listing several issues of the day. For example as Brutus explains to the character Cassius as to why he will kill Julius the Snoozer he says:

*BRUTUS: Cassius, I'll do this act with the excuse all politicians make-  
That 'tis not for office, but for my country's sake.*

*CASSIUS: Would it not be policy to expose your platform?  
We live, you know, in the age of reform.*

*BRUTUS: Say I favor Hard Money, the School Question, Whiskey Rings,  
Canal Frauds, and Inflation,  
Or any other little snap to enrich the nation.  
Take this dollar and lay it out for beer,  
And, as they drink, let them for Brutus cheer.<sup>67</sup>*

In no attempts to hide their frustration the manner of speech in this play, unlike the stump speech mentioned above, was not performed in the black vernacular English. Instead the performers spoke in a dialect that, while it parodied the Shakespearean verse, was very clear and quite understandable. There was to be no undermining or attempts to disguise the true meaning of the burlesque and the material it was satirizing.

As they adapted to their New York audience, the San Francisco Minstrels naturally catered the main character to represent a public figure that was more familiar and closer to home, Boss Tweed. This enhanced the emotions evoked by the satire and using Shakespeare's plot provided the means in which the troupe had the opportunity take down Tweed's character and dispose of him permanently. The ending of Shakespeare's play is the assassination of Julius Caesar, the ending of the San Francisco Minstrel's burlesque is the death of Julius the Snoozer. Julius the Snoozer who is described as an "ambitious politician" stand in contrast to the characters who play opposite him, they are to represent the common man. Brutus is described as the "working man's friend," Cassius as a "skeleton lobbyist" and Decius is simply "one of the gang."<sup>68</sup> In the show their characters come together in front of Julius the Snoozer to beg for reform and better living conditions.

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<sup>67</sup> Add Ryman "Stump Speech" 9 paragraph 4.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

*CASSIUS: Our dirty streets want cleaning; to this you've no objection?*

*JULIUS: We'll have them cleaned just before our next election.*

*BRUTUS: Our tenement houses, crowded pens of slaughter.*

*DECIUS: I'd call your attention to our filthy water.*

*BRUTUS: A police reform is asked for everywhere.*

*And a street car law, "No seat no fare."*

The list continues and the audience would have been well aware of what was being discussed and they would have understood the frustration declared by Brutus and Decius.

*BRUTUS: A thousand other evils could be named,  
But what's the use when there's nothing to be gained.*

*DECIUS: A deaf ear you turn to all our good intents,  
Waiting to be bought for ten or fifteen cents.<sup>69</sup>*

To further add to the tension a new character is imported into the burlesque by the name of Pinchback. The character is of a very disgruntled Senator that is constantly begging to retain his seat which has been persistently refused to him. PINCHBACK: "Most noble Snoozer, grant me, I pray a seat: I'm tired all but to death standing on my feet."<sup>70</sup> This directly references the real Senator P.B.S. Pinchback, a mulatto elected Senator from Louisiana. In 1876 during the time this play would have been performed, Senator Pinchback was involved in a heated fight with the U.S. Senate about retaining his seat that was denied to him, because he was black.<sup>71</sup>

In the same manner that he treated Brutus, Cassius, and Decius, the Snoozer dismisses Pinchback's cries. In the end it is Pinchback that is granted the first strike as he shoots Julius the Snoozer with a cannon. His initial attack is pursued further by the other characters who punch the Snoozer with boxing gloves.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>71</sup> Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback was raised as a free black in Ohio, before fighting for the Union in the Civil War. After the war he became extremely active in Louisiana politics becoming acting governor of the state in 1872 making him the first person of African descent to serve as governor of any state. Around the same time he was elected to Congress in 1873 by the Louisiana legislature. Democrats contested the election and Pinchback was refused permission to take his seat upon arriving in Congress. After a much heated debate his election was nullified in 1877. Pinchback remained very active in politics until his death in 1921.

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It is very interesting to note that just before Julius the Snoozer dies he “*rushes over to BRUTUS, who bits him in [the] face with flour.*”<sup>72</sup>

Turning the Snoozer white could have been meant to place more emphasis on the public figure his character was to be depicting which was an enemy to both black and the working man.<sup>73</sup> It could also suggest a revolutionary idea that one day blacks could potentially defeat the white man's authority over them. Either way, it's a fairly extraordinary moment, which is quickly overshadowed by the bizarre and rather chaotic ending that includes fireworks, the Goddess of Liberty waving flags about, and a quartette singing the “Star Spangled Banner.” The purpose being, to end on a energetic and light note, after all it was the minstrel stage and nothing was to be taken too seriously.

“Julius the Snoozer” in its humor, ridiculed a very public figure while expressing the public's frustration with local and national political corruption and make it laughable and enjoyable. This particular burlesque also gave the character that was to represent Boss Tweed a desirable ending as the “Snoozer” met his end by cannon and boxing gloves, such a conclusion must have been highly satisfying to a frustrated public.

Commentaries on political and social issues were not only found in their afterpieces, or specialty acts but songs as well. Like the stump speeches and burlesques the San Francisco Minstrels hit on some heavy topics but it was soothed over by the upbeat nature of the plantation song. In a plantation song *Pass Down the Centre* (1879) the troupe add their own twist and comment on race as they sing about a “southern darkie” that decides to leave Tennessee and return to Alabama. “Times are hard for de darkie, way down in Tennessee. Mister Ku-Klux can't you let me be.” The speaker intends to “be a color'd lamb” though he intention is to run for Congress. Such a radical thought is eased as the speaker shifts topic and begins to sing about his girl though it comes back to express how difficult it was for “darkie” to earn enough money to keep his girl.

The song ends with a quip that “greenbacks am plenty, dey weigh de same as gold” a references to the fact that there was not enough gold or silver in the U.S. Treasury to back all the greenbacks that were circulating. Finally the song satirically instructs the down on his luck fellow to not “...stand out in de cold. Press a “Freedman's bank” into de fold.” The

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>73</sup> McCoy, 245.

Freedman's Bank collapsed in 1874 and by 1879 when the song was published and was helping no one. The point being made that there wasn't anything there to help those "southern darkies." <sup>74</sup> Another song entitled *Our Torchlight Parade* (1880) sings of elections and the buying of votes. "We don't belong to either side, We're neutrals, on and all; One day we are Republicans, the next with Tamm'ny Hall. We carry a torch for a dollar a night-- and loudly cheer the candidate, For he'll give us a hearty meal..."<sup>75</sup> All three songs seem heavy in their dialogue but the songs are quite rhythmic and upbeat. They were meant to be sung with a lot of energy, essentially undermining the serious message.

The San Francisco's Minstrels ability to mix traditional minstrel comedy with biting satire proved profitable. Twain reported that in 1867 the troupe's gross amount from receipts from the previous twelve months was just under \$110,000 (today this would be approximately \$16,700,000.)<sup>76</sup> The fact that in 1874 the San Francisco Minstrels were able to buy a theater on Broadway and 29<sup>th</sup> street gives some inclination as to their financial success, especially considering that they bought the theater in the midst of an economic recession.

Upon his death in 1883 Charley Backus left an estate of \$350,000 (\$7,700,000) and Backus worked until a few months up to his death. At Wambold's death his estate was said have been worth \$150,000 (3,670,000) and at the time of his death in 1889 he had been retired from the minstrel stage for nine years with serious health issues.<sup>77</sup> Birch claimed that he had probably saved more money than either Backus or Wambold. However, due to frivolous spending along with a misplaced confidence in a friend at the sum of \$200,000 (\$4,680,000) and at least half of that amount lost on bad speculation, he died with hardly a penny to his name.<sup>78</sup>

The numbers are definitely impressive showing that San Francisco Minstrels were very much a financial success. This success and their

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<sup>74</sup> Frank Howard and W.S. Mullaly, *Pass Down de Centre: Plantation or End song*, (New York: Himan & Woodward, 1879.) and McCoy. 237. The government had issued about \$450 million in greenbacks during the Civil War that were not backed by specie (gold or silver.) The Specie Resumption Act stated that by January 1, 1879 steps were to be taken to reduce the number of greenbacks and the government needed to increase their specie reserves to convince the public that their paper notes were as good as gold.

<sup>75</sup> Frank Dumont and W.S. Mullaly, *Our Torchlight Parade*, (Boston, Oliver Ditson & Co 1880.)

<sup>76</sup> Twain, *Travels with Mr. Brown*, 176, and "Billy Birch is Dead" *NY Time* April 21, 1897.

<sup>77</sup> Estavan,, 203.

<sup>78</sup> "Old Minstrel Days."

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eighteen year run on a New York stage gives testimony of their show and its quality. Their success would not have been so prominent had they not been able to create a show that appealed to their diverse New York audience.

In 1883, Billy Birch the only remaining performing founder of the San Francisco Minstrels sold the troupe to Jack Haverly, the owner of a mammoth size minstrel troupe, putting an end to troupe's eighteen year run in New York City.<sup>79</sup> Their ending was lamented and their founders Birch, Backus, and Wambold are listed as some of the greatest performers who performed in the blackface.<sup>80</sup> However, blackface minstrelsy continued on without them and it continued to change, eventually molding itself into the new formats of film and radio during the twentieth century.

What makes the San Francisco Minstrels worth discussing is their discernment concerning the changes that surround them and their audiences' wants and needs that allowed them to skillfully adapt the old minstrel traditions with new emerging ones. Without fully discarding the traditional characters and acts they interlaced it with political and social satire that "hit hard" at contemporary happenings.<sup>81</sup> In an era in which the San Francisco Minstrels performed racial tensions were high and they kept traditional characters and styles that did indeed racially stereotype African Americans. It is unfortunate that such stereotypes were able to bring about a large element of humor within the troupe's minstrel show. Particularly as it was used to undercut the sharp commentary, after all it would not be expected of the "planation darky" to express such profound opinion on local affairs or national politics. In a sense their performances had the ability to blur the lines of reality and representation. Their political and social satire took their audiences to real contemporary issues while their minstrel characters took their audiences back to the good ole' days and simpler times.<sup>82</sup> This combination is what brought about success.

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<sup>79</sup> Toll, 162-163.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> "Old Minstrel Days."

<sup>82</sup> McCoy 237-238. Henry Wonham "Mark Twain's Last Cakewalk: Racialized Performance in No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger* (*American Literary Realism*, 40 Spring 2008, 269) 262-271.



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