

# COMMON-PLACE

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## Searching for Florence

Benjamin Filene

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For me, it was the eyes. With her hand resting easily on the piano, the girl gives the camera a piercing look of pride and self-possession, with just a hint of defiance. That look stirred up deep feelings in me--about music, about daughters (especially prideful, self-possessed, occasionally defiant daughters), about reaching back for the past. I admit--and it became even more plain later, when I knew more--that I brought personal feelings to bear on the image. But this wasn't a time to be an "objective historian." This was a time to indulge, for a moment, the warm, vaguely melancholy feeling that comes from connecting to the past and to remember why I became an historian in the first place. And it was time to learn more.



courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

All that was written on the back of the photograph was "Florence Blood seated at piano, Feb. 25, 1912," plus the call number assigned by the Minnesota Historical Society's library. The photo was one of hundreds that a team of us flipped through on an early winter afternoon

in 1998. The group was assigned to develop a new exhibit for the Society, *Sounds Good to Me: Music in Minnesota*. Two years before the opening date, we were starting to work in earnest. Until that point, *Sounds Good to Me* had been more a felicitous phrase than a meaningful title. Seeing Florence, though, brought it into focus for me. The exhibit should be about the feelings this girl had for music and the feelings I was having about the girl. It should be about how we all--in different ways, in different times, and in different places--weave music into our lives: sounds good to *me*.

Without telling the rest of the team, I order a print of the photograph, slide it into a frame, and put it on my piano at home. For several months, it sits there largely unexamined. Occasionally my four-year-old daughter, Eliza, notices it and asks if it is a picture of her. "No," I say, "it's someone who lived a long, long time ago." "You mean before I was born?" "Yes, before you were born." Is that all? Can the photograph become more than just a reservoir for the vaguely nostalgic feelings I'd imposed on it? Can Florence be found? One day, I begin the hunt.

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The most obvious route dead-ends. Most objects in MHS's collections have donor files that tell how they came to the Society. But our photography curator, Bonnie Wilson, turns up no file on this image, just a record showing that the actual donation had been a 4" x 5" glass-plate negative, not a print. In the 1950s and 1960s, shortly after the Society established its audio-visual library, it was not uncommon for people to donate a stack of glass negatives. The understaffed department might not have had time to develop the images for a while, and donor records either were not created or did not itemize all of the images. The surprisingly precise name and date on Florence's photo likely were handwritten on the paper wrapper that held the negative when it was dropped off. Bonnie speculates that since the identification includes Florence's last name, the photograph was probably snapped by someone other than a family member (who would have written just "Florence")--perhaps an itinerant photographer or an amateur who owned a camera and took pictures for everyone on the block.

Regardless of the exact scenario, I can't call Florence's descendants and say, "Tell me about your grandmother." I turn back to the photo itself. Again I am struck by the clarity of the image. You can tell Florence dressed up for it--hair in a braid and a corkscrew curl with ribbons in the back, bracelets and a bead necklace, rings on fingers, shiny boots laced up tightly, cotton dress with nary a wrinkle. The room that holds the piano is not as fancy as some of the other

turn-of-the-century parlors I've seen in photos. Sometimes you can hardly spot the instrument beneath the doilies, plants, statues, and bevy of family photographs. Florence's instrument looks to be covered with a tasseled cloth. There's a metronome on top in the center, a fern arrangement and vase on a table nearby, a framed painting (spaniels!) on the wall behind, and a flowered flue cover on an adjacent wall. It's not a lavish setup, I think, but certainly comfortable. I realize that the idea of a not-wealthy person dressing up to pose with a piano is part of what I find moving. With an air of idealism and hope, the photo places music in the center of Florence's life--as an avenue for personal and public expression, for feelings of self-worth and hopes for self-advancement.

Tantalizingly, you can read the titles of the music on Florence's piano: "Meet Me To-night in Dreamland" and "Moon Wind." Sheet music, I know from our exhibit research, was all the rage in this period. Pianos had become more affordable in the late 1800s, and their new owners wanted easy-to-play music for parlor sing-alongs. Colorful, single-sheet copies of popular songs became the stock in trade of a booming industry. Although the player piano and then the phonograph began appearing in middle-class homes in the 1890s, the sheet-music trade flourished until the 1930s, when it went into steep decline.

What would it have been like to sit in the parlor and hear Florence play? The question calls to mind an institution I'd read about, the Chatfield Brass Band Music Lending Library in southeastern Minnesota. Jim Perkins, a lawyer in Chatfield, had started a community brass band in 1969 and needed repertoire. He wrote to schools and bands, asking for old sheet music that wasn't being used. At first Perkins filed the donations in his attic in wooden cabinets he bought from the Mayo Clinic for five dollars. As more and more music came pouring in, he moved the collection to City Hall and then, in 1981, opened a three-thousand-square-foot library. Today the collection has more than one hundred thousand songs, with another five hundred boxes of music waiting to be catalogued.

I ask Ayesha Shariff, the researcher working on the music exhibit, to call Chatfield. "Moon Wind" doesn't ring a bell, but, yes, "Meet Me To-night in Dreamland" is in their collection. [The author has since learned that the "Moon" song, partially obscured in the photograph, is actually titled "Moon Winks."] Ayesha orders a photocopy of the music and, with an eye toward reproducing it in the exhibit, asks about the color of the original sheet. A week later the copy comes--clearly legible, showing the same dramatically bonneted woman on the cover as appears on Florence's music. There is also a typewritten note: "I have cut off a corner of the

cover of the sheet music we have so you can get an idea of the color." Egad! To the conservation-minded, this is akin to getting a thumb in the mail. But it does show clearly that the cover is pink with a yellow border and red script.

At home I put the music on my piano, a 1908 upright, not too different, probably, from Florence's. The music has a 1909 copyright along with a warning at the top of the inside page: "PLEASE NOTE:--Owing to the phenomenal and unprecedented success and sale of this beautiful song, there have been placed on the market, imitation "Dreamland" songs with very similar titles. This song written and composed by LEO FRIEDMAN and BETH SLATER WHITSON is THE ORIGINAL song of this title AND WE CAN PROVE IT."



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## Searching for Florence

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**"Dreaming of you /  
that's all I do-- /  
Night and day for  
you I'm pining, /  
And in your eyes, /  
blue as the skies / I  
can see the love-light  
softly shining."**

I start to play the song and immediately run into trouble. It's a waltz-time piece meant to be played "dreamily," according to the notation. But as the music moves along, with three-note chords in each hand, my rendition brings to mind a three-legged cow. I haven't taken a formal piano lesson in twenty years, but I do play for pleasure pretty regularly. Is this the "easy-to-play" music that historians have told me about? Could a young girl in 1912 really play this piece? Did someone else play it for her? Regardless, I'm impressed. Struggling along, I gain a new appreciation for the piano's place in people's lives a century ago. If songs like this were considered a dilution of the repertoire, then people must have had quite a degree of facility, and that, I know, requires many hours of practice.



[Listen to an MP3 of  
"Meet Me To-Night in Dreamland" \(2.3M\)](#)

This recording was made from a contemporary player piano roll.  
MP3s are compact audio files playable by a number of applications, such

as WinAmp (PC) and iTunes (Mac).

After a second and third try, "Meet Me To-night" starts to come through a little more clearly for me, although still at a ridiculously slow tempo for a waltz. The tune is just as schmaltzy as the title would lead you to expect, and the lyrics follow suit: "Dreaming of you / that's all I do-- / Night and day for you I'm pining, / And in your eyes, / blue as the skies / I can see the love-light softly shining." And the chorus: "Meet me to-night in Dreamland / Under the silv'ry moon / Meet me to-night in Dreamland / Where love's sweet roses bloom." I imagine young Florence singing these words. Could she deliver them without the edge of a smirk that we would feel obligated to add now? Probably. At her age, she was likely just starting to become preoccupied with this sort of sentiment.

But what age *was* Florence in the photo? I still know so little. I go down to the MHS library and begin looking at the 1912 city directories, alphabetical listings of people, their addresses, and occupations. Florence could have lived anywhere, but I start with Minneapolis and St. Paul. In those two directories alone, I count eleven Bloods, none of them Florences. As today, the directory doesn't list children. The census does, but the 1910 census has no index. You have to know the name and address of the person you're searching for; and, again, entries appear under the name of the head of the household. The 1920 census does have an index, but it seems unlikely that Florence would show up in it, eight years after she posed by her piano.

With the feeling of turning over the last stone, I listen as a reference librarian explains how the 1920 index works. Called Soundex, it's an arcane but, in its own way, beautifully simple system. The first step is to convert the last name you're searching for into a code. The first letter of the last name stays as is, but the remaining ones are assigned numbers from zero to six, except for vowels, which are ignored. If you run out of consonants, you add zeroes. (Today, driver's-license numbers start with Soundexes.) B-L-O-O-D becomes B430. This bureaucratic finagling has a practical, even noble, purpose. B430 leads to Blood, but it would also lead to Bloud or Blaud or Blode. Spelling variations introduced by a time-pressed or tin-eared census-taker or Ellis Island clerk cannot wash out the trail.

On microfilm, I flip through the pages of the Soundex, four handwritten 3" x 5" cards per screen. And there she is. Florence E. Blood. She appears under the entry for Hulda (yes, Hulda) Blood, whom I remember as one of the names in the St. Paul city directory. I had been searching for drops of

information; suddenly I have a flood. Florence was twenty-one in 1920, so she was thirteen when my photo was taken. She was born in Minnesota. Her mother, Hulda, was born in Sweden. Hulda, forty-two in 1920, emigrated in 1888 (at age ten) and became an American citizen in 1893. Florence had a brother, Wallace, three years younger than she. The family of three lived at 666 Ottawa Avenue, just across the Mississippi River from downtown St. Paul.

I can't believe my good fortune. If Florence had married and changed her name before 1920, I wouldn't have found any of these morsels. From the Soundex card, I go to the census enumeration sheet itself. Following the handwritten list, I feel as if I'm walking down the street with the census-taker as he visits the Clarks at 660 Ottawa, the Silvers at 662, the McCarthys at 664, the Bloods at 666. The enumeration sheet tells me that the Bloods rent their home; that all three can read and write; that Hulda does not have a job; and that Florence does, as a clerk for the railroad. (Florence is all grown up!) Wallace is an electrician apprentice with the telephone company. Interestingly, Hulda appears as the head of the household, and she is listed as divorced, quite unusual for the early decades of the century.

With my new information, I can look for the Bloods in the 1910 census. I find them renting at 695 Ottawa. Hilda (yes, Hilda) is again identified as the head of household (again without a profession), but she is listed as married (for thirteen years), not divorced. Her husband was apparently born in New York. Returning to the city directories, I find Hulda (yes, Hulda again) at 695 Ottawa from 1911 to 1914, around the corner at 322 West Page Street between 1915 and 1917, and then at 666 Ottawa from 1918 to 1921. I'm startled in the 1917 directory, for there Florence appears, clear as day, sharing the Page Street house with her mother. She was there all along; I just hadn't thought to check so far beyond the date of the photo. The listing identifies her as "clk G N Ry." I talk to two reference librarians before we figure it out: clerk, Great Northern Railway.

The 1917 directory also is the only one that lists Hulda as the "widow of Geo W." Widow? George W.? I backtrack and, yes, George W. appears, living in various addresses (but never with Hulda) and working for Blood and Thomas, which, according to the directory, is a downtown St. Paul firm that handles real estate loans and building contracts. George is listed in 1917, disappears in 1918, the year after Hulda is listed as a widow, but then resurfaces in 1919 and on into the 1920s, still in the real estate business! So was Hulda widowed or not? There was significant stigma attached to divorce in this period.

Had Hulda told the city directory surveyor that she had been widowed to avoid uncomfortable questions? Had George moved out of town in 1917-18, prompting Hulda to imagine being rid of him once and for all? Or could she have lost touch with him for a while and presumed him dead? Once again, the historical record is as fallible as it is revealing--and revealing in its fallibility.

As for Florence, the trail abruptly dries up in the 1922 directory. Her mother has moved again, this time to South Smith Street, where, for the first time, she is listed with an occupation: seamstress. But Florence Blood appears nowhere in the 1922 volume, nor in directories for the rest of the decade. No doubt she got married, I figure. I learn that St. Paul's marriage records, wonderfully indexed, are housed in the Ramsey County courthouse, just down the hill from the Minnesota History Center. I'm buoyant as I walk through the doors of the Art Deco building, past the gigantic white onyx statue of the "Indian God of Peace," and into the marriage-record office. After I find Florence's married name, I'll use the directories to trace her and her family down to the present, interview her children, hear stories about how much music meant to their mother, maybe even see the family piano itself!

But Florence doesn't appear in the marriage index--not in 1921 or '22, or '23, or even up to 1930. I almost wish the indexes were less neat so that there would be room to consider other options. I trudge back to the History Center, sit in the microfilm room, and ponder my possibilities. There are few. Florence could have moved out of town or gotten married somewhere else entirely; if so, I will never find her. Or, gulp, she could have died.

The reference librarian tells me that, yes, the historical society has death records on microfilm. In contrast to the marriage records, they are organized chronologically with no index at all. Mainly to avoid admitting that my search is over, I begin paging through the death certificates for January 1922. Almost immediately, they make me feel even more down in the dumps than before. Baby Boy Brown--stillborn. Baby Girl Robbins--mycosarcoma of neck (urgent). Julia French Metcalf--cerebral softening. Fanny Claus--ruptured liver due to auto accident. Florence Grant--diabetes mellitus. Albert H. Neuenfeldt--organic heart. As I turn to each new record, I feel a queasy tension, hoping to find Florence but just as much hoping not to. I want to imagine her as the flashing-eyed girl in the photo, not reduced to an anatomical malfunction.

After three hundred deaths in January 1922, I give up

and, for the first time in this process, start to wonder about myself. What is going on here? Earlier, I had joked with a colleague that my search for the Bloods was a quest for a surrogate Minnesota family (Bloodlines, so to speak). Lacking local roots of my own (I grew up in North Carolina), I was adopting some. Now I wonder if there might be some truth to this theory. My wife and I moved to Minnesota in 1997 and have loved it from the start. We know, though, that we will always be easterners in a midwestern culture that accepts outsiders but does not exactly embrace them.

If the Bloods are supposed to be surrogate family members, though, they're proving to be more than standoffish. Have I reached the end of the line? Lacking documentary clues, I decide to return to physical evidence. I hop into my Chevy Nova and head for Ottawa Avenue.



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**""Know her?! I hated her guts! The name Florence Blood certainly rings a bell with the woman who answered the phone."**

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All of the homes that Hulda, Florence, and Wallace lived in were within a few blocks of each other in a neighborhood called Cherokee Heights. Some of the houses of their era no longer exist, but as I drive slowly down the street, I see the one I had been hoping for: 695 Ottawa, where Florence lived in 1912 when her photograph was taken. No doubt the house looks different today than it did on that February day eighty-eight years ago. The one-story place has green siding, a "Collie on Guard" sign, and, indeed, a collie looking at me amiably from behind a wire fence. In my mind, I subtract the front porch and side additions, and I'm struck by how small the house must have been when Hulda and her children rented it. What an act of optimism and determination it was for a divorced mother of two to bring a piano into this home! After briefly considering a knock on the door ("Hi, I have this photograph"), I drive home.

Cherokee Heights is in Ramsey County, but it's near the border of Dakota County. Somewhat dispiritedly, I decide to follow up on a long shot suggested by the Ramsey County marriage-license office. I drive twenty-five miles to Hastings to check if Florence by chance filed her marriage paperwork in the Dakota County courthouse. With the streamlined index system, it takes all of five minutes to bring Florence back to life once again. On March 11, 1921, in St. Paul, a Presbyterian minister married Florence Blood and Arnold S. Jensen. On the printed form, "Dakota" County is crossed out and "Ramsey" is handwritten above it. I walk out of the office with a secret smile.

Arnold S. Jensen, the 1921-22 St. Paul directories say, was a student in the Nichols Expert Business Office Training and Secretarial School. After that, neither he nor Florence are listed until 1930, when Arnold shows up as a clerk at the Great Northern Railway, the same position Florence had held a decade before. Florence herself has no job listing after 1921. In the 1940s, Arnold appears as supervisor at the State Railroad and Warehouse Commission. Arnold and Florence Jensen live on Margaret Street on St. Paul's east side, six or seven miles from where Florence grew up. By 1950

Florence is a widow. In 1956 she herself disappears from the directory.

Searching for further signs of Florence, I notice that Hulda Blood, at age 78, appears in the 1956 directory, living with her son Wallace at 305 West Annapolis, still in the same neighborhood where she had raised her children. Wallace is listed as a pressman at Brown and Bigelow, a printing factory, with a wife named Evelyn. Hulda no longer shows up in the directory after 1960. Evelyn is a widow by 1962 and last appears in 1978.

From the directories, I can't tell which Bloods or, certainly, Jensens, might be children of Wallace and Evelyn or Florence and Arnold, so I'm left with the last resort of the desperate genealogist, the cold phone call. It's going to be "Hi, I have this photograph" after all. Early on, I had looked at the list of fifteen Bloods in the St. Paul phone book with a feeling of helplessness, but now one name stands out, an E. C. Blood at 330 W. Annapolis--intriguingly close to where Hulda lived with Wallace and Evelyn. With a deep breath, I dial the number and prepare to try to explain my pursuit of Florence Blood without frightening the person on the other end of the line.

"Know her?! I hated her guts!" The name Florence Blood certainly rings a bell with the woman who answered the phone. "You, you did?" I stammer. "Wh--Why?" "I kept her mother for twenty-eight years. When I asked Florence to take her in, she threw me out of the house! When my husband died, she had to take her, but she put her in a nursing home the next year." Reeling, I grasp for the only solid information at hand: "Your husband? Could that be Wallace?" "Yes. Wallace."

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Twenty years after the city directories had stopped listing her, ninety-year-old Evelyn Blood--Florence's sister-in-law, Wallace's widow--is living on Annapolis Avenue. Talking with her, I begin to piece together the story of a family feud. "It was like the Martins and the Coys," says Evelyn, referring to a 1940s ballad opera based on the feuding Hatfields and McCoys. Some of the tension had to do with caring for Hulda who, Evelyn tells me, lived to be 102. Whatever the cause, Evelyn says, "Nobody liked each other." For their part, Wallace and Evelyn saw the Jensens as "a real odd outfit." Relations deteriorated to such an extent that Florence didn't attend her brother's funeral. And, yes, Florence had died in about 1986, thirty years after I'd lost track of her.

Despite her bitterness toward her sister-in-law, Evelyn is being open and generous with me. I venture that the

historical society has a wonderful photograph of Florence as a girl. Could I show it to her sometime? "I don't want to see her if she is eight years old." "Well, it shows her sitting by a piano," I say. "She didn't know how play the piano. She wasn't that smart!"

I end the conversation by asking whether Florence had children. She had three, I learn: Delores, Richard, and Carol. Evelyn recalls that the daughters moved away but thinks Richard still lives in town, although she hasn't said a word to him in more than a decade.

I thank Evelyn profusely, hang up, and try to get my bearings. In some ways, my search has succeeded: I have spoken to someone who actually knew Florence and, in fact, had strong feelings about her! Plainly, though, there must be another side to this story. One doesn't interview the Martins but not the Coys. In the Twin Cities phone books, I count twenty-five Richard Jensens. (Why couldn't Florence have married into the Jabberwocky family?!) Over the next two days, I call them all. In itself, the process turns out to be a heartening gauge of the civic fabric. Twenty-five times I tell my tale, and each time the person on the other end listens and responds politely, sympathetically, encouragingly. "No, that's not my mother. But best of luck!" "Sorry, that's not us. We're from Iowa." After leaving messages on several answering machines, I start getting calls back. "Hello, this is Richard Jensen." My heart leaps. "I'm calling to let you know that my mother was not named Florence. She was Alice"--or Gladys, or Doris. "Yes, my mother was named Florence," says Richard Jensen #14--but not, it turns out, the *right* Florence.

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What more could I do to bring to life Florence Blood and that moment on February 25, 1912? Quite a lot, I suppose: mount a day-by-day newspaper microfilm search for Florence's obituary; enlist a piano expert to identify the model of Florence's instrument; search for the Presbyterian church that married Florence and Arnold; contact a genealogical society and enlist the aid of other Jensen buffs; consult the city's building records for 695 Ottawa Avenue; knock on doors in the Jensens' east side neighborhood; place an ad in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*.

But no, it seems time to call it quits. Somehow, having a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end is satisfying, even if the story follows a very different arc than I had expected. In itself, the unpredictability has been instructive. An image is not always what it seems. Your daughters don't always turn out as adorable as they start out--at least in the eyes of their

sisters-in-law. Evidence is not always evidence.  
History is an improvised tune that deviates willy-nilly  
from the printed score.

These pointed reminders, though, have done nothing  
to dissipate the spark of feeling that Florence Blood  
first elicited in me. If anything, the search for  
Florence has deepened my sense of her as a living  
presence. In its own way, this sense of humanity  
offers the most valuable lesson of all. History isn't  
about building airtight narratives. It's about searching  
for human connection. And when you find it, you  
know it.

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