


Dying Wisconsin Soldier

As sung by
William J. Morgan
04-08-1946 Berlin, WI

The Dying Wisconsin Soldier

The sun was sink-ing in the west, and fell its lin-g'ring ray, Through the
branch-es of the for-est, where a wound-ed sol-dier lay. 'Neath the
shade of a pal-met-to, 'neath the sun-ny south-ern sky, Far from his lov'd Wis-con-sin home they
laid him down to die.

 Carl Fischer, Inc. New York.
No. 32 - 10 lines.

(VERSION A)

Verse 1.

The sun was sinking in the west, and fell its ling'ring ray
Through the branches of the forest, where a wounded soldier lay.
'Neath the shade of a palmetto, 'neath the sunny southern sky,
Far from his loved Wisconsin home, they laid him down to die.

Verse 2.

A group had gathered around him, his comrades in the fight,
And the tears roll down each manly cheek as he breathes his last good-night
Saying, "Comrades, I am dying, have you weep no more for me;
I'm crossing a dark river where beyond it all are free."

Verse 3.

"Now comrades, gather closer; listen to the words I say.
A story I will tell you, ere my life-blood ebbs away.
Far away in old Wisconsin, in my dear old Badger state,
There's one who for my coming with a saddened heart doth wait."

Verse 4.

“My mother, she lies sleeping beneath the church-yard sod,
And it’s many and many a weary year since her spirit went to God;
My father, he lies sleeping beneath the deep blue sea;
I’ve no brother, I’ve no kindred; there was only Nell and me.”

Verse 5.

“When our country was in danger and called for volunteers,
She threw her arms about my neck, and bursting into tears,
Saying, ‘Go, my darling brother, drive the traitors from our shore.
Though my heart, it needs your presence, but our country needs you more.’”

Verse 6.

“It is true, I love my country; I have given her my all.
Had it not been for my sister, I’d be content to fall.
No, comrades, I am dying; I shall never see her more.
She’ll vainly watch my coming at our little cottage door.”

Verse 7.

“Now comrades, gather closer; listen to my dying prayer;
Who’ll be to her a brother, shield her with a brother’s care?”
Thus the soldiers spake together, like a voice it seemed to fall;
“We’ll be to her a brother; we’ll protect her one and all.”

Verse 8.

Then one sweet smile of gladness on the soldier’s face there raised;
One quick convulsive shudder, and the soldier boy was dead.
On the banks of the Potomac they laid him down to rest,
With his knapsack for his pillow, and his rifle on his breast.

Transcription and lyrics from the Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection.

Critical Commentary

Transcriptions by Peters, p. 225, and HST.

HST notes:

In the Professional Papers series:

Version A sung by William J. Morgan, age 76, Berlin, 1946.

Version B sung by Noble B. Brown, age 61, Millsville, 1946

Both singers learned “The Dying Wisconsin Soldier” in central Wisconsin. Mr. Morgan said that he learned the song over fifty years ago from a nephew, Charlie Dibble, who was only a few years younger than Mr. Morgan. Mr. Brown, who was quite overcome emotionally as he finished singing the song, remarked, “That song is supposed to have been composed by a Wisconsin Civil War soldier. I learned it from my mother. She learned it from her father. He was a veteran of the Civil War and was in both Libby and Andersonville prisons.”

Although the melodies of the two singers differ, one melody was probably derived from the other or both were derived from some parent melody. In both melodies pathos and nostalgia are found in the downward melodic leap of a sixth followed by the upward leap of a fourth. These leaps, together with the outline of the major triad, lead me to surmise that whoever composed the melody had the sound of "Taps" ringing in his ears.

Except for a few variable lines, "The Dying Ranger," sung by the Texas cowboys, and "The Dying Wisconsin Soldier" are the same song. The ranger dies "Far away from his home in Texas." The sister is left alone "Way back in northwest Texas, that good old lone star state." In his lecture, "The Romance of the Cow Country," Dr. Edward Everett Dale referred to "The Dying Ranger." When I asked his opinion as to which version, the Texas or the Wisconsin, was the original, he commented that he did not know but thought that "some Wisconsin soldiers made up the song and the Texas boys learned it from them."

[Full quotation from Mr. Brown]: "I learned it from the lips of my own dear mother in childhood, at Neilsville, Clark County, Wis., in the 1890's. I believe she learned it from her father, who served in a company of Wisconsin infantry during the Civil War. He was wounded, taken prisoner, survived life in both Andersonville and Libby prisons."

Alternate titles/related songs: "The Dying Cowboy," "The Dying Soldier."

Sources:

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Randolph, Vance, collector and editor. *Ozark Folksongs*. Vol. II. Columbia, Mo.: State Historical Society of Missouri, 1946-50. "The Dying Cowboy" and "The Dying Soldier."

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K.G.