

# KITTY SHARPE

## Circus and Stage Sand Dancer

by Don Meade

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The revival by Irish traditional musicians of a “sand jig” named for the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American variety theater dancer Kitty O’Neil inspired me to research her life and times and to write about the story behind the tune.<sup>1</sup> In the course of that research, I encountered many references to another female sand dancer, Kitty Sharpe (or Sharp<sup>2</sup>), whose career was contemporary with that of Kitty O’Neil and for whom an equally worthy musical tribute was also published in *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*, an important 1882 compilation of Irish, Scottish, English and American dance tunes.<sup>3</sup>

Like “Kitty O’Neil’s Champion,” “Kitty Sharpe’s Champion” is a fiddle-friendly “straight jig,” a type of syncopated, African-American inspired dance tune written in 2/4 or 2/2 time and played in schottische tempo, i.e., a bit slower than a reel and with more syncopation and rhythmic swing. And, like “Kitty O’Neil’s,” it is a sand jig, a type of straight jig performed by shuffling and sliding in thin-soled shoes on a sand-strewn stage or in a box of sand placed on stage.

166 KITTY SHARPE’S CHAMPION—JIG.

The image shows a musical score for 'Kitty Sharpe's Champion—Jig'. It consists of five staves of music. The first staff is the melody in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. The second staff is the accompaniment in treble clef. The third staff is the melody in bass clef. The fourth staff is the accompaniment in bass clef. The fifth staff is a double bass line with fingerings (1-5) and accents (>) marked. The score includes various musical notations such as trills (tr), slurs, and dynamic markings (v, >).

*Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*

As with “Kitty O’Neil’s Champion,” the piece named for Kitty Sharpe was based on a pre-existing two-part tune, in this case the one called “The Inimitable Reel” in *Ryan’s* (later printed as “Everybody’s Fancy” in Francis O’Neill’s 1903 *Music of Ireland*). The composer of the expanded version, who is not credited but may well have been the book’s editor William Bradbury Ryan,

<sup>1</sup> “Kitty O’Neil and Her ‘Champion Jig’: A Forgotten Irish-American Variety Theater Star,” revised version available online at [www.blarneystar.com](http://www.blarneystar.com).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout her career, the spelling of Kitty’s stage name varied in theater billings, newspaper ads and articles. Her first name was sometimes spelled Kittie and her last name either as “Sharpe” or “Sharp.”

<sup>3</sup> Elias Howe and William Bradbury Ryan, *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection: 1050 Reels and Jigs, Hornpipes, Clogs, Walk-arounds, Essences, Strathspeys, Highland Flings and Contra Dances, with Figures, and How to Play Them. Bowing and Fingering Marked. Together with Forty Introductory Studies for the Violin, with Explanations of Bowing, etc.* (Boston: Elias Howe, 1882, copyright 1883), reformatted facsimile edition published by Mel Bay Publications, Pacific, MO: 1995, ed. Patrick Sky.

added three additional parts that give a dancer more scope for the long slide steps and quick shuffled triplets characteristic of the sand jig. The third part, with its long trilled notes, modulates from G to C major, ascending to a high C that requires a fiddler to move the left hand up to second position. This makes it a more technically challenging piece than “Kitty O’Neil’s Champion” and may partly explain why it has so far remained unplayed and unrecorded by contemporary Irish and American traditional musicians.<sup>4</sup>

Kitty O’Neil was a celebrated performer in her day. Though nearly forgotten a century later, she still rated mentions in articles and books on the history of variety, vaudeville and tap dancing. Kitty Sharpe had a career that lasted longer than Kitty O’Neil, yet she has faded more completely from popular memory and is not even mentioned in academic studies. She led a remarkable life, however, and her dancing inspired a remarkable tune.

The most complete story of Kitty Sharpe’s life can be found in a 1929 biographical sketch in *The Saratogian*, the local paper in her adopted home town of Saratoga Springs, New York. That article, the source of many of the details related below, was one of 27 installments in a serialized biography of her husband, the celebrated circus clown Eddie “Fritz” Smith.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Butcher’s Daughter**

Kitty Sharpe was born in New York City on June 10, 1855, the same year as Kitty O’Neil. Unlike O’Neil, she had no obvious Irish connections. Her name at birth was Schaab, indicating south German ancestry, at least on her father’s side.<sup>6</sup> George Adam Schaab ran a meat market on the site of what is now Pennsylvania Station. Kitty was born on the second floor above the shop. Not long after her birth, the family moved to Pawtucket, Rhode Island, where George opened a new market. When a bite from a rabid dog killed his six-year-old son, George took the family back to Manhattan and opened a shop on Greenwich Street near the Hudson River docks.

Kitty’s mother Catherine (who also used the last name “Sharpe”<sup>7</sup>) had ambitions that extended beyond the meat market. In 1866, she answered a newspaper ad seeking women and girls for the cast of *The Black Crook*. This melodramatic song-and-dance extravaganza, sometimes described as the first American “book” musical, was the result of a collaboration between Londoners Henry C. Jarrett and Harry Palmer, whose corps of dancers had been stranded in New York after a fire

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<sup>4</sup> New York traditional singer and fiddler Grant Rogers recorded a reel called “Kitty Sharp.” It was perhaps another tribute to the same dancer but is not a sand jig and is totally unrelated to “Kitty Sharpe’s Champion” (Grant Rogers, *Songmaker of the Catskills*, Folk-Legacy Records, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> “Life Story of Fritz Smith, Chapter VIII, Kitty Sharp,” *The Saratogian*, Saratoga Springs, New York, February 11, 1929. The chronology in that article, available online via the [www.fultonhistory.com](http://www.fultonhistory.com) site, includes some errors and inconsistencies. It spells her name “Sharp,” without the final ‘e’ used by her mother Catherine, and doesn’t mention that the name was originally Schaab. According to the article, Kitty was eight years old when she joined the *Black Crook*, but the show opened in September, 1866, when she would have been eleven. It claims that Sharp was one of “350 flying angels” in *The Black Crook*, but this is surely a typo as theater historian T. Allston Brown wrote that there were only 35 children in the production. The article claimed Kitty spent three and half years “in that stand,” but the initial production of *The Black Crook* at Niblo’s lasted less than two and half years, so that time span might include Kitty’s stint in *Black Crook* road companies.

<sup>6</sup> The 1929 profile of Kitty Sharp in *The Saratogian* gave her father’s name as Sharp as well, but his obituary (December 30, 1907) in that paper gave it as George Adam Schaab and noted that among his survivors was a son, William Schaab.

<sup>7</sup> “Catherine Sharpe” appeared several times in the pages of *The Saratogian*. The June 7, 1912 edition, for example, printed a note from her thanking those who sent cards of sympathy and flowers on the occasion of the death of her son William.

destroyed the Academy of Music where they were to play, and William Wheatley, the manager of Niblo's Garden, a 3,200-seat theater and entertainment complex on Broadway at Prince Street. The trio joined forces to produce a five-and-a-half hour spectacle loosely based on a script by American playwright Charles M. Barras. It was a technically innovative and wildly popular production, the chief attraction of which was the sight of 140 female legs in silk tights.

Catherine Sharpe won a minor role in *The Black Crook*, taking the stage name "Rose St. Audley," and soon brought Kitty and her younger sister Dolly into the show to join a troupe of 35 "flying angels" who in one scene were suspended above the stage on wires. During her time at Niblo's, Kitty took dance lessons from a French ballet teacher. Mother and daughters subsequently went on the road with touring *Black Crook* troupes before returning to New York, where "Rose St. Audley" joined a company led by the actress Lucy Rushton.

### **Steamboats, Sharpshooters and Sand Jigs**

The Schaab/Sharpe family moved again in 1868 to Memphis, Tennessee, where Kitty continued her stage career at J.M. Schooles' Varieties theater, which the Memphis *Public Ledger* noted in June, 1870 "is becoming quite a popular place of resort."<sup>8</sup> At the end of that month Kitty watched the start of the famous race between the steamboats *Natchez* and *Robert E. Lee* as they left for New Orleans. "It was a sight to remember," she recalled: "The calliopes were playing on the steamers and every time they stoked the fire the blaze would mount up into the night."<sup>9</sup>

From Memphis, Kitty journeyed to Omaha for a brief stay in a town where she recalled "more Indians on the streets than white men." The next stop was St. Louis, where Kitty thought that George Deagle's Varieties Theater was "an exact replica of the Niblo gardens." During a six-month run at Deagle's, Kitty partnered sharpshooter Frank Frayne, posing while Frayne shot an apple off her head, a pipe from her lips and another apple suspended by its stem from her teeth.<sup>10</sup> More crucially for her future career, Kitty learned the sand jig from the Hawley Brothers, a blackface song-and-dance team known for their clogging prowess:<sup>11</sup>

It was here, through the aid of the Hawley Brothers that Kitty Sharp learned the specialty dance that was to create a name for her with most of the theater managers throughout the United States. There were only two women doing sand dancing, or as it is more generally known, jig dancing, at that time, and Kitty rehearsed long and faithfully with the Hawley [*sic*] Brothers.

"After I had learned the dance," she says, "I didn't have the nerve to go on. My mother begged me to go out onto the stage, and the manager pleaded with me. Finding me unmoved, he gave me a shove, and there I was, with the cornucopia of sand in my hands, facing the audience. There was nothing to do but dance, so I danced. A roar of applause greeted my efforts. I did straight jig dancing. With that kind of dancing the more immobile you are from your hips up the better you are. I could dance with a glass of water on my head, and have, many times."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Memphis *Public Ledger*, June 4, 1870

<sup>9</sup> "Life Story of Fritz Smith, Chapter VIII, Kitty Sharp" (*op. cit.*).

<sup>10</sup> Kitty was luckier than Frayne's fiancée, actress Annie Von Behren, who was killed in a stage accident in Cincinnati when Frayne's rifle misfired (New York *Times*, December 3, 1882).

<sup>11</sup> The New York *Clipper*, the theatrical weekly, recorded appearances by the Hawley Brothers in various cities, including St. Louis, from 1870 until the act broke up in 1876. They were referred to as "negro" cloggers, but acts so described in this period were usually white performers in blackface.

<sup>12</sup> "Life Story of Fritz Smith, Chapter VIII, Kitty Sharp" (*op. cit.*).

Kitty was now ready to move up to the big time. She was signed for a week by New York variety king Tony Pastor, and then renewed for second week. She also played in Pastor's other theaters in Brooklyn, Patterson, New Jersey and Jersey City. "Her mother always accompanied her," the *Saratogian* chronicler wrote, "and they always returned to New York city after the performances." Despite the dance lessons in St. Louis, Kitty was initially billed in New York as a singer, as shown in a November 9, 1870 advertisement in the New York *Evening Telegram* for Tony Pastor's Opera House that listed her as "KITTY SHARPE, Vocalist." By the next year, however, she was appearing with Tony's brother Billy Pastor as a "song and dance artiste" at the Philadelphia Varieties theater.<sup>13</sup>

Kitty told *The Saratogian* reporter that she played the Theatre Comique in Providence for a year, sand dancing and introducing comic songs written by a Mr. Mitchell, and that this stint was followed by a two-year contract to play in Wally Ward's theaters in Newark, Patterson, Fall River and Portland. These commitments didn't prevent her from returning to work on occasion for Tony Pastor, who was in need of a replacement dancer when Kitty O'Neil left his troupe to work for Josh Hart at the New York Theatre Comique. At times, the two Kitty's (undoubtedly the "only two women doing sand dancing" mentioned Sharpe's *Saratogian* biography) were in direct competition, as in January of 1873 when the New York *Herald* advertised both "Kitty Sharp's Champion Jig" at Pastor's Bowery Opera House and Kitty O'Neil's appearance on the bill at the Comique, a few blocks away on Broadway.<sup>14</sup>

Notices in the New York *Clipper*, a weekly devoted to popular entertainment, show that Kitty was at the Washington Varieties in Providence in April and May of 1873 and back with Pastor in October. On November 1, an upstate New York *Clipper* correspondent gushed: "Kitty Sharpe is the star at present. She is the most dashing and vigorous song and dance lady that has ever appeared in Troy." That may have been the case, but the Troy Theatre Comique nevertheless closed on the 8th of November without paying her salary or that of the other performers.<sup>15</sup>

### **Circus Summers and Stage Winters**

New York City or Boston theaters in the 1870's could be unbearably hot in the summer months, so Tony Pastor, Michael Bennett Leavitt, John Stetson and other pioneer variety producers took their shows on the road at that time. They were long preceded in this practice by circus troupes who traveled even more widely, first on wagons and later on rails, to bring shows under canvas to small-town audiences.

The type of entertainment offered by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century circus overlapped to a considerable degree with that of the variety theater. The variety stage had no room for elephants, but theater programs did include smaller animal acts, as well as jugglers, sharpshooters and wire walkers along with blackface minstrelsy, comedy, dance and song. Circus shows in this era often concluded with a variety-style concert performance, and many circus clowns specialized in comic songs. One of these was Tony Pastor himself, who launched his career as a singing clown before achieving stardom at Robert Butler's American Music Hall at 444 Broadway in New York.

In July, 1874 Kitty Sharpe and her sister, now billed as Dolly Lang, joined the L.B. Lent Circus

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<sup>13</sup> New York *Clipper*, November 18, 1871.

<sup>14</sup> "Before she was 19, she was advertised as 'The Greatest Sand Dancer on the American Stage,'" Albany *Times-Union*, March 14, 1943, "Once Star of 'Black Crook,' Now 87, Living Quietly Here: Kitty Sharp, Famed in Day as Greatest Sand Dancer Known."

<sup>15</sup> *The Spirit of the Times*, November 15, 1873.

on a New England tour as a song-and-dance duo. At the time, Kitty was engaged to be married to Frank Pastor, another of Tony's brothers and a celebrated bareback circus equestrian.<sup>16</sup> But when she met Eddie Fritz, the Lent troupe's "daring young man on the flying trapeze," she quickly made new plans. Kitty and Fritz were married in Red Bank, New Jersey on August 18 and would be together on stage and off for the next 56 years.

Born in Liverpool in 1849, Edwin "Fritz" Smith came to the U.S. via South America in 1873 along with his partner James Cassim, a fellow acrobat of mixed Scottish and East Indian ancestry. Though initially famed for his acrobatic "flying," he expanded his repertoire in the circus, eventually becoming the principal clown with Barnum & Bailey, "the greatest show on earth."



*The Saratogian*, February 20, 1929

When the 1874 tent season ended, Cassim, Fritz and Kitty Sharpe toured variety theaters for the winter, playing at Pastor's, the Olympic and Niblo's in New York, then working their way through smaller cities. In January they placed the following ad in the *Clipper*:

Notice to Circus Mangers  
**CASSIM AND FRITZ**  
 Premier Acrobats of the World, and  
**MISS KITTY SHARP**

The accomplished Song-and-dance Lady, are at liberty for the tenting season of 1875. Managers address THEATRE COMIQUE, Washington, D.C.<sup>17</sup>

The trio found a place with Howe & Cushing's Circus and toured the Atlantic states. Fritz and Kitty's first child, also christened Kitty, was born on the road in Boston that May. Soon after, the young family arrived in Saratoga Springs to visit George Schaab, who was running his latest meat market in that upstate resort town.

Kitty and Fritz continued the same pattern of circus summers and variety theater winters for decades. In an interview many years later, Fritz commented: "The first few weeks in the music halls, or theatres were almost like a rest for us, for there was not that dust, and the hurly-burly noises

of the circus to distract us."<sup>18</sup> In Philadelphia, while playing at the Olympic Theater, Cassim, Fritz and Kitty were recruited to join Cooper & Bailey's Circus for the 1876 season. They traveled west until the train was stopped by Buffalo Bill, who warned the circus people to get off as Indians were tearing up the tracks. He was right – the train was later wrecked and the crew massacred but Cooper & Bailey's troupe had already taken to the road to tour western towns, including Salt Lake City, where the audience included Brigham Young.

<sup>16</sup> "Life Story of Fritz Smith, Chapter VIII, Kitty Sharp" (*op. cit.*)

<sup>17</sup> New York *Clipper*, January 16, 1875

<sup>18</sup> "Life Story of Fritz Smith, Chapter IX, *The Saratogian*, February 13, 1929.

Cooper & Bailey were heading for Australia but Kitty wouldn't hear of it. Instead, before returning to New York (where Cassim and Fritz played alongside Harrigan and Hart at the Theatre Comique), the family trio played for over seven months in San Francisco at Haverly and Maguire's Minstrels, then at the Bella Union, the west coast's most famous "melodeon" (the local name for a variety hall), where Kitty was showered with coins by the patrons on her debut. In October, 1877, Kitty despite being pregnant, finally succumbed to Bailey's entreaties and embarked with Cassim and Fritz on a circus tour of Australia and New Zealand. Her first son, Sidney, was born at sea. The return trip took them home via Peru, Chile, Argentina and Brazil.

Kitty resumed her variety stage career, only briefly interrupted when her second son Eddie was born in Brooklyn in the spring of 1879. That season the team of Cassim and Fritz broke up because James Bailey didn't want Kitty to tour with The London Show, a circus he'd bought while the Cooper & Bailey troupe was in South America. Fritz wouldn't tour without Kitty, so Cassim went alone. On May 14, while Fritz and Kitty were touring with the Commonwealth Circus, Cassim was run over by a train in a rail yard accident in Johnstown, New York.<sup>19</sup>

Fritz then toured for a while with John Robinson, an English tumbler he'd met on his first trip to America, then joined Barnum & Bailey in 1883. Kitty went with him and P.T. Barnum, the king of hype, dressed her in Oriental costume and passed her off to the press as an exotic Arabian danseuse.<sup>20</sup> In the spring of that year, Kitty bore a third son, Jeal (named for circus equestrienne Linda Jeal) in Brooklyn and, though still touring frequently, set up a fixed abode in in Saratoga Springs near the rest of her immediate family.

Young Eddie began his stage career under his parents' tutelage at the age of seven in 1886. Three years later Fritz quit Barnum & Bailey and brought Eddie into his act. They joined the Cole Younger and Frank James Wild West Show and later the Forepaugh circus. In the latter days of his long career, Fritz's specialty, along with Eddie and an English clown named Leslie, was "The Trick House," in which he was chased through trap doors and windows of a prop house.

Throughout the 1880's and into the '90's, Kitty Sharpe still featured on the bill at variety halls in the winter and in circus troupes during the summer. She was still a hit in 1894 in Toronto, where a local paper noted: "Miss Kitty Sharpe, a sand-dancer, won the favour of all the audiences. While the programme probably exaggerates in describing her as the greatest sand-dancer on the American stage, she can claim a place in the front rank of her profession."<sup>21</sup> She was still touring with her husband and son, along with their partner, the English clown Leslie, in the summer of 1896, when *The Clipper* reported they played two weeks the Guvernator Theater in Atlantic City.

Fritz stayed even longer in show business than his wife, not retiring permanently until 1904, when he settled down in Saratoga Springs, ran a gymnasium and worked for 21 years as a watchman at the local waterworks. He passed away in April, 1931, two years after the extensive chronicle of his life appeared in *The Saratogian*. Kitty lived on in Saratoga Springs with her sister Dolly Lang Woodward, surviving a house fire that made the papers in 1935. She died on May 20, 1945, just shy of 90 years old, and was buried beside Fritz in Greenridge Cemetery.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Clipper*, May 24, 1879.

<sup>20</sup> "Life Story of Fritz Smith, Chapter XX, *The Saratogian*, February 25, 1929.

<sup>21</sup> *Toronto Daily Mail*, March 6, 1894.

<sup>22</sup> *The Saratogian*, May 21, 1945.

Thanks to William Bradbury Ryan and those, especially Pat Sky, who labored to keep his work in print, “Kitty Sharpe’s Champion Jig” is still available to any musician who might take a fancy to it. Those dots on the page in *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection* may yet be brought to life by contemporary traditional musicians, restoring some posthumous celebrity to a once-famous variety and circus hooper.