

# THE LEEDY WAY

by Rob Cook

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# George Way's Boston Background

George Harrison Way was born in San Francisco as George Harrison Bassett on January 8, 1891. His father was also named George Harrison Bassett. His mother, Augusta Ann (Shaw) Bassett was born to Swedish immigrant parents in 1871. They married in 1889 when she was 18, and George was born almost exactly two years later.

While George was still a baby, his mother divorced his father and left San Francisco with him. She married William Thompson Way in May of 1894. Way was a lawyer who had passed his first bar exam in St Louis, Missouri in 1890, and applied to the Massachusetts Bar in 1892. George's petition for the change of name from Bassett to Way was filed when he was 13 in 1904 at the same time that he was legally adopted by his stepfather. (Augusta later divorced William Thompson Way and took back her maiden name of Shaw while William remarried, to Edna Frances.)

The Way family had deep roots in the Boston area, reaching back to the 1600s. They had done quite well for themselves; George would later comment that his family had come from "old money," but that much of it was gone and his father had faced some struggles.

Although George Way came from a prominent Boston Family, we learn little about them from George. He spoke very little about his upbringing, even to closest friends. He did mention that he grew up in a well-to-do household in which it was difficult to sit in a chair without having a servant eager to push the chair closer to the table for you. As we will soon learn, George quite literally ran away to join the circus, a source of humiliation for a Boston society family, and he had little contact with them through most of his adult life.

In his later years, George began to search for the graves of his departed family members. Robert Zildjian remembered George searching Boston-area cemeteries every time George came to town. George was a Zildjian houseguest on these trips, and usually came back after a day of searching looking very defeated. Finally one day an elated George reported that he had found them after years of searching. The family plot with George's adoptive family (father, grandfather, stepmother, uncles, etc.) was finally found by George in Boston's Forest Hills Cemetery. It speaks to George's relationship with his adoptive family that he had such a hard time finding the family plot. It wasn't as if the plot was established after George had "left the nest;" by the time of his legal adoption the plot had been owned by the family for over 30 years and 4 relatives were already buried there.



**William Thompson Way, Statesman  
Platform: Tariff for revenue only, A national shrine to Wm. J. Bryan, Opposed to Henry Cabot Lodge, Opposed to the Ku Klux Klan, for religious freedom regardless of consequences even to cannibalism, and last but not least cheap strawberries and good tobacco, both smoking and chewing.**

George's stepfather, William Thompson Way, was born in 1864 to John M. Way, a lawyer with offices in Boston and a residence in Duxbury. He had a sister Edith, born in 1866, a brother Clarence born in 1855, and a half-brother, John M. Way Jr..



It is not clear whether Wm. T. Way was successful in any of his bids for public office, but certainly he had a successful legal career. He became a prosecuting attorney and eventually a judge. One rather remarkable case that he handled was on behalf of his brother John M. Way Jr. and his half-brother Clarence Way. Clarence was in 1904 living in Aguacaliente de Baca, Mexico, where he was working as the Superintendent of a mescal works. There was a confrontation between Clarence and a local official (Alcalde) in which the official pointed a gun at Clarence who pushed it aside and continued on his way. The official, Hermolao Torres, later claimed the original reason for the confrontation was an earlier incident in which Clarence disrespected Torres through a salute lacking proper respect. Torres immediately went to the home of another citizen whom he ordered, along with another man, to go to Clarence Way's home and arrest Clarence along with his cook Latimer. The men were instructed to "use whatever force is necessary." Both Latimer and Way were shot dead in the scuffle that resulted when the men tried to serve the warrant. Torres and his two henchmen were arrested and tried for murder. One of the henchmen was convicted and sentenced to execution, the other was found not guilty and released, and Torres was sentenced to ten months in jail. It took many years, but in 1928 William T. Way was able to win a wrongful death settlement claim filed with the newly created (1919) League of Nations against the United States of Mexico. He had filed for \$25,000, was awarded \$8,000 on behalf of the estate of his half-brother John M Way Jr..





George H. Way attended an exclusive military boarding school for boys fourteen miles from Boston. The school building no longer exists, having burned after George's tenure there. (It is not clear whether the fire contributed to the fire phobias George developed in adulthood.)

#### **Mitchell School For Boys, Billerica, Massachusetts**

*For boys from eight to sixteen. Location unsurpassed for health and beauty. Course of Study— practical and efficient. Modern buildings. 100 acres. Table supplied from our gardens and model dairy. Outdoor and indoor gymnasium. New athletic field designed for every sport. Physical training and athletics are closely supervised. A moderate military system. Health and morals are considered of first importance. Our youngest boys live in Campbell Hall and receive particular attention in details. Tuition includes all extras. Limited to fifty.*



In 1879, Mr. M.C. Mitchell purchased a hotel property and converted it to the "Billerica Family School for Boys," later renamed the Mitchell School for Boys. Local society columns of the day compliment the boys of the school on their elocution skills and general deportment during the public exercises. The columns also described the facility:

*The regular teachers, principal, first, second, and third assistants, and scholars, form one and the same family, under the same roof, and at the same table.*

*The sleeping apartments are large and airy, each room having only two occupants in single beds. The sanitary and toilet arrangements are of the first order, and in charge of competent persons. A gymnasium and billiard room afford means for recreation. The sitting rooms for the boys in the main building are large and pleasant, and furnished with an eye to comfort and enjoyment.*

*We enter at the front door and are in a wide and spacious hall. To the left is a tastefully furnished parlor, while on the right is a study or reading room. In the rear of the study is the family sitting room, and just across*



*the hall is the dining room with its long and well filled tables. Beyond the dining room are the cook room, wash rooms, etc. The upper floors are devoted to sleeping apartments and the rooms, with two single beds in each, are models of neatness and comfort. The school room is in a separate building of two stories. We pass through a short entry, where the boys hand their outer garments, and are in the school room, which is a large, well lighted room. Each boy has a desk, and also around the room are 30 small closets of brown ash, one for each boy. On the left as we enter the school room is the bath room, in which are five bathing tubs, each in a separate alcove and provided with hot and cold water. To the right of the bath room is the recitation room, and in the school room between the two are marble wash basins. In the rear of the school room are the gymnasium and bowling alley, which are supplied with all the modern appliances. Adjoining the above is the gun room, where in racks around the room are arranged the muskets used in the military drill, which Captain A.A. Hanscom of Lowell has in charge. The sanitary arrangements are as near perfect as they can be, six single closets finished in brown ash in the rear of the gymnasium, with others in the main building.*

*In the roll of membership for the year now drawn to a close appear the names of boys from some of the leading families of Lowell and surrounding towns as well as many others from a greater distance. The popularity of the institution increases with each succeeding year.*



George attended the Mitchell School from 1905 to 1908, from age 14 to 17. Prior to that, his parents had arranged piano lessons, but George begged relentlessly for a drum. The school had a four-piece drum corps with “an old civil war guy who didn’t know how to play a flam,” starting them out. George’s mother would not buy him a drum, but a friend of hers did. A rich architect’s wife, Mrs. Hollingsworth, who lived on Marlborough Street, thought George was “a cute monkey” and drove him in an open two-seated carriage, with a “boss hossler” and a footman, to Oliver Ditson’s and bought George a drum. George was dressed up in a uniform; presumably his military uniform from school. George: “The drum cost \$12.50 and was made of tin with black hoops with an imitation inlaid wood transfer clear around, red waterproof snares, and a military strainer that wouldn’t turn.” (Ed. note: \$12.50 in 1908 relates to over \$600.00 in 2012 dollars.) While they were at the Ditson shop, the salesman told them about George B. Stone’s operation at 47 Hanover Street; less than a mile away.

George’s mother was “pretty sore” about him getting the drum, but he kept yelling for lessons and eventually she took him down to “old 47.” At the time, what there was of George B. Stone’s Stone Drum Factory was set up in a couple of small rooms on the ground floor. Local 9 of the Musician’s Union was on the top floor. According to Stone’s son and successor in the business George Lawrence Stone, George B. Stone would often, when business was slow, leave one of the boys in charge and go upstairs to play cards with “the old guard.” It was on such a day that young George Way showed up and interrupted the card game. He was dressed in his military uniform and wearing his drum on it’s sling. In a high-pitched voice, he asked to speak to “Mister George B. Stone, the man who teaches people to play the drums.” A number of amused musicians who were lounging in the Union Hall fell in around George as an impromptu military-type escort and escorted him across the room to present him to George B. Stone, interrupting the card game. Ignoring

their antics, young George squared his shoulders, gave a very formal military salute, and informed Mr. Stone that he wanted to learn to play the drum. Furthermore, he had heard that George B. Stone was the best teacher in the world and that he wanted to take his first lesson right then and there. The “comic” musicians began a debate as to whether Mr. Stone should continue the game and let the business wait, or whether he should desert the cards and give the boy his lesson. It was really pretty much a no-win situation for Stone. Would he be an old meanie with no time for playing with children, or would he ostracize the true musicians by “taking money from infants?” George B. reportedly settled the comic debate by taking the boy by the hand and saying “Come on downstairs.” That moment, related George L. Stone later, was the start of the musical career of George H. Way.

George B. Stone was an exceptionally qualified instructor. He was commissioned as a Drum Major in the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, an instructor of bands, and the conductor of his own Stone’s Military Band. He played the violin professionally and gave lessons on that instrument also. Many of his students went on to positions with nationally known orchestras while others started drum companies and/or became well-known instructors in their own right. George L. Stone once said of his father: “He was a born teacher. Fat and jolly, he loved people and people loved him. He had a way with him and seemed to know just how to handle a pupil. His manner of criticizing (and he was a most exacting taskmaster) was as smooth as his Long Roll, and this was the envy of all who ever heard it. He could play anything in the book *ppp* on a dime while someone held it down with a fingernail tip. In later years, he and I would drum the Camp Duty (not *ppp*), he wielding one stick and I the other.”

George continued his lessons and hung around the shop all summer. Stone finally started having young George run errands and clean up, more to keep him out of the way than to give him employment. George Way was eager for the opportunity—sometimes too eager. George B. Stone was, according to his son, of the old school as far as his desk was concerned. It was always piled with a foot and a half accumulation of papers, letters, bills, notes, music, etc. Stone was always able to reach his hand in and produce exactly what he was looking for. Everyone took this for granted, and no one thought to caution young George never to disturb the desk debris. One time when both George L. (about George Way’s age,) and George B. Stone were out, George Way took it upon himself to clean the desk. George did not do that kind of thing half way.

When he was done, the desk was immaculate inside and out. There was not one loose piece of paper. The pigeonholes were stuffed, the drawers filled, and two big wastebaskets were bulging from all manner of “refuse” including old catalogs and uncashed checks. In relating the incident later, George L. Stone explained: “A most amiable man was my father, with a true and sincere love for his fellow man, and for George the feeling of a father toward a son, but when his outraged eyes beheld what had been done he momentarily lost the power of speech. When the benumbing shock of first sight began to wear off, he gained it again, and I don’t mind admitting that George and I, together with the boys in the factory and whatever customers may have appeared, took to cover until the storm subsided. George B. was fond of looking back at this incident, and more than once I have heard him claim that it took him the best part of six months to get his desk back to normal again.”

The next fall George did not return to Mitchell; he instead went to the public school in Boston at Newbury and Exeter Streets. His family moved to the Westminster Hotel, as his father was the attorney for the company.

George continued his lessons with Stone (and learning the drum business,) for the next two years. He worked as a shipping clerk for Howard Brigham, a position he considered his first job in 1908. He then traveled to Providence, Rhode Island, and learned to sling hash in the second of the original Baltimore Lunch Rooms. While there, he took a job for a few weeks at the Rocky Point Amusement Park in Rocky Point, Rhode Island, guiding shoot-the-chute boats. He had to dress as a sailor, and more than once fell into the water.

Back in Boston, George finally landed his first job with a musical organization, the vaudeville orchestra of the Congress Hall Theatre in South Boston. George later said of that first gig; “The very first act was that of two negro dancers doing a ‘one in a bar’ at 100 m.p.h. I came in very timidly somewhere around the ‘and’ of the 30th or 40th bar, and I have been looking for the ‘down-beat’ of that act for the last thirty-two years.”



George Way and George L. Stone became very good friends, almost like brothers. He later wrote to George L., "The first time I ever played anywhere with you was on a Labor Day parade, on and around Washington Street, in somebody's band (Schell's Band, I think). You played snare drum and you gave me the cymbals, and the men almost marched backwards trying to see how it was possible for anyone to slap cymbals in 'swing' style even before swing was born."

George B. gave young Way some drums to go to work with in South Boston, and Way eventually managed to pay for the drums. After that engagement, Way landed a job at the Joliette Theatre in Bowdoin Square. It was a 12-hour job, seven days a week. Recalling that engagement later, Way wrote to George L Stone, *When you or your dad showed up to see the show, I would come out of my coma and bang away at every trap I could lay my hands on. And I had plenty; in those days the drummer had to have a sound effect for every noise indicated on the screen. I wore out a pair*

*of case-knives a week clashing them together when the swordsmen battled it out on the screen, and at the same time I yelled myself hoarse, shouting, 'Curse you, Jack Dalton, you shall never have the girl as long as my trusty right arm wields this steel' etc. The piano player and I (this was the orchestra there) used to eat our lunch in the pit and keep playing at the same time. He would go into a waltz, even though the cowboys were chasing each other on the screen, so that I could play 'Oooof-kitty-kitty' with the pedal and one stick and eat a sandwich and drink coffee using the other hand. Then, when it came the piano player's turn to eat, we would wait for a gun-fight and the drum would do its solo while he gulped his in sequences of 8 to 32 bars.*

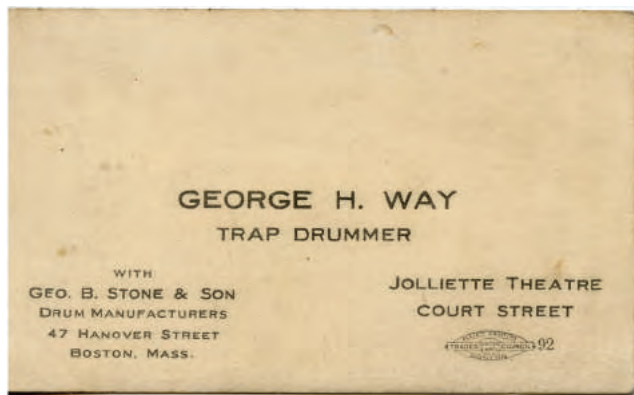
From George L. Stone column in Jacobs' Orchestra Monthly a few years later: *George worked the pictures from 10:30 A.M. to about the same in the P.M. with a couple of ten-minute intermissions for a sandwich and some coffee. George's manager was one of those*





*“simon Legree” boys who wanted his money’s worth—and generally got it. Considering that George’s weekly stipend for this job was in the neighborhood of \$10.00, less fines for tardiness, etc. we don’t think the manager got stuck. One week there was a fire scene shown at the Joliet, and George (in addition to working the fire-gong, siren, bell, whistle, crash cymbal, bass drum, auto horn and a few more) was called upon to shout “Fire! Fire!” to add realism to the picture. He did this so well that someone on the street took it in earnest and pulled in an alarm. Three ladies fainted, including the ticket taker, and a panic was narrowly averted. “Simon Legree,” the manager, instead of figuring this as good publicity, fined George \$2.00 and the ticket taker \$1.00.*

A young man named Foley showed up in Boston from New York, and told George that he could have his \$15.00/week job in a “piano and drum dump” in New York’s Columbus Circle. George jumped at the chance.



Most of the New York theatres where George performed were destined to become historic sites:

### City Theatre

The City Theater was built in 1909 as a playhouse, but was quickly converted to vaudeville and movies. It was the first project by Scottish architect Thomas W. Lamb. Lamb was considered one of the leading architects of the American theater construction boom of the 1910s and 1920s, the era of the opulent “movie palaces.” His work became the template for the American movie palace.

After building the City Theatre for William Fox, Lamb’s accomplishments included three Times Square landmarks: the Mark Strand Theatre, the Rialto, and the Rivoli.

### Circle Theatre

The Circle Theater opened as a “high class, polite vaudeville,” house in 1901 that was forced to close after a year-long legal battle with a neighboring church.

### Princess Theatre

The Princess was one of Broadway’s smallest theaters, with just 299 seats. The acoustics were acclaimed, and the finishing touches included neoclassically inspired plasterwork and hanging French tapestries

### Fox’s Folly Theatre

The Wm. Fox Amusement Company originally offered “five acts of vaudeville and five reels of pictures.” It continued as a prominent vaudeville and burlesque house for many years.

### B.F. Keith’s Harlem Opera House

Built by Oscar Hammerstein in 1889 on 125th Street, presented all of the big names of the era

### Dewey Theatre

The Dewey was converted from a church and opened in 1898 as a vaudeville and burlesque house. In 1908 William Fox leased it for \$50/day, a record at the time for a theater of its size. Fox charged ten cents per seat admission for a program of six vaudeville acts and eight reels of movies. (“shorts.”) Daily attendance averaged 9,000 with record attendance hitting 16,800. The Dewey billed itself as the coolest place in New York during the hot summer months, sporting 25 fans on the ceilings and walls. The fans had to be switched off during many performances because the noise drowned out the performances.

### Ross Park

Ross Park, in Binghamton, N.Y. was an outdoor venue with a small orchestra that accompanied a variety of vaudeville-style performers.



Next for George came several small picture-show jobs for William J. Gaines, who had the first chain of movie shows. He was sent to Reading, PA, but the Union sent him back in one week. Next came Fox's first theater, the old Novelty, in Brooklyn, then five more for Fox.

"I was William Fox's first drummer when he himself took tickets at the door and his father sold the tickets," recalled George, "and his nephew was janitor. The women used to come into the Folly in Brooklyn at 12 noon with their kids and sit there until 12 at night, bringing their lunch with them. We had to keep sawdust on the floor of the pit to keep the drums dry. There's where I got a good deal of my experience, possibly because it was a try-out house for big-time vaudeville and we didn't miss any of it. The acts used to rehearse right in front of the audience, then come back and do their act.."

The entertainment world that George stepped into when he began this vaudeville career was rapidly evolving, and George seems to have been at the epicenter. In New York City the charge seems to have been led not only by the Fox family George mentions having worked for, but by Adolph Zukor and his associates. Zukor's first entertainment venture was a penny arcade; slot machines that showed a brief animated sketch by flipping cards. It was a big hit, with New Yorkers lining up, sometimes for hours, for a chance at their favorite machines. Zukor decided the next step would be to provide a place where the customers could sit in a group and enjoy a projected image, so he found some partners and rented the hall above his arcade. The idea was scorned by some of Zukor's contemporaries in show business who doubted that he would find customers who were willing to climb stairs to view entertainment. Zukor turned that logic on its ear by making the stairs a selling point for his venue. He had the steps rebuilt out of heavy glass, under which there was running water flowing over colored lights creating the feeling that one was climbing a mystical waterfall. His "Crystal Hall" was an immediate success.

Zukor's first screenings were short novelty clips simply because that was about all that was being made at the time. He pioneered the concept of showing full-length feature films and expanded his operation to uptown New York, New Jersey and Boston. He became the first motion picture theater corporation. In 1953 Zukor, (who was then the head of Paramount pictures) was honored by New York's 14th Street Association for his pioneering efforts in starting the film industry. Well-known syndicated columnist Bob Considine de-



**Found in George's archives years later along with a copy of the Bob Considine column and a duplicate of George's letter was an 8x10 photo of Adolph Zukor, signed to George.**

scribed the event in his column "On The Line," where he also gave an overview of Zukor's rise to power in which was mentioned the Crystal Hall. George Way read the Considine column, and was inspired to sit right down and write a letter to Zukor. An excerpt from the letter:

*this is from one of your old employees who is very much ashamed of the fact that I had long since forgotten the name of my boss 'way back in 1908. I was the trap drummer (as we were then called) in Crystal Hall on 14th Street, in the old piano and drum days, and many an Indian bit the dust to the rap of my shot pad in your pit. A Mrs. Barker was the piano player, and we both climbed the waterfall glass stairs at 1 P.M. and came down only once or twice thru to 11 P.M.*

*I just couldn't refrain from writing you after reading Bob Considine's article. If it would not be presuming too much I would certainly like to have an autographed photo of you for my office wall so that I may point with pride to the fact that I was the first trap drummer in your employ.*



# Touring Career

*I went into show business to see the world. I got paid to see things that cost tourists a lot of money. I've been all over the world and in every U.S. town over 25,000 people at least once. You will note that most of my jobs were with second and third rate organizations. It is not a record that would classify a drummer as a fine musician or artist, but who cares? I do not regret one hour of it, because there never was a drummer who traveled more, saw more, or had more fun than I did, in those years on the road. Every day was like the 4th of July!*



**George with copy of Billboard magazine with Buffalo Bill Cody on the cover.**

In later years, George Way would refer to his engagement with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in 1908 as his first professional gig. Way substituted for the regular drummer in William Sweeney's orchestra, known as Sweeney's Cowboy Band. The orchestra typically played a half-hour concert of classical and popular music prior to the show. During the show, the Cowboy Band (up to 36-strong and complete with costumes) was an integral part of the show. They played constantly, providing a soundtrack and adding drama to the riding, shooting, and fighting demonstrations.