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Tom Fletcher

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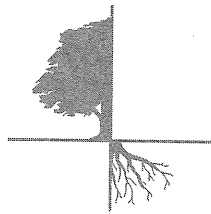
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AFRICAN AMERICAN NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY



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union loyalty. Following a string of minor skirmishes throughout the port, many of Local 8's key leaders switched allegiance to the ILA in 1925, bringing to a close the IWW's brief but illustrious history on the docks.

Fletcher, a man of principle, refused to follow his former comrades into the ILA. His decision was not without its costs, both personal and professional, for it meant that Fletcher's career in the labor movement was effectively over. Indeed, he was not heard from for several years, surfacing briefly in 1931 on the streets of New York City, where he held his listeners "spellbound" for over an hour. "I have heard all the big shots of the labor movement over a period of 25 years from coast to coast," wrote an AFL official who was in the audience, "and it is no exaggeration when I state that this colored man . . . is the only one I ever heard who cut right through to the bone of capitalist pretensions . . . with a concrete constructive working class union argument." It was to be Fletcher's last known public address. A victim of failing health, he suffered a stroke two years later that all but silenced this gifted orator. Further limited by a heart attack in 1945 he eventually died at his home in Brooklyn—with his membership in the IWW current and paid up.

Further Reading

Fletcher's papers are in the Abram Harris Collection, deposited in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University.

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Marcus, Irwin. "Benjamin Fletcher: Black Labor Leader," *Negro History Bulletin* 35 (Oct. 1972).

Seraile, William. "Ben Fletcher, I.W.W. Organizer," *Pennsylvania History* 46 (July 1979).

Spero, Sterling D., and Abram L. Harris. *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (1931).

HOWARD KIMELDORF

FLETCHER, Tom (16 May 1873–13 October 1954), entertainer, was born in Portsmouth, Ohio, the son of Luther Fletcher, a steamboat fireman, and Mary Eliza Cox, a cook. A stage performance sometime before 1888 of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that featured a cadre of African American actors and in which he played a small part initially inspired Tom Fletcher to pursue a career in entertainment. Later Fletcher became the first black actor to play the role of Uncle Tom.

Fletcher spent more than sixty years on the stage or performing in various venues. As a boy soprano he sang in local talent shows and played in the Portsmouth fife corps. His professional theatrical career began at age fifteen when he appeared with such groups as Howard's Novelty Colored Minstrels, the Old Kentucky show, Ed Winn's minstrel company, and Richard and Pringle's Georgia Minstrels. At the turn of the twentieth century Fletcher launched a new career in vaudeville shows and nightclub performances, frequently performing with Al Bailey in an act known as "Bailey and Fletcher, the Minstrel Boys."

In 1908 Tom Fletcher played a leading role as a singer and dancer in the second edition of the Memphis Students, replacing the ailing founder Ernest Hogan. The Memphis Students was an ensemble consisting of musicians who were neither students nor from Memphis. They featured the soprano ABBIE MITCHELL and three dancers, Edith Harrison, Esmeralda Statum, and Isola Ringold. Their New York act played Proctor's 125th Street Theater and the Orpheum in Brooklyn with so much success that it was booked for the summer season at Hammerstein's Roof Garden on Broadway. This playing-singing-dancing orchestra was the first to perform syncopated music on a public concert stage, radically departing from the previous dance hall settings or theater orchestra pits. They numbered about twenty, performing predominantly on banjos, mandolins, guitars, saxophones, and drums, along with a violin, a few brass instruments, and a double bass. This historic ensemble paved the way for the acceptance of syncopated song and dance music on the concert stage by the likes of Paul Whiteman and DUKE ELLINGTON nearly a generation later.

In 1919 Fletcher joined the New York Syncopated Orchestra's American tour under WILL MARION COOK's baton and performed in such venues as Orchestra Hall in Chicago, Pabst Theatre in Milwaukee, and Carnegie Hall in Pittsburgh. This unique performing group adopted the term "orchestra" as it was used in its earliest and broadest sense: a group of mixed instruments playing together with more than one instrument on a single part. The fifty players and singers consisted of violins, saxophones, trombones, trumpets, mandolins, banjos, guitars, a bass horn, tympani, and drums, in addition to a male quartet and a soprano soloist. Fletcher was a member of the group for four months, serving as assistant manager, stage manager, leading comedian, and sometimes advance agent. Throughout his career he also entertained the who's who of white America in their homes, hotels, restaurants, and yachts.

No doubt Fletcher is best remembered for his autobiography, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business*, which gives the only eyewitness account from a black insider of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatrical players, personalities, and pioneers. His career spanned the rise and fall of minstrelsy, yet he valued its role in the march toward economic equality and social justice.

Further Reading

Fletcher, Tom. *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business: The Tom Fletcher Story* (1954).

MARVA GRIFFIN CARTER

FLIPPER, Henry Ossian (21 Mar. 1856–3 May 1940), soldier and engineer, was born in Thomasville, Georgia, the son of Festus Flipper and Isabelle (maiden name unknown), slaves. During the Civil War and Reconstruction he was educated in American Missionary Association schools and in 1873