

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

## JOHN KELLY AND WILLIE, THE SNAKE INDIAN BOY

Number 251

Revised May 1966

Western entertainment took a variety of forms during the gold rush era. Troupes of classical actors, ladies of the chorus line, magicians, singers of popular and classical tunes, ventriloquists, mesmerists, phrenologists—all came in a steady stream to enrich the lives of the mining towns and the backwoods communities of the west. Idaho gold camps had their share of actors and musicians in the 1860's and 1870's. A perennial favorite in southern Idaho was an Irish violinist, John Kelly, whose renditions of such popular airs as "Old Dog Tray" and "Write a Letter to My Mother" alternated with the heavier strains of Bach and Beethoven. The versatile maestro also sang popular ballads to his own accompaniment. Whenever Kelly performed in Idaho, he drew capacity crowds. One concert in Boise merited the newspaper opinion that Kelly's performance was "the most fashionable entertainment ever given in this city."

Kelly's popularity was enhanced by the antics of Willie, his traveling partner and co-performer between 1863 and the early 1870's. Everyone in southern Idaho knew the story of that Snake Indian lad. Early in the spring of 1863 Jeff Standifer and fifty Indian fighters from Boise Basin had organized a volunteer expedition to punish a Snake band which was raising havoc with the gold rush. After one of the battles, the volunteers, so records one chronicler, found Willie nursing at the breast of his dead mother who was killed in the action. Standifer rounded up the surviving Indians, including Willie, and took them back to Boise Basin. Some of the prisoners were farmed out as cheap, but intransigent, laborers. Willie found himself in more pleasant surroundings. He was given to John Kelly, who was on a Basin tour at the time.

The Snake Indian boy surprised everyone by quickly adapting to his new surroundings. Kelly taught the youngster to play the fiddle and to tumble and turn in the fashion popular with gymnasts of the period. Within a few months Willie had joined the act. He was "supposed to be the greatest contortionist of his age living," wrote a Boise newspaper editor. During the next few years Kelly and his Indian companion performed for audiences all over the country. Even Europe knew of the famous duet, for Kelly and Willie toured the violinist's native Ireland early in the 1870's. It was while in Ireland, however, that tragedy ended the friendship. Willie took ill and died, and John Kelly returned to America with a heavy heart. Neither he nor his audiences soon forgot the Snake Indian acrobat.

Material prepared by Ron Limbaugh.