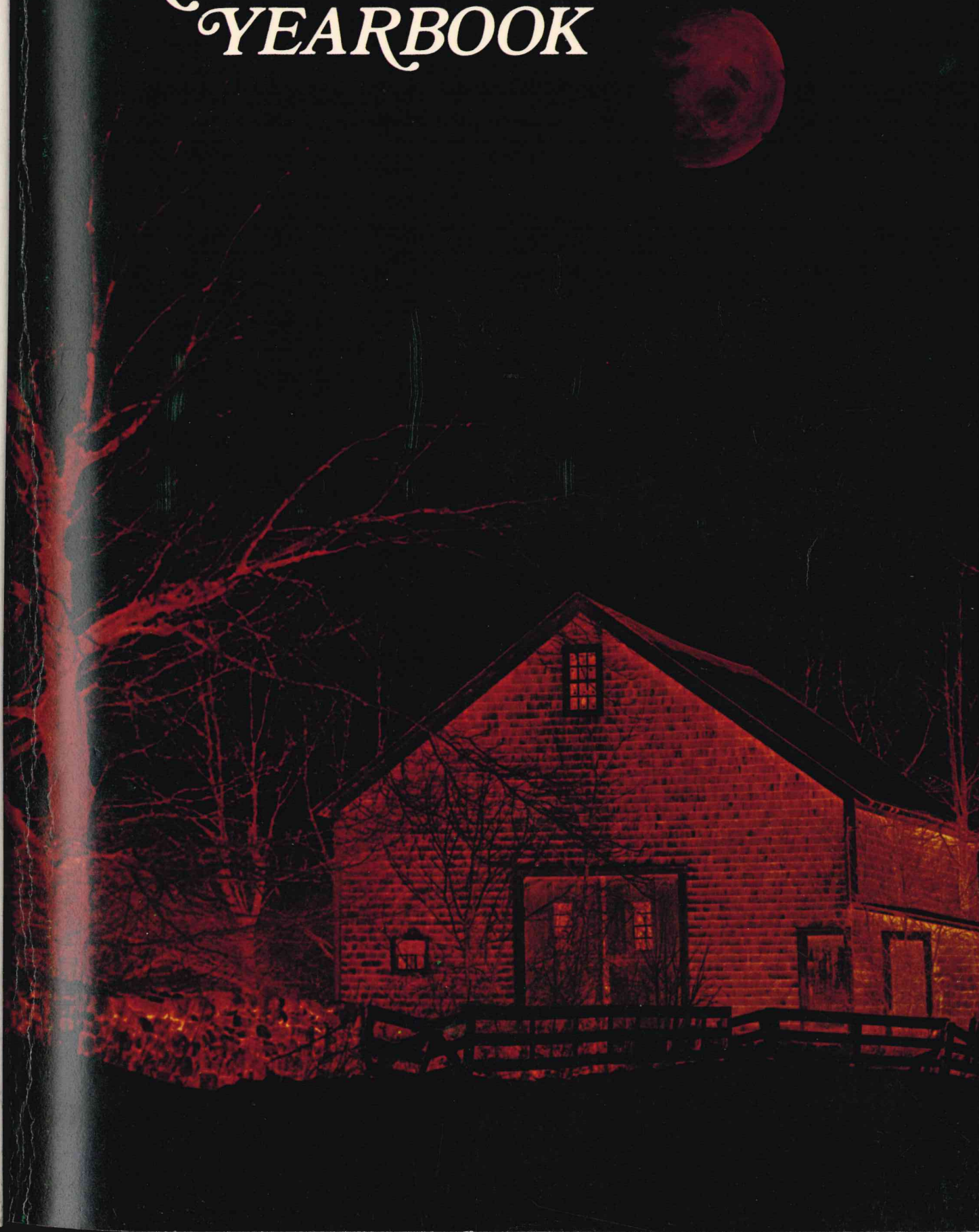


the 1972
**RHODE ISLAND
YEARBOOK**



George M. Cohan
Over There, Over Here

By Katherine P. Tucker

Joel Grey and cast in "George M."



Valente

On July 4, 1966, Providence, Rhode Island received a gift signifying the indivisible union of past, present and future. The gift was "something old"—in tradition, "something new"—in fact, "something borrowed"—in a sense, "something blue"—and red and white.

The gift was appropriate and of national interest. Special ceremonies marked the initial flag raising of a very special flag, a unique tribute to a great composer of wonderful patriotic songs, *George M. Cohan*. The flag now flies over the Cohan birthplace at 536 Wickenden Street.

A unique feature of the Armistice Day program was a special flag ceremony at the birthplace of the composer of "*Over There*", George M. Cohan. 1966 marked the 30th anniversary of the Congressional award and the 100th anniversary of the Cohan birthplace.

The flag flown over the capitol in Washington, D. C. in honor of "George M." flew for the first time over the Cohan birthplace, 536 Wickenden Street, a simple white frame house, gaily decorated for this special occasion with red, white and blue bunting.

Chief Justice Robert E. Quinn, United States Court of Military Appeals in Washington was the principal speaker. Judge Quinn, a former governor of Rhode Island was a friend of the late Mr. Cohan.

The United States Navy Band from Newport presented a program of Cohan music. "*Over There*" was played just prior to Judge Quinn's tribute which was followed by a rendition of "*You're A Grand Old Flag*". Then the flag was unfurled as the strains of "*The Star Spangled Banner*" filled the air. Judge Quinn urged that the Cohan birthplace be designated a national historic landmark.

Color Guards were furnished by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, the American Veterans Committee as well as the Rhode Island National Guard. The Disabled American Veterans and the Veterans of World War I were represented. The flagpole was donated by the DAV.

Telegrams were received from the Cohan family, James Cagney, the Lambs Club, the Friars Club, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers and Eddie Dowling, playwright and

Photo by Annette Gregoire.



George M. Cohan House, 536 Wickenden Street, Providence.

performer.

All the veteran organizations in Rhode Island sent resolutions to Councilman Edward J. Loughran, chairman of the Committee on Urban Redevelopment urging that the Cohan home be preserved at its present location. The house, in the east side renewal project area, had been designated for relocation.

However, popular support of an offensive launched by veterans groups led to a reversal of the original plan and the Providence City Council has now voted second and final passage to the renewal project in which the Cohan house is to be preserved at its present site.

The "Yankee Doodle Boy" born on the "Fourth of July" always waved the flag and wrote of the flag inspiring and reverently because to George M. Cohan the flag was always "the emblem of the land I love" and "every heart beats true for the red, white and blue".

His birthday coincides with the birthday of our nation. Our country was born of a revolution and his patriotic songs joyously celebrate that occasion, an event which yearly marks the rededication to the ideals of 1776.

While Mr. Cohan always celebrated his birthday on July 4th, he actually was born a few hours earlier. On July 3, 1878 President Rutherford B. Hayes was in the White House, Governor Charles C. Van Zandt was in the Rhode Island State House, Mayor Thomas A. Doyle was in the Providence City Hall and at 536 Wickenden Street, George M. Cohan arrived on the scene to join the Providence population of 104,000.

As composer, actor, dancer, stage director, author and producer, Mr. Cohan won a lasting fame beginning with his early vaudeville days as a boy violinist with the famous "Four Cohans". George M. with his parents Jerry and Nellie Costigan Cohan and his sister Josie, toured the country performing vaudeville skits. Jerry Cohan wrote all his own material, songs and sketches, created dances, staged and managed their acts until the day come when George, the "Prince Of The American Theater", took over. From their dancing days at Rocky Point, the Four Cohans went on to win fame in the four corners of America. Beautiful and charming Josie Cohan soon won the acclaim of critics and the hearts of audiences with her

Joel Grey as Cohan in "George M."



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wonderful and graceful dancing.

When George Cohan was only thirteen years old, he wrote his first song, "*Why Did Nellie Leave Her Home?*" and sold it for Twenty-five Dollars (\$25.00). His first song hit was "*Venus, My Shining Love*". By the time he was fifteen, young George was selling his original sketches to fellow actors in addition to marketing his songs. Before his seventeenth birthday, he had deposited from his earnings over One Thousand Dollars (\$1,000) in his own bank account.

Shortly before the turn of the century, the Cohans made their New York appearance opening at Keith's Union Square Theater. Soon after, the Cohans rated top billing and top salary of One Thousand Dollars (\$1,000) a week, a record breaking amount for those times.

In 1917, George M. Cohan wrote "*Over There*", the song that swept across the country and crossed the Atlantic with our troops. The chorus was written in less than half an hour and the verse was written on his drive into New York from his home on Long Island. "*Over There*" reached the million-and-a-half mark in total sales and thus more than fulfilled the dream and ambition of a thirteen year old boy who wanted desperately to be a song writer. Mr. Cohan received an autographed photograph of President Wilson together with a note saying that he considered the "war song, "*Over There*" a genuine inspiration to all American manhood".

George M. Cohan was the most successful theatrical producer America has ever known. Mr. Cohan composed more than five hundred songs and musical numbers; wrote and produced thirty-one plays in twenty years; produced, owned, controlled, or was interested in, actively or financially, one hundred twenty-eight attractions.

"As a playwright", Mr. Cohan "set the style for the swift moving American comedy of the present century." ##

The strands of George M. Cohan's life are brilliantly interwoven in the tapestry of the history of the American theater. His life was the theater and the theater was enriched by his life.

The Cohan House, built in 1866, is a white three

"George M. Cohan, Prince Of The American Theater" by Ward Morehouse.



Joel Grey and cast in "George M."

story "gabled roof wooden building set with the gable end to the street. This is the general scheme followed for ordinary Greek Revival structures which were built about twenty to twenty-five years earlier. The architectural detail is of the Victorian Period, especially the doorway which is hooded and has heavy bracketted and turned drops." ###

George M. was born in a third floor front bedroom overlooking the boulevard which now bears his name. (George M. Cohan Boulevard was dedicated on August 12, 1947.) The Cohan family between theatrical engagements often visited a cousin, Mrs. Mary Ann O'Hern, who occupied the house and it was on one such visit that the three Cohans Jerry, Nellie and little Josie became the Four Cohans who later won fame on the stage.

Thanks to the present occupants, the Evans family, in April 1965, I spent a memorable

"Housing Survey, College hill Demonstration Grant Project, Providence, Rhode Island, 1957-1958 Mrs. Antionette Downing.

afternoon at the Cohan House. The Evans love Cohan music and often play the RCA Victor album from the motion picture, "Yankee Doodle Dandy", starring James Cagney. Visiting the room in which George M. Cohan was born and hearing his music played was a wonderful and moving experience.

As I left the Cohan House, the sky was gray, a chill wind blew from the river and the street was deserted. The House itself faced an uncertain future as rumors circulated of plans to acquire the site for a new clubhouse for the Boys Club. It was here that George M. Cohan, the "Man Who Owned Broadway"; the composer who was awarded a special Congressional Medal for "*Over There*", "*You're A Grand Old Flag*" and his inspiration to the American spirit, was born. I became dedicated to the proposition that somehow this, too, shall not, must not pass away. At Times Square, a statue of Mr. Cohan by the noted sculptor George Lober had been presented to the City of New York by the late Oscar Hammerstein, 2nd on September 11, 1959, and now his very birthplace was threatened.

On August 31, 1966, representatives of veterans organizations began a campaign to preserve the birthplace here of George M. Cohan, composer of "*Over There*".

Commander Ronald Beattie, Department of Rhode Island Disabled American Veterans, and Daniel Martin, member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American, spoke at the hearing held by the City Council's committee on urban renewal.

Also at the hearing were John Bungiro (Department Commander for Amvets) American Veterans Committee and Commander Leonard Keating, American Legion, Fox Point Post which is near the Cohan birthplace.

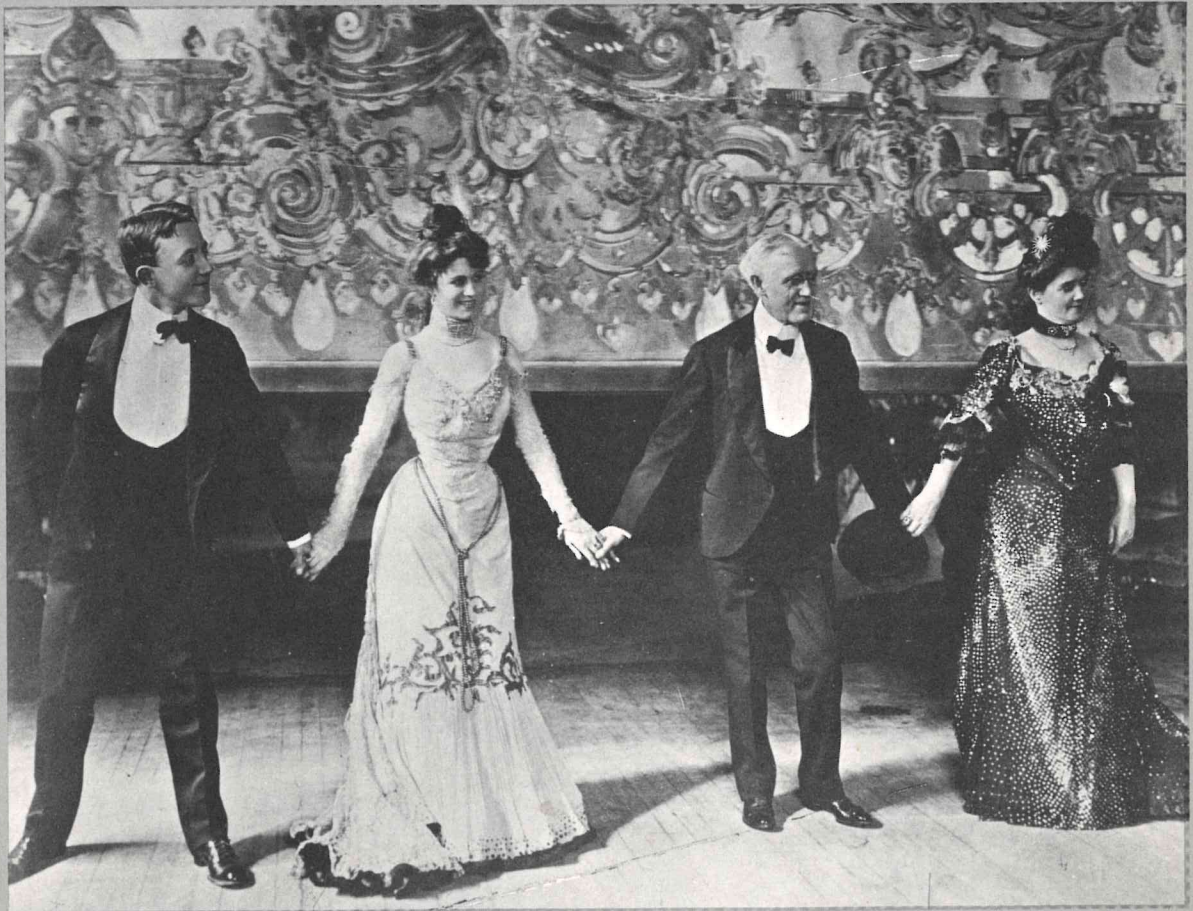
George M. Cohan was a great national figure. During Hope High School and Pembroke days, I always wished that his own city and state would honor him more. Certainly his music should be played here, especially on his symbolic birthday. Fourth of July George M. Cohan Concerts and Providence go together like the stars and stripes, like fireworks and "Yankee Doodle Boy".

In 1935, Brown University wished to confer an honorary degree upon Mr. Cohan. However, in a letter to President Barbour, he declined the honor.

This letter, together with another from Mr. Cohan expressing appreciation for best wishes from Brown University during his illness, is preserved in the Harris Collection at the John Hay Library. Many of George M. Cohan's plays are also part of the Harris Collection.

George M. Cohan, Jr. was a Brown student. On a Sunday afternoon, May 1, 1938, George M. Cohan came to Brown and addressed the cast of Brown-brokers during a dress rehearsal of "*Curriculi-Curricula*", Bob O'Brien's ('39) first production. Mr. Cohan's obvious enjoyment of the excitement in Faunce House Theater, his enthusiasm for the production itself and his whole manner clearly indicated that his world was definitely the stage, be it legitimate theater, musical comedy or college production. Charles Mercer, reporting in the "*Brown Daily Herald*", described Mr. Cohan's "busman's holiday" and quoted "America's best loved actor" as saying, "I think the show is swell. Bob O'Brien has really done an excellent job of directing."

"The Four Cohans", George, Josie (sister), and Mr. and Mrs. Cohan.



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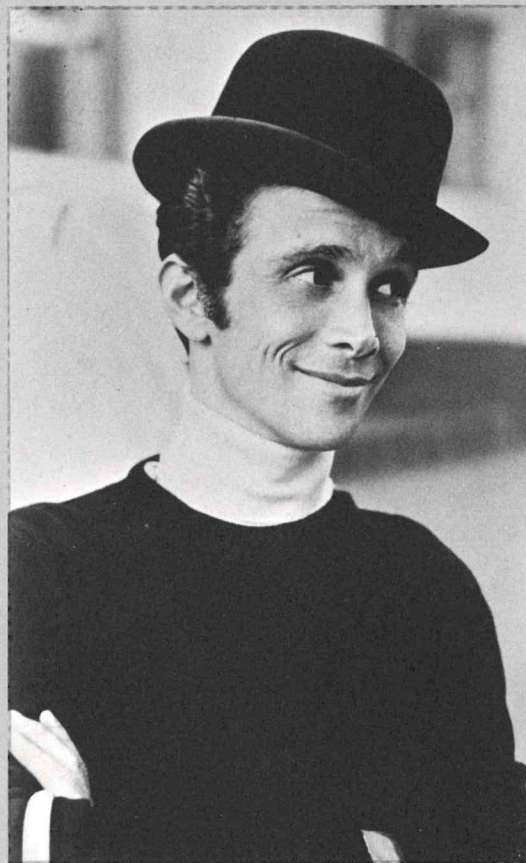
Mr. Cohan also said, "The collegiate stage and the little theater movements are the best training fields for actors and technicians now." Certainly speaking from experience, Mr. Cohan said, "The secret of a successful musical comedy is to have continuously fast action. Five slow minutes will ruin a show no matter how good the rest of the production is." George M. Cohan came to Brown and conquered the hearts of the Brownbrokers and, in accepting the gold key and honorary membership, his "curtain speech" was, "I've always been a Brown fan, being a Providence man, but now I have a great deal more reason for rooting for Brown."

In the fall of 1938, Mr. Cohan was touring in "I'd Rather Be Right" and played Providence. Because of his extremely busy schedule, he was unable to come to Brown for another special award. Accordingly, Professor Ben Brown went to the Metropolitan Theater and in Mr. Cohan's dressing room presented him with the key and award of honorary membership in Sock and Buskin which the society had voted. So, Mr. Cohan was officially honored by Brown before his special award received at the White House on May 1, 1940, the second anniversary of the Brownbroker award.

George M. Cohan's memorable portrayal of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in "I'd Rather Be Right" ended in Providence in mid-February, 1939. Following the final performance, a reception, arranged by his great friend, Edward M. Fay, was held in honor of Mr. Cohan at the Biltmore Hotel. A classmate, Meg Gainor (the talented Konian leading lady), and I attended. Having just been part of an audience completely captivated by his superb performance and his unique, unforgettable prancing dance that carried him across the stage and up one side of the proscenium arch, I felt so grateful for the privilege of shaking hands with George M. Cohan. His charming and friendly manner in memory will always be treasured.

After my visit to the Cohan House, I intensified my search for copies of Mr. Cohan's autobiography, *Twenty Years On Broadway—And The Years It Took To Get There* (published in 1924 by Harper and Brothers) and Ward Morehouse's biography, *George M. Cohan, Prince Of The American Theater* (published in 1943 by J. P. Lippincott Company). After checking many book stores in various cities, at last the long search had a happy

Joel Grey as George M. Cohan.



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and appropriate ending here in Mr. Cohan's native city at the Lincoln Book Shoppe, Inc. Both books are first edition copies and in excellent condition. They are of special interest because of particular associations with Mr. Cohan. The Ward Morehouse book is autographed by Edward M. Fay.

Mr. Cohan's own book has the name *Helen D. Phelan* written on the first page and interesting marginal notes pencilled throughout indicate that she knew Mr. Cohan and many people referred to in the book. In the chapter, *Steve Reardon*, there is the notation "They came to Boston and our house." "The Evening Bulletin" (September 21, 1965) ran a story on the discovery of the books and the July 4th Concert background. United Press International then carried the story. Pertinent information about Helen D. Phelan is still being sought.

Mr proposal that Cohan music be played on his birthday as part of any official municipal 4th of July Observance was approved by Mayor Joseph A. Doorley, Jr. and Chairman Jacob J. Alprin, and the Committee of the City Council on Planning Observance of the Fourth of July. There were several interesting meetings on concert arrangements with Mr. Vincent Vespia, City Clerk. I deeply appreciated the City Council Committee's special invitation to attend the Cohan Concert in Roger Williams Park. Telegrams of tribute to George M. Cohan were received by Mayor Doorley from the Cohan family, Mayor Robert F. Wagner, James Cagney, Eddie Dowling, Ward Morehouse, The Lambs, Friars Club, and the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (Mr. Cohan was a charter member).

At long last, thanks to the help and support of many wonderful people, George M. Cohan's music was officially played on his birthday in his native city. Following the Cohan Concert, a brilliant display of fireworks created an enchanted sky and a great nation's birthday and a great composer's birthday received an official salute. On April 19th, as her sister state, Massachusetts, celebrated Patriot's Day and honored heroes of 1775, Rhode Island proudly honored her own "Yankee Doodle Boy".

A resolution honoring George M. Cohan was introduced in the Rhode Island House of Representatives. The measure urged the division of cultural arts, with the state's Department of

George M. Cohan in
"The Man Who Owned Broadway".



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Education, to encourage the presentation of Mr. Cohan's works, particularly those of a patriotic nature. The measure also urged that Cohan concerts be held annually.

While writing background material for the Legislative Council, I had discussions with Mr. Richard Taft of that office in the State House, and with Representatives Eugene Cockran and Alfred Travers, Jr., sponsors of the Resolution (H 1796). Thus, as I sat in the Chamber of the House of Representatives listening to the proceedings and awaiting introduction of the Cohan Resolution, I was acutely aware of and deeply grateful for the enrichment of a Pembroke education and, on this occasion, especially my history major and political science courses. It was really an afternoon of "Poli-Sci" in living color. Then followed a discussion with Senator Julius C. Michaelson and Senate passage of the measure and then Governor John H. Chafee's signature.

In a telegram, James Cagney hailed the original "Yankee Doodle Boy" and said in part, "*Mr. Cohan's contribution to the American Theater, his songs which are a permanent part of our popular music and the inspiration he gave to the American spirit richly deserve the honor being accorded him. I should like to add my small voice to the chorus.*"

Mr. Cagney's sentiments were enthusiastically echoed in New York by ASCAP, Eddie Dowling, Ward Morehouse, The Lambs, Friars Club, and "Variety". They all expressed interest and endorsement of plans for an annual musical salute to George M. Cohan and a Cohan Museum.

A nation wide search will be made for Cohan material. A unique feature will be the "living museum" theme. The voices of many of the greats of the theater will be preserved forever in recordings of Cohan songs and plays and recollections, reminiscences and tributes.

The enthusiastic interest and professional advice of Professor Martin J. Fischer of Brown University's Music Department have been invaluable and greatly appreciated.

The Rhode Island General Assembly appropriately passed the Cohan Resolution on the eve of the anniversary of his Congressional Medal award presented on May 1, 1940 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on behalf of a grateful nation to a great

George M. Cohan at time of "I'd Rather Be Right".

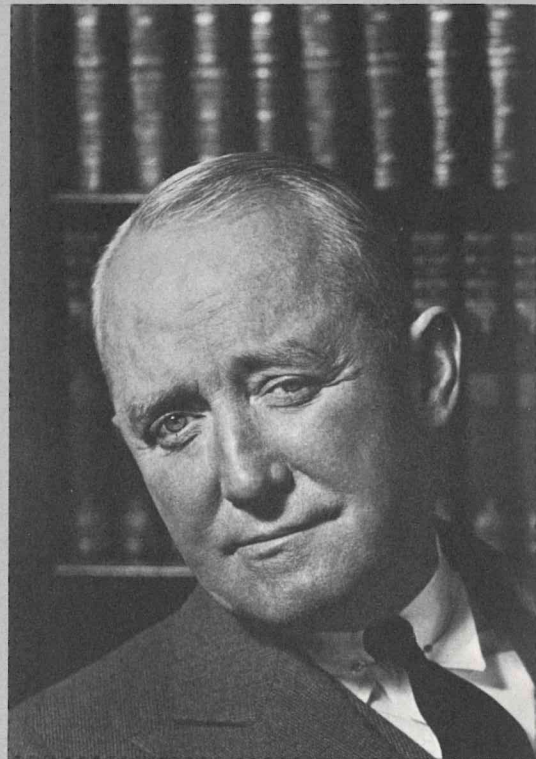


Photo by Alfredo Valente.

American. Rhode Island's own Eddie Dowling, a good friend of Mr. Cohan's, was present at the White House on that occasion.

On May 5, George M. Cohan was honored by his city and his country. The Providence City Council passed a Resolution commemorating the anniversary of Mr. Cohan's award. The measure was introduced by Councilman Richard D. Worrell and Joseph Souza.

"Mr. President, over this Capitol today floats a flag of 50 stars and a million memories. There would be as many memories as there are voices that ever sang 'Over There' and 'You're a Grand Old Flag'. For that special flag is flown in tribute to the American who wrote and sang those songs—George M. Cohan."

With these words, Senator John O. Pastore began his special tribute to George M. Cohan in the United States Senate. Senator Jacob K. Javits joined in the tribute.

Thanks to Senator Pastore's arrangements, this special flag, together with the certificate from the Architect of the Capitol, Mr. J. George Stewart, was then sent to Providence. The flag flown in Washington, D. C. as a national tribute will always fly over the Cohan Birthplace here, a constant reminder that the Nation honors *George M. Cohan*, the composer of patriotic songs that will live forever.

In 1969, the flag flew high on the Fourth of July in honor of the "*Yankee Doodle Boy*", George M. Cohan. Governor Frank Licht arranged for the flag to be flown over the State Capitol as a special tribute. The flag, accompanied by a special letter from Governor Licht, was sent to the Cohan family in New York.

When informed of the honor, Mr. Cohan's granddaughter, Mary Ronkin, said, "That makes me very proud."

The composer of "*Over There*" will always be remembered "*Over Here*".



Katherine P. Tucker, a Providence native, obtained her A.B. in History from Pembroke College. She attended Rhode Island College, Rhode Island School of Design, and Brown University Graduate School. Miss Tucker taught in the Providence School System and has held several positions with the Rhode Island Department of Labor. Much of her writing and research has been published in the local newspapers, the New York Times and Boston Herald. She maintains active membership in many organizations including the Rhode Island Historical Society, World Affairs Council and the Rhode Island Short Story Club.