

Digital Mando (XXV.4) News from Long Ago  
by John Goodin

On December 23, 1894 the Washington Post ran a short notice announcing that “The Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar Club of the Columbian University will make a short trip into Virginia during the Christmas holidays, under the management of the National Lyceum Bureau.”

On February 24, 1913 the Hartford Courant reported: “James Ashton Moore of Geneva, N. Y., a member of the junior class at Trinity College, will lead the mandolin club in the selections it will give at the concert to be given by the musical clubs of Trinity and Amherst Thursday evening at 8 o'clock in Unity Hall.”

The March 14, 1920 edition of the Atlanta Constitution informed its readers that “The Georgia Tech Glee and Mandolin club has been revived after a lapse of several years, due to the late war, and is once more blazing its musical trail to glory.”

The April 2, 1893 issue of the New York Times announced an upcoming concert at Carnegie Hall by the Princeton College Glee, Banjo and Mandolin Clubs. The article explained that the “Princeton boys have given concerts during this season in Louisville, Indianapolis, Columbus, Cedar Rapids, Milwaukee, Kansas City, Pittsburgh, Omaha, Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and other cities, ... Their concerts were great successes, the audiences, aggregating in all over 20,000 people, receiving them with great enthusiasm.”

Which of our present-day mandolin orchestras have entertained 20,000 listeners in a season, let alone presented a concert in Carnegie Hall attended by the New York social elite?

If you find this kind of information as fascinating as I do you will want to set aside some time to spend exploring the Google News Archive Search website (<http://news.google.com/archivesearch>). This piece of the Google universe can lead you to hundreds of articles and snippets of articles about the mandolin and its players.

If you haven't already heard: “Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.” To this end the folks at Google have invented a myriad of ways to search information on the World Wide Web. Often this information is presented to you in your web browser free of charge. Usually it is accompanied by advertising that is tailored, more or less accurately, to your imagined interests. Often, also, only a small portion of the information you seek is free and the rest can be yours for a price.

All of the facts from old newspapers presented above were acquired at no expense (except, of course, the cost of my computer, my internet connection and the electricity that powers it all). I simply searched for “mandolin club” at the Google News Archive Search site. The first three pieces of information came from longer articles that I wasn't allowed to view but which I could have purchased from a variety of companies that sell electronic access to old newspapers. In these cases Google's role was to search the web for this information and to present enough of the stories to give me a good idea of what I would be buying if I chose to purchase the articles. Even

though sketchy, these snippets of information are sufficient to give me a good idea of the kinds of activities that mandolin clubs were engaged in during the Golden Era of mandolin in the United States.

An even more useful approach to this rich store of information is to use the Advanced Search function ([http://news.google.com/archivesearch/advanced\\_search](http://news.google.com/archivesearch/advanced_search)) of the Google News site. This search allows you to specify a variety of search types you might want to use and to dictate both the precise years and language of the results you are interested in. It also allows you to choose only those results that are available at no price or at a variety of price points.

Whichever way you choose to search and whatever search terms you use Google is providing us with a powerful new way to dig through dusty files of old newspapers. The searching, however, is far from perfect. In particular most of the newspapers are indexed using OCR (optical character recognition) software that can provide hilariously bad results. In my first example above “guitar” was translated as “gultar” by the OCR software. So if I had done a search for “guitar club” I would not have found this particular article. Nonetheless the results of this kind of searching are so much fun that we can agree to overlook this kind of problem.

One final tidbit: by searching the words “siegel” (thinking of the great virtuoso Samuel Siegel) and “mandolin” the news archive search led me to a 1991 obituary for Don Siegel, the Hollywood director of *Dirty Harry*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and many other famous films. Near the end of the obit we learn that he was born in Chicago in 1912 and “his father was a mandolin virtuoso.” Could there have been more than one mandolin virtuoso named Siegel in Chicago in 1912? I’ll have to keep looking.

