

# SWING It!

## The Story of Peg Leg Bates

by Darienne Oaks

**IF MOTHER BATES** ever found out that he was dancing in the streets, she would “wup” him good, but five-year-old Clayton couldn’t help himself. His feet needed to dance as surely as his heart needed to beat. While waiting for his next shoeshine customer, Clayton rhythmically snapped his white polishing rag in the air, joyfully stomping around to its catchy beat. People walking by sometimes dropped a few coins in his shoeshine kit to show their appreciation. Clayton sure didn’t tell his Momma about that either!

The money Clayton earned shining shoes was needed at home. His father had deserted the family when Clayton was three. Mother Bates struggled to make ends meet while raising Clayton by herself and caring for her own mother. A strong woman, she labored from “kin work” to “kant work”—which was often more than from sunup to sundown—as a sharecropper in the cotton and corn fields near Fountain Inn, South Carolina. On Sundays she worshiped at the Baptist church

DO YOU FOLKS MIND IF I INTRODUCE MYSELF TO YOU?  
I AM THE FASTEST DANCING MAN IN TOWN.  
JUST GIVE ME HALF THE CHANCE  
AND I'LL PROVE THAT THIS IS TRUE  
WHEN I SWING THIS PEG LEG ALL AROUND.  
—Peg Leg Bates

in town, making Clayton come along, too. Clayton deeply loved his mother and tried to respect her wishes, but her church taught that dancing was sinful, and dancing was something he just couldn't keep himself from doing.

When Clayton was twelve years old, he knew it was time to offer his aging mother more help. He'd heard there was work at the cottonseed gin, a factory where machines removed cottonseeds from the fibers, then crushed them to extract their valuable oil. At first Clayton's mother refused to give him permission to work near such dangerous machinery. But Clayton hated sharecropping and, like a small child pleading for a puppy, constantly begged his mother to change her mind. Worn down by weeks of pleading, Mother Bates finally told Clayton she would take the matter up in prayer with the Lord. Next morning, she informed her son that he had God's blessing to take the job.

At the cottonseed gin, several buildings were connected by an auger conveyer, a long trough with a corkscrew-shaped blade along the bottom. The blade turned night and day, pushing cottonseeds in the trough from one

building to another. Clayton was still getting used to the layout of the factory when, around three o'clock one morning, a light went out in the back of one of the buildings. Not quite knowing what to do, Clayton went to investigate. As he crept cautiously across the floor in the darkness, groping his way through the unfamiliar rooms, he suddenly felt his left foot step into air and slip down into the auger conveyer. The sharp blade, twisting like a screw, ripped through his flesh and began to devour his leg. Intense pain exploded through Clayton's body. His piercing screams reached the only other person working that night. He found Clayton, stopped the machinery, then ran to get help.

Clayton was carried home to his horrified mother, and doctors came to examine his injury. His leg was so terribly mangled that they had no choice but to amputate. They cut off Clayton's left leg below the knee as the boy lay across his kitchen table. In those days, "colored" people just weren't sent to hospitals.

It took Clayton more than a year to recover from his surgery. He learned to walk with crutches, and then on a crude wooden leg that his uncle whittled for him. In time,

Clayton taught himself to do everything the other kids at school could do, from baseball, to gymnastics, to horseback riding. Although the mill owner bought him a peg leg to replace the homemade leg, Clayton vowed he would never return to the mill.

Determined that the loss of his leg would not stop him from doing whatever he wanted to do, Clayton experimented with dancing while wearing only one tap shoe on his good leg. Tapping with his good foot, he would work the bottom of his peg leg to create unique sounds and rhythms. Having a peg leg added an interesting dimension to his dancing, he discovered. At fifteen he began entering amateur dance contests. The audiences loved his dancing, and with his glowing grin and sparkling deep brown eyes, he won first prize in every contest he entered.

Clayton made up his mind to become the best tap dancer around. He had never taken a lesson in his life, but he watched the two-legged tap dancers and copied their steps. For hours every day, Clayton made up rhythms in his head and worked them out with his foot and peg leg until they sounded right. Combining gymnastic leaps with his dancing, he created an electrifyingly flashy step he called the “jet plane.” After a running start, he would jump high into the air, do a split with his legs, then land on the tip of his peg, with his good leg stretched out behind him and his arms wide open as if he were soaring. He finished his routine by hopping backward on his peg leg all the way offstage.

To earn money, Clayton would hobo the local trains to dance on the streets in nearby towns. He danced alone, swinging away without any music, his peg leg providing a driving rhythm. But dancing in the streets was a very hard and lonely way to make a living. When he felt his routine was as polished and flashy as he could make it, Clayton decided to hobo the trains up the East Coast, dancing at each stop on his way to New York City, the dance capital of the country.

In the 1920s, theaters in New York were racially segregated. Clayton performed in black theaters on the vaudeville circuit, as well as in the segregated theaters that were only for white people. Although blacks were not allowed in these theaters, white performers would blacken their faces with burnt cork to entertain the white audiences by impersonating the singing and dancing of African Americans. Never allowing physical or racial barriers to get in his way, Peg Leg also performed “black-faced” in the early part of his career, so the white audiences wouldn’t know he was really a black man. As his popularity grew, Clayton stopped rubbing his face with the burnt cork and became Peg Leg Bates, the legendary black, one-legged, tap dancing man!

Clayton began to dance with other well-known black entertainers, including the famous Bill Bojangles, with whom he toured Europe, creating a clever three-legged tapping routine that thrilled audiences in Paris. A very dapper dresser, Clayton had fifteen




IMAGINE DANCING  
WITH ONE LEG  
(AND A PEG)!



WE DANCERS DANCE  
WITH ALL WE'VE GOT!  
(SLAPPITY-TAPPITY-LEAP)

peg legs made to match his suits. He was in such demand as a tap dancer that some days he'd have to change his suit three times, adding the matching peg leg for each outfit. Audiences found his act so stupefying that they would leap to their feet, whistling and shouting "MORE! MORE!" He entertained the king and queen of England, performed with the great Louis Armstrong, toured with the Harlem Globe Trotters basketball team, and danced at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. He was the first African-American to perform on the Ed Sullivan Show, one of the most popular television shows of the 1950s and 1960s, on which he appeared an astonishing twenty-two times. During the Korean War in the early 1950s, Peg Leg spent a lot of time visiting and performing for wounded soldiers who had lost

legs or arms. When he tapped for young children in the New York State schools, he told them, "Remember, you can do anything you want to, providing you want to bad enough."

Clayton danced for fifty-two years, right into his sixties. He died in 1998, at the age of ninety-one, convinced that losing his leg was God's way of giving him his character and a unique dancing style. Peg Leg danced with a beaming smile, sharing his unwavering determination with people of all ages, colors, and cultures. "Always go with your heart," he advised. By following his own heart, Peg Leg spread more than just the joy of tapping. When people watched him, their hearts danced warmly with inspiration, filled with the exciting feeling that they could swing it, too! 

LiFe MeAN do youR best WiTh ALL youR  
MiGht WiTh WhAt you've got.  
I'M Not sORry Nor UNHAPPY thAt I LoSt thIS leg.  
So please, don't SyMpatHize WiTh Me  
For I enJOy My peg.  
—peg Leg Bates