

## Lucia B. Griffin: Platform Speaker of the Late Nineteenth Century

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IN RECENT YEARS A LARGE number of monographic studies have appeared which help to illuminate the role of women in American history. Most works chronicle the female struggle for legal rights and for suffrage.<sup>1</sup> Yet, a significant part of woman's history is the story of those women who were not particularly brave or pioneering. One such woman was Lucia B. Griffin. Never involved in the woman's rights movement, she instead sought to earn a decent living as a platform entertainer during the closing years of the nineteenth century. Her professional career not only reveals the activities of one of the few nationally known women elocutionists of the period but provides useful insights into American popular culture.

Born in Knoxville, Iowa on March 12, 1865, the daughter of John W. H. and Fannie Morse Griffin, Lucia B. soon moved with her family to Albia, the bustling seat of Monroe County. Here her father served as county superintendent of schools and later as county clerk of courts. Lucia B.'s family was a large one. She had two older brothers, Charles and William, and an older sister, Lina. She also had four younger brothers, Frank, Harry, Fred and John, and a baby sister, Annie. From all available informa-

\*The author is indebted to John W. Griffin of Albia, Iowa for information relating to Mr. Griffin's aunt.

<sup>1</sup>For recent works on women's history see Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Women Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1965); Gerda Lerner, *The Woman in American History* (Menlo Park, California: Addison Wesley, 1971); Sarah Margaret Fuller Ossoli, *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Greenwood, 1968); William L. O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: A History of Feminism in America* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1969); Anne F. Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and Page Smith, *Daughters of the Promised Land: Women in American History* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970).

tion the Griffins seemed to be a fairly typical Middle Border family. While the Protestant ethic of thrift, piety and hard work characterized the actions and views of the Griffins, Charles, Frank and Fred broke with family and community tradition to become circus performers. Lucia B., moreover, bucked prevailing opinion by refusing to marry (spinsters had no place in Middle Border society) and by seeking a career not generally approved for a woman, the public platform.<sup>2</sup>

After graduating from high school and "feeling obliged to do something and having a repugnance to teaching," Lucia B. Griffin worked briefly under her father as Monroe County deputy clerk of courts. Then in 1884 she resigned and began her oratorical training.<sup>3</sup> Lucia B. first studied in Chicago and later she enrolled at the Boston School of Oratory. There her mentor "gave her no encouragement, for her style is light and natural, while he is of the old school, with a ponderous, heavy way of going at a piece. But he soon recognized her talent."<sup>4</sup>

Lucia B. presented her first "pay" performance at Watseka, Illinois in September 1885. A year later she began her annual tours of the country with a six-week swing through the Middle West, followed by a three-month southern and eastern trip. Each year Lucia B. spent five to six months on the road, often giving only a single performance in a community. During the remaining months she returned either to Albia or New York City and spoke before area groups.<sup>5</sup> By the time of her retirement shortly after the turn of the century, Lucia B. had performed before audiences in every state and territory in the United States and in various Canadian provinces. As the *Star Speaker* said, "Albia, Iowa, is known from East to West, from North to South, as the home of the peerless little artist, who has thrilled and convulsed the largest audiences from New York to San Francisco, from Winnipeg to New Orleans."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Tenth United States Census, (1880) Troy Township, Monroe County, Iowa, 83; John W. Griffin to author, November 12, 1972; September 12, 1973.

<sup>3</sup>Lucia B. Griffin's interest in elocution likely came from hearing speakers locally. Since all the Griffins were known for their extroverted personalities, it is understandable that Lucia B. became interested in a public speaking career.

<sup>4</sup>*Werner's Voice Magazine*, June 1890, 24.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*: John W. Griffin Interview, November 10, 1973.

<sup>6</sup>Flora N. Kightlinger, *The Star Speaker* (Jersey City, N.J.: Star Publishing Company, 1894), 466.

Throughout her career Lucia B. spoke to a variety of audiences. Generally she entertained before women's gatherings—church, lodge and club meetings. At times she would be the sole performer, but often she asked local singers and musicians to join the show. Lucia B. also rented opera houses or public halls and opened her program to the general public, particularly when she played in mining and factory towns. And occasionally she performed in private homes.<sup>7</sup>

As a professional speaker Lucia B. Griffin may best be described as a recitationist and impersonator. Her dramatic sketches and impersonations were varied. "She is at once the squirming, fretful crying infant; the prattling, laughing child; the rollicking saucy, mischievous girl; the romping, reckless, whimpering boy; the faithless, deceitful coquettish maiden; . . . the aged, tottering grandmother," wrote Flora N. Kightlinger, a contemporary elocutionist. "In short, in her face and form in quick succession may be seen all the mimicry of artless childhood in its countless phases, then the snow, sorrow and decrepitude of age."<sup>8</sup>

Lucia B.'s repertoire included hundreds of pieces, but eight or ten was the usual number that she gave at a performance. A typical Griffin program, according to *Werner's Voice Magazine*, consisted of these melodramatic and comic selections: "'The Bobolink,' 'Baby's Soliloquy,' 'Joseph Allen's Wife at A. T. Stewart's Store,' in costume, 'Over the Hill to the Poor House,' in costume, 'Money Musk,' in costume, 'Over the Hill from the Poorhouse,' 'Innocent Bess,' in costume, [and] 'Naughty Little Girl,' in costume."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Lucia B.'s most popular selection was "Baby's Soliloquy," an original piece in which she mimicked the sounds of a two-day old infant:

And I'm here, and if hi is wat you call a world I don't sink much ov it. It's an awfully flannelly wold anyhow, and it thmells awful palogical. It's an awful light wold. It makes me blink like eversing I tell you, and I don't know wat to do wif my hands. I'll tell you I'll scrabble at ze corner of my blanket, and chew it up and zen I'll holler (imitate cry). Zere's a pin a-sticking in me now, and if I says a word about it I'll be frotted or fed, and I'd raver have catnip tea. I'll tell you whose baby I am; I foun out to-day. I heard some one say sh! don't make a noise! r'lese you'll

<sup>7</sup>Lucia B. Griffin, *Notes on Vocal Culture* (Albia, Iowa: By the Author, 1895), 2-3, 8.

<sup>8</sup>Kightlinger, *The Star Speaker*, 466-467.

<sup>9</sup>*Werner's Voice Magazine*, June 1890, 24.

wake up Emma's baby. I s'pose zat pletty white faced womans over zare on the pillow's Emma. No I wuz mistaken. A chap wuz in here just now, and says he wants to see Bob's baby. He smells of cigars, and I aint used to 'em. Zatcomes of being a two days' old baby. Wonder who else I belongs to, anyhow? Yes, zere's another one. It was ganma's baby. "Mits it go ayiding up a hilly dilly? cause you wus your ganma's own little baby." I declare I don't know who I does belongs to anyhow. Guess I'll holler and maybe I'll find out. Zere comes old snuffy now commun' wif catnip tea. I'm going to holler: Glu wak glu wak—wah wah (Cry like a young baby.)<sup>10</sup>

Like all successful entertainers, Lucia B. varied the content of her performances. Although she had standard programs, which she revised annually, she recognized regional variations in taste. The South, which proved the most remunerative area for her readings "because few women impersonators go through that section and comparatively few of the southern women are themselves elocutionists," preferred a "light program of comedy."<sup>11</sup> Western mining communities, on the other hand, enjoyed readings of "a violent, raucous or suspense-filled nature."<sup>12</sup> But Middle West and New England audiences wanted to hear "those numbers that extol the simple values of thrift, honesty, work and sobriety," what might be called the "village virtues."<sup>13</sup> Lucia B.'s "Honest Labor" always proved a favorite in these sections of the country:

Whom do we call our heroes? To whom our praises sing?  
 The pampered child of fortune? The titled Lord or King?  
 They live by others' labors, take all and nothing give.  
 The noblest type of manhood is he who works to live.  
 'Tis toil that over nature gives man his proud control;  
 It purifies, it hallows the temple of the soul;  
 It scatters foul diseases thro' all their ghastly train,  
 Put iron in the muscles and crystals in the brain.  
 The Great Almighty builder who fashioned out this earth.  
 He stamped his seal of honor on labor from her birth.  
 In every angel flower that blossoms from the sod.  
 Behold the Master touches, the handiwork of God.<sup>14</sup>

While the vast majority of Lucia B. Griffin's selections were non-political, several expressed her views on current issues and they also reflected prevailing Middle Border notions and preju-

<sup>10</sup>Lucia B. Griffin, *Lucia B. Griffin's Catchy Cullings* (New York: By the Author, 1890), 31.

<sup>11</sup>*Werner's Voice Magazine*, June 1890, 24.

<sup>12</sup>Griffin, *Notes on Vocal Culture*, 14.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>14</sup>Griffin, *Lucia B. Griffin's Catchy Cullings*, 17.

dices. A member of the Disciples of Christ church, the P. E. O. Sisterhood and the Republican party, it is understandable that she would voice strong prohibitionist and even anti-Catholic sentiments. Moreover, the 1880s and 1890s saw the flowering of the Prohibitionist party and the anti-Catholic American Protective Association. Both movements were strong in Iowa and throughout much of the Midwest. Lucia B. succinctly expressed her "cold water" feelings in her original reading, "Glass Number One:"

Glass number one, only in fun.  
 Glass number two, other boys do.  
 Glass number three, it won't hurt me.  
 Glass number four, only one more.  
 Glass number five, out for a drive.  
 Glass number six, brain in a mix.  
 Glass number seven, quite far from heaven.  
 Glass number eight, out rather late.  
 Glass number nine, whiskey, not wine.  
 Glass number ten, drinking again.  
 Glass number twenty, not yet a plenty.  
 Light-hearted boy, somebody's joy.  
 Do not begin early in sin.  
 Taste not in fun glass number one.<sup>15</sup>

While Lucia B. Griffin spent most of her time preparing skits, performing and travelling, she also became involved in the publishing business. In conjunction with her brother Charles's printing operations, she wrote nearly a score of speaker's pamphlets during the 1890s. They were "compiled and arranged for parlor, platform, school-room or stage." The most popular of her works was *Lucia B. Griffin's Catchy Cullings* which appeared in 1890. This fifty-page pamphlet sold for twenty-five cents and went through seven editions. It is unlikely, however, that her literary efforts were financial triumphs.<sup>16</sup>

Lucia B. further demonstrated her business independence when she initially served as her own manager. As she said in 1887, "I see no need of wasting money on some high-priced business manager. I am perfectly able to take care of my own affairs."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>16</sup>John W. Griffin Interview, November 10, 1973. For the career of Lucia B.'s brother Charles, see H. Roger Grant, "An Iowan with Buffalo Bill: Charles Eldridge Griffin in Europe, 1903-1906," *Palimpsest*. LIV (January-February, 1973), 2-13.

<sup>17</sup>Griffin, *Notes on Vocal Culture*, 2-3.

But three years later she hired a prominent New York City Manager, H. K. Barclay, to guide her career. Presumably the magnitude of her professional activities prompted this change.

The public career of Lucia B. Griffin ended suddenly and tragically in 1902. Although the details are not clear, she suffered severe head injuries in a railroad accident. This mishap permanently affected her mind and personality, causing her to withdraw from society. Then on the morning of January 8, 1940 Lucia B. burned to death when flames engulfed her small cottage in Albia. She died penniless and alone.<sup>18</sup>

\* FOURTH ANNUAL TOUR OF \*

SEVERAL PROMINENT METROPOLITAN ARTISTS  
WILL ASSIST  
MISS GRIFFIN \*



\* TESTIMONIAL BENEFIT \*  
HARDMAN'S HALL  
TUESDAY, APRIL 29, 1890.  
11:30 P. M.  
ADMISSION, ONE DOLLAR

\* LUCIA B. GRIFFIN. \*

*Photograph courtesy of author*

<sup>18</sup>John W. Griffin Interview, November 10, 1973; *Monroe County News*, January 8, 1940.

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