

The Cherry Sisters

by
Steven J. Fuller



(courtesy Cedar Rapids Gazette)

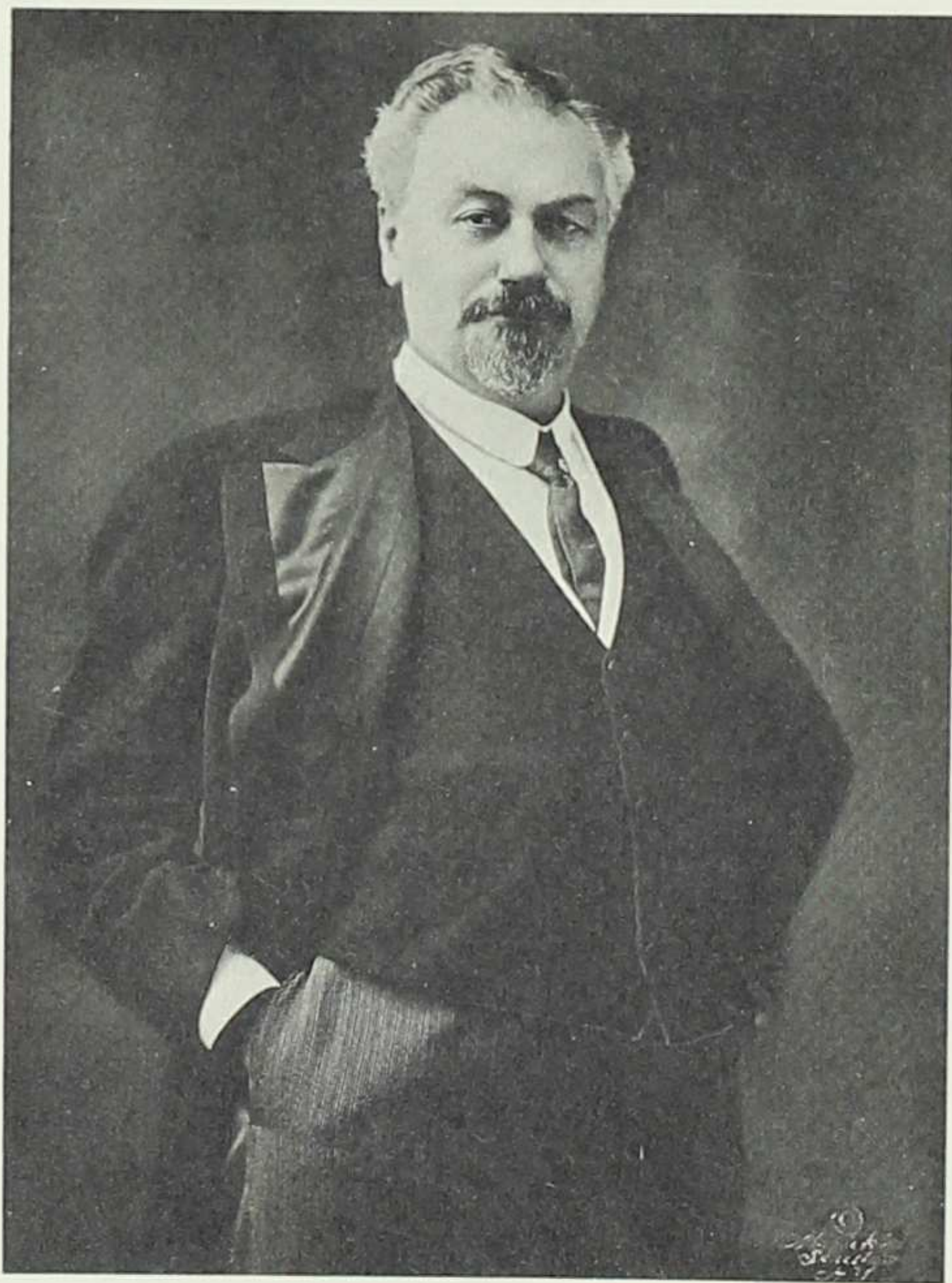
In New York City that month Maurice Barrymore starred in "Roaring Dick & Co." Wilson Barrat introduced his new play, "The Sign of the Cross." Down at Koster and Bial's Music Hall, where the summer before motion pictures made their Broadway debut, New York fire fighters rushed from frame to frame saving lives, all in wonderful Vitascope. But the Olympia Music Hall in November of 1896 was trying something completely different.

There at the Olympia the five Cherry sisters from Iowa—Ella, Elizabeth, Addie, Effie, and Jessie—gave their first New York performance. Opening with their theme song, written to the tune of "Ta-ra-ra-Boom-de-ay," the sisters took turns in the spotlight. Jessie sang a solo called "Corn Juice"; Addie and Elizabeth rendered duo an Irish Ballad in a Midwest twang; and Addie recited an essay of her own composition

entitled, "The Mystery of the 19th Century." A skit written by the sisters—"The Gypsy's Warning"—came next. Addie, as a sinister Latin lover, donned a moustache and declared her love for the Lady, played by Elizabeth. Suddenly, a gypsy—Effie—leaped out to warn the Lady of the crude Don Juan's evil intentions and to give her sound moral advice.

At first, the audience sat in stunned silence, unable to believe the astonishingly bad performance. But in no time, they were screaming and howling at the sisters. They had begun to enjoy the worst show they had ever seen.

Critics also enjoyed themselves, competing to see who could give the luckless ladies from Iowa the worst review. *The New York Times* wrote, "It was a little after 10 o'clock when three lank figures and one short and thick walked awkwardly to the centre of the stage. They were all dressed in shapeless red gowns, made by themselves almost surely, and the fat sister carried a bass drum. They stood quietly



Oscar Hammerstein (Culver Pictures)

for a moment, apparently seeing nothing and wondering what the jeering laughter they heard could mean. . . . None of them had shown a sign of nervousness, nor a trace of ability for their chosen work." *The New York Tribune* summed up the sisters' appearance: "Miss Jessie narrowly escaped being pretty, but her sisters never were in any such danger."

Oscar Hammerstein, grandfather of the musical comedy librettist, deeply in debt from unsuccessful attempts to produce operas in English, had hired the sisters to see if the "world's worst act" could rescue him from bankruptcy. In October, 1896 he had sent his stage manager Al Aarons to book the Cherry Sisters, and according to an account written later by Effie, Lizzie signed the contract while the other sisters were away on tour. Aarons signed on all the sisters except Ella for \$100 a week, railroad fare and hotel expenses in-

cluded. Though the offer did not appeal to the sisters, who thought the salary was too small, they felt honor-bound to go since Lizzie had signed the contract.

Although critics looked upon the Cherry Sisters with distaste, New Yorkers packed the Olympia, possibly rescuing Hammerstein from bankruptcy. Twelve days after the sisters opened at his theater, the *New York Herald* reported Hammerstein had paid off his debts. For six weeks the sisters played to a packed house, the audiences bombarding them with rotten vegetables. Newspapers reported the city's vegetable retailers could not meet the demands of their regular customers because truck raisers and commission men were selling their vegetables directly to the patrons of Hammerstein's theater.

The girls were raised on a Linn County farm, but their father told them they were nobility. Thomas Cherry claimed to have been the gardener for the family of an English earl. He fell for the earl's daughter, with whom he eloped across the Atlantic, settling in Massachusetts. As if this lineage were not impressive enough, Effie Cherry also claimed her mother was a direct descendant of Edward Rawson, Secretary of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for 30 years.

In the mid-1850s, Thomas, his wife Laura, and their infant daughter Ella left Massachusetts for Iowa. Cherry called himself a landscape painter, but, so far as any of his Linn County neighbors could tell, he was really a farmer. The family grew, and by 1871 Thomas and Laura had six girls and two boys, though one son was to die in infancy and a daughter from a childhood illness. Then Laura Cherry died, and Ella, Elizabeth, Addie, Effie, and Jessie, with their brother Nathan, had to help their father manage the farm. Soon Nathan left—without saying where he was going—and Thomas died in the mid-1880s. Most accounts

of the sisters' lives call the girls young orphans—but at least three were past 20 by the time their father died.

For several years the sisters were content to manage the farm, but in 1893 they were determined to try something new. As schoolgirls, they had shown a certain flair for skits and recitals. One classmate remembers that the five sisters did not mumble through the Friday afternoon recitals as students usually did: "one time Ella gave something in which she was supposed to be a hunter. What did she do but throw a dummy pigeon of some sort in the air and then shoot at it. It scared everyone including the teacher, half to death."

They decided to give a performance at Marion. Perhaps they needed money in order to search for their brother Nathan, who had not been heard from since he left home. Or maybe, as one rumor has it, they desperately wanted to see the Chicago World's Fair. More likely, though, they simply needed the money to support the 40-acre farm that circumstances had forced them to manage.

Effie, who quickly became the leader of the group, rented Daniel's Opera House in Marion for five dollars a night. The sisters made all of the arrangements for the production, even distributing handbills with crude portraits of themselves in the streets of Marion. Tickets sold for 10¢, 20¢, and 30¢ each. On January 21, 1893 Ella, Effie, and Jessie made their debut, appearing on stage with hair painted a bright gold—an effect created with left-over sign paint—and attired just as ludicrously. Effie sang a solo, followed by Jessie who played the harmonica. Next Ella acted the part of a black-face minstrel in a comic ballad. The show lasted slightly over an hour, and netted the sisters \$250.

The account of the performance in the next day's issue of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* was one of the best reviews the sisters would receive for many years: "The entertainment given at Daniel's Opera House by the Cherry

Concert Company was a polished and recherche affair. The people of this handsome overgrown village on Indian Creek absolutely crowded and jammed, pushed and hauled, and literally walked over one another in wild efforts to procure seats. . . ."

Although the *Gazette* was not overly critical of the performance, neither was it overwhelmed by the sisters' talent. The reviewer did note that "the sisters had a keen appreciation of Uncle Sam's legal tender," concluding that "The public wanted fun, the public got it; the young ladies wanted money and they got it."

Confident after this success, the ladies made plans for a repeat performance, obtaining booking at Greene's Opera House in Cedar Rapids, one of the largest theaters between Chicago and Denver.

The Marion audience had been composed of neighbors and friends, whose theatrical standards were limited. But some of the most distinguished citizens of Cedar Rapids, accustomed to performers such as Lillian Russell and Otis Skinner saw the show at Greene's. The *Gazette's* review undoubtedly reflected their reaction: "Such unlimited gall as was exhibited last night at Greene's Opera House is past the understanding of ordinary mortals. They are no doubt respectable girls and probably educated in some few things, but their knowledge of the stage is worse than none at all . . . if some indefinable act of modesty could not have warned them that they were acting the parts of monkeys, it does seem like the overshoes thrown at them would have conveyed the idea in a more substantial manner. . . . Possibly the most ridiculous thing of the entire performance was an essay read by one of the poor girls in which she plead for the uplifting of the stage and hoped that no one would be harmed by anything they may have witnessed during the evening."

Angered by the review, but not too angry to

seize an opportunity for free publicity, the sisters visited the *Gazette* office, demanding the paper print a retraction. The *Gazette* editors told them to write their own letter. The girls obliged: "The Cherry Sisters Concert That appeared in the *Gazette* the other evening was intily a mistake and we take it back The young ladies wer refined and modist in every respict And their intertanement was as good as any that has been given in the city by home people. The noise and tumult that was raised in the house was not done as stated by the Cedar Rapids people but by a lot of toughs that came down from marion with the intention of creating a disturbance. . . ."

Supposedly this was to have ended the affair, but three days later Addie Cherry swore out a complaint against the city editor of the *Gazette*, Fred P. Davis, charging him with libel. The *Gazette* took it calmly, suggesting the trial be held at the sisters' next performance.

Many people believed the suit against Davis was not in earnest, and when the authorities agreed to hold the trial at Greene's, they suspected the sisters and the paper of collusion. They grew more suspicious as articles concerning the sisters appeared in the *Gazette* each day leading up to the performance. On the day before the performance, the paper urged its readers to attend the trial, and suggested a



Effie, Jessie, and Addie Cherry

screen be placed in front of a jury bound to contain some bald-headed men, since "there was nothing in the world, except the Cherry Sisters, that would hypnotize the small boy in the gallery and cause him to fling cabbage like the shining mark of a bald head." The *Gazette* warned: "Promiscuous running about the house is prohibited, although there is no penalty for violation of that rule."

The performance was held in March, 1893. The manager made a rare appearance at the beginning of the show, asking the members of the audience to restrain themselves. When he reminded them that the sisters were fellow citizens, the crowd reacted with cries of "No! No! Not for a minute!"

Lizzie and Effie appeared on stage as the curtain rose, and were greeted with kazoos, horns, and whistles. After a few moments the sisters could not be heard above the roar of the crowd. The trial was swift; the verdict severe. Davis, the city editor, was found guilty and sentenced to:

proceed at once to the said (Cherry Sisters) farm and diligently manage the same, especially see to it that the pigs are fed at the proper time, that cows do not go past their milking without due attention, that the ducks are regularly driven to water, and that the chickens are penned at night.

The verdict continued:

We further find that when the said Cherry Sisters shall return from their triumphal tour, the said Davis shall submit himself to the choice of the said sisters, beginning with the eldest, and the first one who will consent to such an alliance to that one shall be then and there joined in the holy bonds of matrimony.

Although the *Gazette* gained almost as much publicity from the performance as the sisters, it did not like the idea of their representing the culture of Cedar Rapids and Iowa to the rest of the nation. Immediately following the huge, one-page article on the performance and trial was an editorial:

Now that this foolishness is over there is another matter to consider: these girls intend to go to Chicago and give an exhibition. That might be a great deal of fun for the people of the World's Fair city, but wouldn't it be a pretty black eye for Iowa?

Their statewide reputation assured, the sisters got billing at the Burtis Opera House in Davenport. The *Davenport Democrat* dubbed this engagement the "coup de maitre" of the season, adding that the audience did not restrict itself to showering the sisters with applause. Almost anything that could be concealed under a coat was hurled at the ladies. At the request of the theater's management, the *Democrat* printed a notice that revolvers had to be left at the door, and rocks that would not pass through a two-inch ring were to be prohibited.

Since three of the sisters had to stay in Marion to nurse "Old Boss," the family cow, only two made the trip to Davenport. The morning after the performance the *Democrat* reported the audience indulged in nothing more than a little rank horseplay "that exactly comported with the unutterably rank show."

The reception at Davenport was mild compared to what the girls were met with a few months later at the Grand Opera House in Dubuque. Box seats sold for \$1.00, general admission tickets for as much as 50¢, the sisters receiving half the gate.

As usual, the audience accompanied the opening songs with potatoes, onions, tin cans, and cabbages. But later someone went too far, squirting a Babcock fire extinguisher into one of the sister's faces. She fled, her blue gown, black slippers (with gaudy buckles), and white stockings drenched. The other sister appeared in a denim shirt and matching overalls, reportedly carrying a shotgun, but was driven back by a "volley of turnips." "A meek and much subdued" youth attempted to secure order, but he also fled when an old tin wash boiler was thrown on the stage. William Roehl, the the-

ater manager, had hired the marshal and nine of his men to maintain order, but none of the officers attempted to quiet the crowd. As the Cherry Sisters fled, their carriage was battered with eggs by a group of young boys.

The mayor of Dubuque, fearing a lawsuit and hoping to use the situation for political advantage, ordered a full-scale investigation of the incident. Witnesses were summoned to a meeting at the city marshal's office, where one of the city aldermen assumed the role of prosecutor.

The first witness was Manager Roehl, who testified that instances of audience violence had occurred during previous performances by the sisters. He claimed that everyone entering the gallery had been searched. Roehl accused the marshal of attempting to extort money from the sisters for protection, and stated that, although he did not order the marshal to stop the disturbance, neither did he tell him to wait until the audience had ripped up the seats before intervening. Only after the wash boiler was thrown upon the stage, did the marshal stop the performance. That was when the audience began throwing vegetables with a vengeance. Roehl concluded that, had Marshal Rice arrested some of the ringleaders, the "violence" would have been averted.

Marshal Rice was called to the witness stand. There were seven policemen in the opera house, he told the committee, and each understood that vegetable throwing and general rowdiness were expected by both the sisters and Roehl. His men were under orders not to interfere unless the crowd damaged the theater. Any mention of money for police protection, he said, had been made strictly in a joking manner, and he pointed out that if Roehl had ordered him and his deputies to stop the performance, they would have done so at once.

By the next meeting of the council, a committee had prepared an eight-page document fixing much of the blame on advance publicity, which led the crowd to believe obnoxious be-

havior was not only to be tolerated, but was expected. Roehl himself, the report alleged, contributed to this impression, and made little effort to quell the disturbance once it had begun. The committee gently admonished Marshal Rice for relinquishing the supervision of his men to Roehl.

Since the police had no reason to expect that people would continue to harass the sisters after they had left the theater, the committee decided the police were not negligent in their failure to prevent the egg assault on the ladies' carriage. The report was approved by the council, but the sisters were not placated, and sued the city of Dubuque. The suit failed, and the matter was forgotten.

The Cherry Sisters continued to tour the state, making appearances in Jefferson, La Porte City, and Grinnell. They traveled to Kansas and Illinois, then to New York, in October, 1896, where they were enthusiastically received by East Coast audiences, who, much like their Midwestern counterparts, hissed, booed, and threw rotten vegetables. But New York critics mistakenly assumed that Iowans took the sisters seriously. As one suggested, the ladies were "probably respected at home and ought to have stayed there."

After finishing their engagement in the East, they traveled to California, stopping in towns and cities along the way. One of their first engagements after returning to Iowa in the spring of 1897 was at Foster's Opera House in Des Moines. The *Iowa State Register*, shrinking from the light they cast on Iowa, vigorously attacked the sisters. "They have toured the country as productions of Iowa, but until now the capital city of the fair state they have humiliated has been spared the affliction of their presence on the stage." After debating whether the performers or their audience should be the more pitied, the *Register* quickly summarized: "It was the most insipid, stale,

weary, tiresome, contemptible two hours work we have ever seen on the stage. Every man who laughed or jeered or hooted or howled at them reviled himself."

Perhaps the reviewer was unaware that his own boss, Richard P. Clarkson, owner and editor of the *Register*, had been in attendance at the performance. According to the *Montezuma Republican*, Clarkson fought a vegetable duel with future Iowa Senator Lafayette Young. The fight began when he accidentally hit Young with a poorly-aimed cabbage. It took State Printer Freeman Conaway to reconcile the two men, who had turned from the sisters on stage to bombard each other with rotten vegetables. By the time the curtain had been rung down, "they were all three wrapped in each others embrace, weeping."

The sisters continued performing around the state, their critics tirelessly keeping pace, inventing new phrases and images to describe what they could hardly believe. Billy Hamilton of the *Odebolt Chronicle* wrote:

Effie is an old jade of 50 summers, Jessie a frisky filly of 40, and Addie, the flower of the family, a capering monstrosity of 35. Their long skinny arms, equipped with talons at the extremities, swung mechanically, and anon waved frantically at the suffering audience. The mouths of their rancid features opened like caverns, and sounds like the wailing of damned souls issued therefrom. . . . Effie is spavined, Addie is stringhalt, and Jessie, the only one who showed her stockings, has legs with calves as classic in their outlines as the curves of a broom handle.

When the *Des Moines Leader* reprinted the review, the sisters sued for \$25,000. Judge C.A. Bishop of the Polk County District Court asked for a performance of selections from their act, and after witnessing the display, decided in favor of the *Leader*. Undaunted, the sisters appealed to the State Supreme Court. Under examination, Editor Hamilton described the show as "the most ridiculous performance I ever saw. There was no orchestra there. The pianist left after the thing was half over. She could not stand the racket and left." The court

reaffirmed the district court's decision.

The sisters lost the trial, but won publicity. They continued to appear in Iowa and the nation until 1903. Jessie died suddenly that year, while on tour in Hot Springs, Arkansas, from the combined effects of typhoid and malaria. She was 33.

Her funeral was held in Cedar Rapids on October 7, little noticed, and with only brief mention in the personals column of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*. During the next few years, Addie and Effie made infrequent appearances near Cedar Rapids. They opened a bakery—specializing in cherry pies—there during World War I, Elizabeth doing the baking, Effie managing the business end, and Addie helping wherever she could. The sisters converted part of the bakery into living quarters and set up housekeeping there in 1921.

The bakery was moderately successful, and in 1924 Effie Cherry ran as an independent candidate for mayor in Cedar Rapids. Her platform included an 8 PM curfew for children and a 9 PM curfew for adults in the winter. She promised to look into the problem of garbage, which she felt should be hauled away "before it walks away by itself." She also advocated the prohibition of profanity on the streets. Too many parks, she claimed, were also damaging the moral fiber of the community. "I like beautiful parks, but the young folk are going to them times when they shouldn't and in a way they shouldn't."

Wearing a long sweeping skirt with a high-necked waist, black hat, and black gloves, Effie launched her campaign in the familiar territory of the Majestic Theater. She thanked the

Note on Sources

The newspaper and manuscript collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa were the primary sources of information contained in this article. Other sources include the files of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* and the Cedar Rapids Public Library.



"Played the hose on her. A wild and disgraceful scene in the Grand Opera House, Dubuque, Ia., during a recent performance given by the Cherry Sisters," June 17, 1893 (from *The National Police Gazette*: New York)

newspapers for the notice she and her sisters had been given in the past, but declared that the stories about a screen being used to ward off vegetable assaults were untrue.

Effie received 805 votes from a total of over 10,000. Undiscouraged, she ran again two years later, on a platform of cleanliness, thriftiness, and morality. The *New York Times* reported that Effie was counting on the farm vote, and hoped the mayoralty would lead to the governorship or a senate seat. This time she received less than 5% of the primary vote.

But, even while they were managing the bakery, the sisters did not entirely neglect their stage career. In fact, they attempted countless comebacks, the earliest in 1918 when they appeared as a special feature with the Williams Stock Company at the Majestic The-

ater. The *Cedar Rapids Gazette* had mellowed toward the girls, referring to them now as "distinguished local artists," and reporting ticket sales so brisk that steps had to be taken to prevent scalpers from buying up huge blocks of tickets. Although the article noted that the fortune the Cherry Sisters made at the height of their career was lost through extensive litigation, the sisters made it clear that they were not appealing to charity. They wanted the performance to be judged on its merits.

After the performance on June 20, the *Gazette* critic tersely observed that the sisters "were applauded last evening instead of having things thrown at them." Following this successful — if not overwhelmingly triumphant — comeback, the sisters were satisfied with running their bakery. But when the bakery failed during the depression, they returned to the stage.

Early in 1933 they appeared in Des Moines, the *Des Moines Register* reporting that their act had withstood the ravages of time: "business boomed and the audience booed." But the women had not swallowed their pride. When the theater manager attempted to pick them up at the station in an old, two-horse shay, Addie insisted on a conventional taxi. At Addie's request the theater posted notices warning the other performers not to smoke, swear, or in any way annoy the sisters. The only other act on the bill featured a burlesque queen and "ten sweethearts."

Late in 1934, the *Gazette* received a letter from Carl Whyte, the Cherry Sisters' manager. He claimed the sisters were appearing with burlesque acts throughout the nation, and were back in the "big dough" because of his shrewdness.

He also said he had proposed to Effie, and though she was twice his age, she had not yet declined. In fact, he claimed, she wouldn't allow him to speak to another girl, and forbade his drinking anything stronger than milk. The sisters denied all of his claim, including his

responsibility for their success. He was, in fact, only one of many managers — the sisters hired six in seven years.

But Whyte's claims were partially true, and the sisters did travel extensively in 1934, appearing in New York (on a bill with Gracie Allen and Tallulah Bankhead), Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis, and many towns in Iowa. One of their last appearances was with Little Johnny, Philip Morris's famous page boy, at a radio station WHO barn dance, held at the Shrine Auditorium in Des Moines. Interviewed after the performance — which was attended by 2,500 — the sisters denied having ever performed behind a screen. There had been problems with some audiences, they admitted, but "you are always apt to run into some ignorant people."

With the death of Ella in 1934, and of Elizabeth in 1936, the two remaining sisters, Effie and Addie, were reduced to meager circumstances. They had been living in what was left of the Cherry estate — a basement — before being taken to the county nursing home in the winter of 1934. When Elizabeth died in 1936, her personal assets consisted of \$45 and a quarter interest in the family farm, which was

involved in litigation. The Cherry Sisters' claim was dubious.

Addie and Effie struggled on into the 1940s, moving from one location to another in Cedar Rapids.

Addie was stricken with a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 83 in Cedar Rapids, and in 1944 Effie died of heart failure.

Both were buried in Linwood Cemetery, Cedar Rapids.

New Yorkers, who never forgot the Cherry Sisters, were told of Effie's death in a full column obituary in the *Times*. An editorial later appeared in the *Times* calling the sisters, "one of the strangest episodes in American vaudeville."

If a person isn't too sentimental about the vanished glories of vaudeville, he must admit that the Cherry Sisters had competition. There must have been times when other acts going around the circuits were almost as bad as theirs. During the ten years when they were on the stage the sisters must have had to fight hard to keep from learning something about dramatic technique, or to keep from putting into practice what they couldn't help learning. What had been naive in them at the beginning must have been pretty sophisticated at the end. Maybe the laugh was on their side. Maybe the Cherry Sisters knew better than the public what was really going on. Be this as it may, they left behind an imperishable memory. And they gave more pleasure to their audiences than did many a performer who was merely almost good. □

CONTRIBUTORS

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