

"If it's a Cass show it's a good show"

by Michael Kramme

The attractive redhead pulled into town in her 1920 white Packard convertible with white upholstery, accompanied by two large white Russian wolfhounds seated beside her. With her name emblazoned in gold on each door, there could be no mistaking the driver. Hazel M. Cass had arrived.

One of Iowa's most flamboyant businesswomen, Cass owned and managed tent theater companies from 1919 to 1938. Earlier in this century, tent theater was a popular form of entertainment across the nation, but especially in the Midwest. At least 167 companies are known to have played in Iowa between 1890 and 1940. In the early days, traveling shows played in town halls, theaters, or opera houses for nine months, and then performed in enormous tents during the summer when non-air-conditioned buildings became unbearable in midwestern heat. Later, as motion pictures took over the stages of many theaters and opera houses, the shows only played in the summer months.

The arrival of a tent show by railroad or by car-and-truck caravan was looked forward to by the citizens of most communities. Companies often returned to the same towns year after year, and their annual visit became a highlight of the summer. Children helped erect the tent and move chairs and equipment into place in exchange for free tickets. Most com-

panies prepared six plays that they would perform during the week before moving to the next location. Because many audience members returned for every show, a company could perform in towns with small populations and still count on an audience each night.

Hazel Cass was perhaps the only woman in the tent-show business who was primarily a manager. Other women like Hazel McOwen and "Iowa's Little Sweetheart," Hila Morgan, owned their companies, but they were primarily actresses and had others fulfill management responsibilities. Some shows such as the Jack and Maude Brooks Stock Company, based in Sabula, Iowa, and the Neil and Caroline Schaffner Players, based in Wapello, Iowa, were husband-and-wife partnerships with shared managerial duties.

Hazel Cass's background was not typical for a show business manager. Most managers were either born into show business families or worked for years in several different companies, learning the trade in a variety of jobs. Cass, however, was born October 20, 1889, into Sumner's most prominent family. Her grandfather S. G. Cass founded the Sumner bank and built the Cass block building. Her father, Joseph F. Cass, was also a banker. He and his brothers C. D. and L. C. Cass built the Waterloo, Cedar Falls & Northern Railway and owned the Electric Park in Waterloo. (Electric parks were turn-of-the-century amusement parks often built by streetcar companies at the end of their lines to encourage weekend use of the streetcars.)

Hazel Cass was a fervent believer in tent theater and a self-confident owner and manager of traveling companies in the Midwest (photo circa 1920s).



Raised in this house, Cass was the daughter of a prominent family in Sumner, Iowa.

Cass had the typical upbringing of a young lady of her family's wealth and stature. She studied elocution, music, dancing, and equestrian skills in private schools with the finest teachers. She and her family traveled extensively and spent summers in San Antonio, where she became acquainted with General Pershing, impressing him with her horse-riding skills. While in San Antonio, she met John C. Koeneke, whom she married in 1909.

Cass, however, was not interested in becoming a society wife. She had something more interesting in mind and soon announced that she was going into show business.

Her family's precise reaction is not recorded, but a news story of the time recounted: "When she decided she would establish an independent career in the show business there was serious objections and some 'fireworks' around the old home. She tried to convince her family that she could have just as respectable, moral and honorable a career in that business as in any other, if the right methods were pursued. She insisted on following her ambition. While her family put no obstacles in her way after her start, she got no help or encouragement from any of them."

Cass joined a stock company and played a variety of roles as well as singing and dancing

in vaudeville. Her performing career was short lived, however, and she soon was involved in management. In 1918 the Parker-Rachford Shows, Inc. was organized; Cass was vice-president. Their first performance was in a tent in a Waterloo amusement park, most likely the family-owned Electric Park. The venture was successful, and the company took to the road.

Because actors and the theater in general had a tarnished reputation in the minds of many Americans, and because outsiders were automatically suspect in many communities, most traveling shows took extra care to establish a high moral atmosphere. Plays judged appropriate for families were performed, and the private lives of the performers were carefully monitored. Cass and her partners knew this, of course. In one of their "heralds" (printed advertisements tacked on telephone poles or sent to patrons) they reassured their audience: "The Cass, Parker, Rachford Shows (Inc.) was organized on strictly business lines to give the public full value in Amusement for every cent paid them. They employ only people and artists who are ladies and gentlemen of the best reputation and ability in their respective lines, all having appeared at various times in the largest city productions. The management will consider it a favor if their patrons will report anything that is not

entirely satisfactory to them. They will also appreciate any applause or favorable comment."

Cass soon bought out her partners' interest in the company and renamed it "The Hazel Cass Players." Her company performed in a tent from the first of April through the second week of September. Unlike most traveling companies, they did not have a winter season in opera houses. This left Cass free to pursue other interests: managing the Sioux City Playhouse for the 1928 winter season; spending time in San Antonio; appearing in small roles in Hollywood films; and selecting plays for her own actors, planning routes, and hiring personnel.

At the height of her career she ran four tent shows. She personally managed the original company, "The Hazel M. Cass Players." The other companies were "The Hazel M. Cass Comedians," "The Hazel M. Cass Stock Company," and "Davidson's Comedians," managed by her second husband, S. G. Davidson. All four companies shared one motto: "If it's a Cass show it's a good show."

Cass's own company—The Hazel M. Cass Players, or sometimes called the Number One Unit—was perhaps the most elaborate traveling tent theater in the country. Troup-

ers often referred to it as the "Cadillac of tent shows." Like most companies it traveled by railroad in the early years, but even in that respect Cass's company distinguished itself: it had a private baggage car. The company's tent was the largest in the Midwest (80 x 100 feet), costing more than ten thousand dollars in the early 1920s. It could hold an audience of 1,200.

The eager audience entered through the "lobby" in the front of the tent, and purchased tickets at the box office, set up on a raised platform. The prices charged by the Cass shows were similar to those of other companies. Adult tickets cost 25¢ (later raised to 35¢, and then 50¢) and children's cost 15¢ (later 25¢). Women were admitted free when accompanied by one paid ticket, a common practice of the time. An extra dime bought one a reserved chair (perhaps a box seat on a wooden floor), rather than a seat on the "circus blues." These bleachers, which lined the back and sides of the tent, were later replaced by chairs, reducing audience capacity but adding comfort. In fact, an advertisement reminded patrons: "Don't be afraid of the weather as the tent is as dry and comfortable as your home." On cooler evenings, coke-burning furnaces heated the

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Cass-Parker-Rachford Shows
INCORPORATED
Operating

H.R. PARKER
PRES.

HAZEL M. CASS
VICE-PRES.

J. A. RACHFORD
SEC. & TREAS.

*Electric Park
Waterloo, Iowa
Largest and Finest
Amusement Park.*

*Dramatic Tent
Road Shows
Home Office
Waterloo, Iowa.*

Cass found her strength in managing rather than performing, and soon became a partner in the Cass-Parker-Rachford Shows, which played in Waterloo. (Advertisement circa 1919)



"There always have been tent shows and always will be, I fancy," Cass said in a 1927 interview.

tent, reportedly an innovation in tent theater.

"I'm going to have the best company of players, the best plays, the best vaudeville, the best music and the best tent theater in America," Cass once told an interviewer. She did hire the best talent available, and paid the highest salaries of her era to achieve that goal. Leading actors made \$125 weekly.

In 1921, her Number One Unit was not particularly large—herself, eight cast members, and four orchestra members playing violin, piano, cornet, and drums. It was common for traveling companies to have this sized cast and a separate orchestra, which played a concert before the show and provide music for vaudeville specialties between acts of the plays. (Smaller shows sometimes had the actors "double in brass"—playing roles in the play and instruments in the orchestra.) But Cass didn't stop there. Her Number One Unit would eventually have a maid for the ladies' dressing room. She began hiring an advance agent to go to the towns ahead of the company and secure publicity and necessary licenses, a general agent to handle financial aspects, and another to help with logistics. Three men on regular salary set up and maintained the tent and equipment. When all four companies were at their prime, the Cass enterprises employed more than 120 workers.

The companies traveled by train, and later, when there were more hard-surfaced roads, by car-and-truck caravans. Although the Number One Unit played in some small towns such as Hawkeye and Postville, it focused primarily on larger ones such as Waterloo, Estherville, and Webster City, leaving the smaller towns to the other three companies. Each had a repertoire of six or seven plays, which enabled them to perform a different play nightly to encourage audience members to return. In the large towns, they could stay two weeks and present two performances of each play.

The Cass territory included Minnesota, Wisconsin, and northern Iowa. Her more popular Iowa towns span the alphabet—Algona, Britt, Clear Lake, Clarion, Cresco, Decorah, Eldora, Estherville, Guttenberg, Hampton, Hawkeye, Manchester, McGregor,

Mt. Vernon, New Hampton, Northwood, Osage, Postville, Rock Rapids, Waterloo, Waverly, Waukon, Webster City, and West Union.

"The shows are all of the same high quality and management," Cass bragged, "and will give more value in good clean amusement than any other tent show on the Road." The plays performed were typical of other traveling shows; many were Broadway hits and some were written especially for midwestern audiences. Everything from serious drama and sentimental melodrama to drawing-room comedies and farces appeared on stage. Nevertheless, great care was taken to select plays that provided "good, clean, family entertainment" and a variety of subject matter. A company often opened with a play with a religious or highly moral theme. These "preacher plays" established the entertainment as a positive experience in the eyes of the community leaders. The end of the week's run might conclude with a farce. Several had racy or suggestive titles, but nothing questionable actually happened in the performance. Among the hundreds of plays performed by the Cass organization include titles that pulled in crowds in the Twenties and Thirties (and amuse readers today). Consider, for instance, *Oh, Johnny Oh*; *Turn to the Right*; *The Fatal Card*; *Which One Shall I Marry?*; *The Divided House*; *Confessions of a Wife*; *Her Step Husband*; *Dancing Mothers*; *Any Men's Daughter*; *Other People's Business*; *Mary's Ankle*; and *Up in Mable's Room*. In 1925, a typical season, The Hazel M. Cass Players performed *It's A Boy* (on Monday), *Modern Cinderella* (Tuesday), *The Unkissed Bride* (Wednesday), *Smiles* (Thursday, replaced mid-season by *Where the Shannon Flows*), *Why Men Leave Home* (Friday), and *The Girl of the Flying X* (Saturday).

Each evening Cass appeared on stage. With her trademark red hair and rhinestone swagger stick (a thin walking stick), the glamorous mistress of ceremonies and hostess wore the latest Paris fashions purchased for each season at Marshall Field's in Chicago.

One of the keys to her success was that she was able to give her audiences what they wanted. "People want good clean shows," she explained. "That is what we are giving them



Inside one of Cass's tents, "circus blues" (or bleachers) edge the audience area and local advertisements surround the stage.

and that is the reason, I believe, why we draw the crowds we do and can return to the same towns and find friends and a welcome waiting for us every summer." She was indeed welcomed back, year after year. When her only child, Virginia, married, the wedding was held in the tent after a performance in McGregor, and the audience was invited to stay and see the wedding.

Only occasionally did she have problems in the towns in which she played. Once in Clear Lake, the authorities refused to allow her to perform on a Sunday. A local editorial

soon appeared: "A few Sundays ago a ban was placed upon the Hazel Cass tent show giving a Sunday entertainment as had been their custom on Sunday nights in their previous engagements here. Someone 'holier than thou' filed information with the mayor and there was no other alternative than to enforce the 'blue law' statute." (Blue laws prohibited certain public entertainments on Sundays.) The editorial continued: "In this day and age the greater part of the population of this country turn to Sunday as a day for recreation and amusement. It may be a violation of the Bible injunction, but it is a truism, nevertheless, and all must face it whether it agrees with their code of habits of living or not.

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She was mistaken. Throughout the 1930s, show after show closed. Like Chautauquas, they were victims of competition from motion pictures and the Great Depression. During the early Thirties, three of the Cass shows were closed. Finally in 1938, The Hazel M. Cass Players toured their last.

Cass returned to her hometown of Sumner, Iowa, and with Clem McNally, her third husband, operated the family's Cass Opera House as a motion picture theater from 1938 until 1940. Not much more is known. In 1950 she organized and directed the Lion's Club Minstrel Show. About then, her friends, the Tiltons, persuaded her to return to the business she loved. They invited her to manage their Mid Tilton Shows, which she did for five years. By now in her sixties, she was fondly greeted by former audience members in each town she visited.

Cass eventually moved to Greene, Iowa, to live with her daughter and son-in-law. When she was ninety-one, the final curtain fell, on February 22, 1981. She was buried in the Union Mound Cemetery at Sumner.

Hazel Cass is still remembered as a glamorous and capable businesswoman by the few remaining performers with whom she worked, as well as by those who saw her shows. Deserving of the ultimate accolade in tent theater, she was, one might honestly say, "a real trouper." □

the writer reasoned, "when an entertainment, clean and respectable, is denied the privilege of opening its door on a Sunday night, whilst others of a like kind are not molested?" Remarking that the local Bayside amusement park, swimming, and motor boating were allowed on Sundays, the writer concluded: "We have an idea that local residents own most of the above mentioned amusement devices and in that case it would be a breach of friendship for the mayor to declare them disturbances of the peace. It makes a difference whose ox is gored."

Cass believed fervently in the tent theater business. Interviewed for a 1927 *Christian Science Monitor*, she predicted, "People in summer like to take their entertainment out of doors where they get the breezes. There al-

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