

INTERVIEW WITH GERALDINE FURGESON

SUBJECT: SIBYL PHELPS

I first met Sibyl in 1922. A local group was putting on a home talent show, and she was the pianist for rehearsals. She was most generous in all of these activities.

Sibyl lived with her grandparents, parents and an Aunt Mary in the one and only home she ever knew. This was a three-story block on Market Street where the family had a grocery store. Her father delivered groceries in a two-wheeled cart as far as the village line east of the village.

Sibyl's health, as a child, was not of the strongest. She caught colds easily and was of the nervous type. Whether this was caused by the association of too many old folks we never knew.

She attended Palmyra Classical High School graduating in 1915. Later she studied at Eastman School of the Theatre and Dancing, Rochester, N.Y. where she had such well-known teachers (today) as Rouben Mamoulian, Martha Graham, and Esther Gustafson.

When, thru the advice of Mr. Mamoulian, she went to the Inter-Theatre Art School in New York City. She lived at Laura Spellman Hall which was named after John D. Rockefeller's mother. I can remember the day she left. Her parents and

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I saw her off on the early morning trolley heading for Syracuse where she'd board the New York Central for the big city. Never could understand why she didn't take the N.Y.C. train from Palmyra.

She stayed in N.Y.C. only a few months. Taken ill with the diagnosis of either measles or mumps and, overhearing the doctor and house mother talking about her being sent to one of the islands for isolation, she immediately put some things in a bag and left for home. This was in the evening, and she wasn't missed until the next morning. She rode all night on the train arriving in Rochester just in time to board the early trolley for Palmyra. You can imagine how surprised her parents were. They called the school to inform them where Sibyl was.

Sibyl was interested in all types of music, especially piano. She played well and liked to improvise, which her father did not like. They had an old organ, which is in the home yet. Occasionally, she'd play this, but pumping the pedals was no easy job.

The family enjoyed animals, especially cats. In late years, Sibyl had a dog, along with her cat. She called them her family.

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Her father and she were great circus fans, and whenever the circus came around to the surrounding towns, they were there. They'd go into Rochester, and she would go behind the lines to visit with all the performers. Many wrote to her after retiring.

Also, she was interested in different religions. She was a true Episcopalian but enjoyed studying Spiritualism, Numerology, and Astrology. Evangeline Adams, a well-known astrologer, read her horoscope and told her she'd work among stones. She worked for many years at the monument place on Market Street owned by Mr. Wilbur Barnhart.

Another interesting experience was when Sarah Bernhardt, a well-known actress played at the Lyceum Theatre in Rochester, Sibyl wanted to wear her long, white kid gloves, but they were soiled. So, her mother washed them in gasoline, then put them in a warm oven to get rid of the odor, and thought they had. She wore them to the theatre, and the next day in the Democrat & Chronicle column of 'Henry Clune's Seen & Heard' was this article-'The scent of Thrift at the Theatre' and, Sibyl knew it was she about whom he was writing.

Mr. Clune provoked Sibyl when he wrote a column about Eva Le Gallienne. Sibyl was very fond of Miss Le Gallienne: as an actress, and would go into Rochester whenever she

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played at the Lyceum. Well, Mr. Clune wrote that he would rather eat his beans at his favorite local restaurant than to review her play, which made Sibyl write a letter to him saying he didn't appreciate good acting, etc. Very graciously, Mr. Clune answered her letter and at the very end he wrote

*I still prefer eating my beans.'

Sibyl was always appreciative for whatever was done for her. She gave more than she received. She had a fantastic memory.

Her mother passed away in October of '55 her father, the early sixties. Sibyl left us on Pearl Harbor Day-Dec. 7, 1976, after a lingering illness in the Newark-Wayne Community Hospital. How we miss her!

More on Sibyl.

After returning from N.Y.C. she studied with a Mrs. Eldridge in Rochester. Under her tutelage, Sibyl gave a performance at the Rochester Brick Church Institute as a Japanese Geisha Girl, and it was received very well.