

Vaudeville in 1916 with the Kentucky Belles
A Story About My Grandpa by C. Scott

At 10 o'clock in the morning after another late night, five bleary-eyed but freshly shaved men and seven corseted and coiffed women slip quietly into chairs at a boarding house dining room for their breakfast. Fragrances of bay-rum aftershave and Ivory soap mingle with the aroma of fried eggs, toast, and bacon. When everyone has swallowed a few sips of coffee, they are ready to speak to each other. (Rule: Anyone coming to the table feeling alert and sociable must say nothing until the others are fully awake.) This group travels together by train through five Midwest states. They have developed a morning routine that includes a discussion of their business.

It is June, marking the last half of the 1917 season. This morning, the Kentucky Belles, a vaudeville company, are in Noblesville, Indiana. They completed one matinee and two shows nightly on Monday and Tuesday, and will be boarding the train to Piqua, Ohio tomorrow. An advertisement in the paper announces tonight's final performance:

OPERA HOUSE
TONIGHT NOBLESVILLE INDIANA

The Kentucky Belles

Big Musical Comedy Presents that Musical Review

"HOTEL TOPSY TURVY"

A Laugh Every Minute, New Songs, Dances, and
Comedy and a Big Triangle Photoplay in 5 Parts.
Lillian Gish in "DAPHNE AND THE PIRATES."
Don't forget this is a Triangle.

Prices: Lower Floor 15c Balcony 10c

Coming Next Week, "The Carolina Lillies."

Compared to ads clipped and saved from other small town newspapers this one seems incomplete. Most theater owners promote the Kentucky Belles in advertisements (and on handbills posted at the theater) with the phrase: **Aesthetic Dancing, Refined Musical Comedy and Special Vaudeville for Ladies and Children.** A typical handbill also says the cast is composed of: **Five Men and Seven Pretty Girls with Good Voices, Two Black Face Comedians.** And, of course, the Kentucky Belles are: **The Best That Have Played the Opera House This Season.**

By 1917, vaudeville houses were consistently offering a glimpse of glamour and luxury to middle-class audiences seeking temporary escape

from their humdrum existence. A place named *Opera House* or *Grand Theater* could resemble neoclassic museums and library buildings promoting education, or if named differently, it could present a more exotic architectural impression that matched a label like *The Granada*, *The Bijou*, *The Eldorado*, or *The Riviera*. Inside such a building, customers marveled at popular Victorian décor that included fancy mirrors, marble statues, ornate wall hangings, and oriental carpets. People gladly paid ten, fifteen, or twenty cents to be entertained in one of these lavish entertainment palaces.

Small to medium-sized vaudeville companies moved from town to town across three or four states during a season. They were hired by the vaudeville theaters to arrive and perform on a pre-arranged schedule. The "vaude" house might hire several different minor acts lasting ten minutes each to warm up the audience before the main attraction began. The Kentucky Belles were a main attraction in their mid west circuit.

This morning, the manager of the Kentucky Belles, Paul Zallee, enters the dining room fifteen minutes after the group has begun eating and chatting. He is carrying a newspaper. He taps his water glass with a spoon to get the attention of his cast. "Good morning all. I have good news. Listen to this piece by Thomas Wright about yesterday's performance. It could bring us another crowd today." Paul begins to read:

A Musical Farce at the Opera House: There was standing room only at the Opera House last night where the Kentucky Belles gave an encore performance of the 1898 musical comedy "The Hotel Topsy Turvy." It was a perfect vehicle for them to display their trademark variety of musical numbers, dancing, and comedic interplay. The plot is not unusual: a young man connives with a friend to prevent his lady love from being married to a middle-aged Italian count, whose betrothal was arranged by her family. Added farcical elements and the absurd setting make it a play of obviously ridiculous actions.

"Boy, you can say that last part again, but without the fancy words. That story was way beyond crazy without any help from us!" interrupts Ed Miller, the red-headed pianist who always has an opinion.

"Well, yeah. Of course it was; that's why we picked it," pipes in Curley Wakefield. He had to restate the obvious. Maybe that's why he always played the straights guy opposite the comics - taking everything at face value. "Let Paul read the article." Paul continues reading about the plot of the play:

The two young men invite a company of strolling actors into a vacant private mansion which has been turned into a hotel for this event. The girl being courted arrives at the supposed hotel with her father and cousin and the foreign count. Unknown to them, one of the actors begins to impersonate the count at every opportunity. The situation is further complicated

when the elderly owners of the house return from their travels unexpectedly. The scene of the plot is full of potential complications because of all the actors pretending to be other people.

Ernie Johnson the trap drummer raps his spoon on the table and says "Do you get it? You guys were actors pretending to be actors who were pretending to be other people. How weird is that, huh?" The others know Ernie's head is full of rhythm and not much else. They shush him and tell Paul to go on.

The performance included a wild food fight and romantically funny serenades accompanied with tin pan percussion. Can-can dancing, acrobatics, and singing intersperse every slap-stick accident, fumbled trick, and stumbling chase. By the end of the second act, a stage covered with food, smashed plates, seltzer water, champagne bottles and soiled table linens confirms the topsy-turvy condition of the hotel.

"I'll say," adds Blanche Watson, a chorus girl with ruddy complexion who dislikes bending over to pick anything off the floor. "What a mess that was to clean! Topsy turvy means a lot of work after the fun."

"Yeah, and what about dancing on that slippery mess?" May Lilly adds her worries. "We could have fallen and broken a leg on all that stuff. The funny act wouldn't be so funny then."

Paul understands their concerns and says "Well yes, those are the chances we take in this business, but listen to this. It gets better, and you might change your minds about not liking this play." He continues to read the entertainment review:

Although not famous like Edwin Foy who first played the part of Lebeau the clown in the original New York City production, Leslie Kell was very amusing and convincing in the role. Likewise, the Kentucky Belles' own Nell Larkin sang cleverly to mimic the Broadway star Marie Dressler, in her part as proprietress of Cluny's Colossal Combination.

Leslie and Nell grin. The rest of the cast cheers and claps hands. It is not often that a reviewer of small-time shows will single out performers by name for accolades. Paul reads on:



In this observer's opinion, all of the cast knew their stage business and carried it off admirably. Even the seven chorus girls wearing hosiery and lingerie to suggestive advantage were trained to perform in a manner suitable for family entertainment. Most important, well-conducted and orchestrated music lifted this production above what could have been merely a mass of confusion and noise. Composers Victor Roger and Lionel Monckton would be pleased with this artful rendition of their work by the Kentucky Belles musical director Garnett Hansen.

"Did you hear that, Garnett?" Paul asks. "All your hard work really paid off." Garnett blushes, but doesn't have anything to say. The others speak for him.

Emma Marr, the prima donna who played the part of the wrongly betrothed girl, declares "I'm glad Garnett taught me how to say the words, especially in that French *Toujours* song. And, he helped Curley and I learn the duet timing for *How to Kiss*. That was a tricky one."

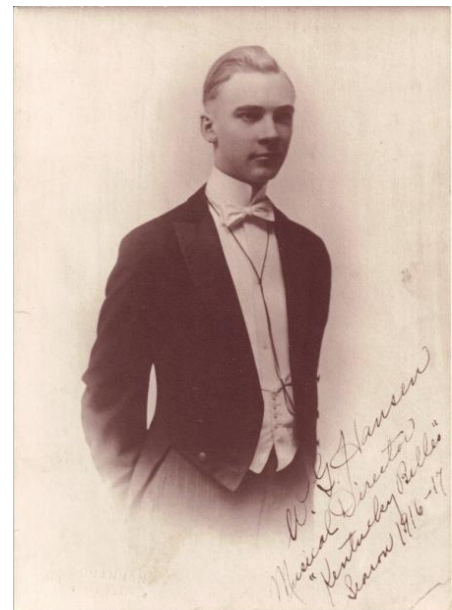
"Yeah," says Ed, "the same is true for the house orchestra. That sheet music was hard to read and some of the guys in the horn section didn't understand how parts of it should sound. Garnett doctored the score to give them a smoother time of it."

"Say," announces Pansy Hart who created her own fancy stage name and is always pestering the others to do the same, "We ought to start calling Garnett 'Doc' for doctoring up the music. What do you think of that?" The others look at each other and smile in agreement; the response is unanimous. "Doc" it is, and even Garnett is amused by that moniker. He insists, however, that the nickname not be published in their advertisements. It isn't professional and won't fit the musical conductor image he tries to project by wearing a formal white tie and tails.

Garnett, like everyone in Vaudeville, knows the value of image and how wardrobe affects it. Even Curley Wakefield promotes his act for side jobs outside the KB Company by advertising a "Wardrobe par Excellence."

Paul brings the conversation back to the original subject. "As well as we did last night and the night before," Paul warns, "it won't pay to get over confident. Surely you must realize that there was another reason for the crowd. In addition to the Topsy Turvy Hotel, what made last night so special?" Paul pauses so they can take that in. Some of the cast are looking puzzled.

Doc makes a guess: "Was it the new flick at the end--the Triangle photoplay starring Lillian Gish? That one was longer and better than the shorts that usually follow our act."





Theatrical poster to *Daphne and the Pirate*

"Bingo!" Paul answers. "Movies are getting more and more attention. Look at how much they have changed just in the last seven years. Used to be, you'd see a few minutes of a horse galloping across a field, a prize fight, moving automobiles and trains, or Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley in shooting competitions. They were billed as added attractions, but were really meant to help clear out the theater for the next show. But now, you can see real photo plays --with popular stars like Lillian Gish, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford-- that run as long as fifty minutes."

"Well that's a good thing, isn't it?" Leslie makes a point. "Anything that brings in the crowd is good for our pocketbooks. We should be happy that movies are attracting more attention. It's a good deal for the families that come to see us. They get to see real people on the stage plus they can marvel at the latest moving pictures. I like those films too. Aren't they amazing?"

Garnett is remembering how it was four years ago when he was sixteen and played piano ragtime music in Galesburg for \$12.50 a week at the "nickel." A nickelodeon was a storefront movie house, not worthy of the label "theater." The owner crammed as many chairs as possible into a long narrow room bare of any decorations. Images flashing on a white curtain would flicker if the projectionist didn't have the feed mechanism set just right, and sometimes he would slow the film down or speed it up on purpose-- whichever the audience liked. None of the films lasted more than fifteen or twenty minutes, so it was easy for people to squeeze a viewing into their schedules. Children came by after school, housewives visited any time of the day while out shopping, and factory employees stopped there on their way home from work. Nickelodeons were mostly enjoyed by the low end of the working class and the recent immigrants who couldn't speak much English.

Garnett asks Paul, "so what do you mean by pointing out the attraction of these longer photoplays? Is there something wrong with those that we can't see?"

Paul shares his concern. "No, there's nothing wrong with those films, and I agree with Leslie that they are good for our business. I'm just worried about our future if they continue to gain more and more attention. I read in *Billboard* and other weeklies that a lot of vaudeville theaters in New York and Philadelphia are switching

completely over to just movies. They no longer book any vaudeville acts."

Leslie counters that fear by remarking "Ah, that won't happen everywhere! Sure, movies are more popular than dime museums, circuses, and street carnivals now - but vaudeville still out numbers all the movie theaters. Why, those movies don't even have any sound. How can a black and white moving picture with no sound compete with real breathing, singing, speaking actors on a stage?"

Curly wants to agree with Leslie, but feels obligated to point out one thing. "I don't know, Leslie. Maybe there's no way to put sound with movies now, but remember how amazed we were when Thomas Edison invented the phonograph? Don't you think someone will figure out how to combine sound and motion together someday?"

The discussion continues until it is time to go to the Opera House and get to work. They must prepare for the matinee performance starting at one o'clock. Paul and Leslies will be arranging stage props for their comedy act while Curly checks with the theater manager about ticket sales and last minute announcements. Everyone playing a clown gathers their costumes and grease paints together. The chorus girls will do another run through of their trickiest song and dance routine. No matter how much they might complain about the risks of injury, the stage is their home and they love it.

On his way down the street to rehearse with the orchestra, Garnett is thinking about the future of film and wondering if he really wants to continue with the Kentucky Belles after he returns from service in the War to End All Wars. Maybe it's not such a great idea to make vaudeville his life career. Still, it was a grand time he had this past year—a last adventure before he turns twenty-one and must report to the draft board. The travel, the applause from packed houses, the camaraderie with the cast members, and above all—the music made the experience one to treasure. Maybe he can play piano again somewhere else when the war is over. It just won't be in vaudeville. Soon, the movies will be the main attraction and stage acts will be last on the bill or gone all together. Vaudeville will be tossed topsy turvy.