

The Rochester Legend

Ruth Beitz

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Also pictured in PLATE XII is a special First Day cover honoring Hoover with a photograph of the towboat *Herbert Hoover*.

A few more figures of general interest conclude this philatelic history: There were 999,219 stamps sold the First Day. There were 631,819 machine cancellations and 66,363 hand cancellations. The man hours required to accomplish all the above totalled 5,547.



MAIN STREET, WEST BRANCH, IOWA

THE ROCHESTER LEGEND

BY RUTH BEITZ

For many years a fascinating legend has persisted concerning the village of Rochester, Iowa, not far from West Branch, the birthplace of Herbert Hoover. It originated in an incident that happened one night in 1905:

The evening train snorted up to the tiny station at West Branch and stopped with a ferocious grinding of brakes. From one of the cars descended a woman muffled in a thick veil and carrying a long pasteboard box.

She had hardly set foot on the ground, when the driver of a waiting hack from the local livery stable stepped up to offer his services. He'd been hoping for some business that night, and this lady looked like a good prospect. Anybody could see she was out of the ordinary, all swathed up like that; and then, the way she carried herself . . . head way up in the air, like a queen. Perfume, too! He sniffed deeply. Didn't smell like Bay Rum, or any of that stuff you could get at the local drug store.

"Where'd you want to go, Lady?" He waited eagerly to hear her voice. It was low, throaty, and undefinably accented.

"To Rochester—and back."

As the hack-driver helped his passenger step into the carriage, he tried to get a good look at her, but he couldn't see a thing through that veil. His mind worked busily as he tried to figure out the contents of the package. Looked like a florist's box, he thought. Maybe somebody was sick.

"You got folks at Rochester, Lady? Just whereabouts was you wanting to go?"

The deep but chill tones of the response startled him. "You will please drive me to the cemetery at Rochester, leave me at the gate, and then return in half an hour."

"All right, Lady, no offense intended. Business is business." He shut the door, climbed up to the box, and roused the somnolent horse to action.

With every turn of the carriage wheels, the driver was putting two and two together—or rather, it was three and three: Veiled lady . . . pasteboard box . . . cemetery. What former resident wouldn't want to be recognized . . . lived a long way off . . . and had somebody buried out there? Suddenly he snapped his fingers in jubilation. He had the answer! Sure, it must be the King girl that had run away nearly half a century earlier. After her mother had up 'n died and was put away six feet under, she'd been a hard one to handle by all accounts. Got stagestruck after seein' some travelin' troupers. Then her relatives wouldn't have anything more to do with her . . . said she'd disgraced them. And after that *she* got high and mighty and wouldn't have a thing to do with them, either.

He whoa'd at the cemetery entrance—the place wasn't shut up at night—and hustled out to hand down the passenger. She never said a word until he was back up on the box. Then: "Please drive on. I wish to be alone. Return in half an hour."

The cabbie was so excited that he hardly knew where he drove during that interval. Did the young lady speak with a French accent? If his guess about her identity was right, that was where she'd told people she'd been born, and had it put in all that printed stuff about her. It'd be worth losing his profits on the trip to drive back from the station and find out just where she'd put those flowers—if they were flowers.

When he returned, right on the dot, to the cemetery, the

mysterious passenger was waiting, minus the box. The cabman put the horse to the trot; he could hardly wait to get to the station and turn around. As the lady paid her fare, he tried to draw her out some more; but he might as well have been talking to a wooden post. Anyhow, she didn't dispute his bill!

After she'd gone into the waiting room, he climbed back on the box and urged the horse over the road until once more the white headstones glimmered like shafts of twilight through the gloom. The cabbie threw down the reins, jumped out and rushed to the grave of Mrs. John King. Eureka! There, propped up in the paseboard box, was a bunch of the most expensive roses you could buy! And what was more, there was quite a dent in the little decorative mound of mussel shells piled up near the marker. The veiled lady had undoubtedly taken a handful of them away with her as a memento.

Next day, all Rochester and all West Branch, too, heard the story; and afterwards it kept ringing through the years, 'til the date was as fixed as the A.D. on the courthouse cornerstone. Folks had looked up the city papers and found that Sarah Bernhardt had played at an Iowa theater a night or so earlier, and that clinched matters.

Back in the late 1840's Mr. and Mrs. John King and their small daughter, Sarah, started from New York to the Mississippi Valley, where they expected to join the John Finefield family. Mrs. King, *nee* Castle, a vivacious French Canadian, looked forward to a reunion with her daughter and the grandchildren at Rochester. The death of her husband en route made the meeting a sad one; but comforted by her married daughter, Mrs. King and young Sarah remained for a lengthening stay.

Sarah King played happily with Scott and Fred Finefield and their sisters until Mrs. King died. What was to become of the young orphan? It was decided that she would accompany the Finefield girls to Muscatine, where they could all learn the millinery trade. The city on the shore of the Mississippi River held many attractions; too many, in fact, for carnivals and showboats would tie up at the wharf to offer the community a glimpse into what many considered to be a sinful

life. Sarah simply would go to the shows; there was no keeping her away, and her relatives feared the worst. Nevertheless, it was a distinct shock when they heard that she was actually going to join a carnival. One of the female players had fallen ill, and there was a chance for Sarah to learn the part and get a billing on the posters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The parting was cold; the stubborn girl may not actually have been told never to darken the family door again, but she was made to feel that she was bringing disgrace upon them all. It was some time before they heard from her again, but she did write John Finefield. He never answered. From devious sources he heard how she had left the carnival to attend a French convent in St. Paul and had later departed from there for France. After that came a long gap. At last out of the void there materialized the renowned Sarah Bernhardt of Paris. The relatives had always been alert to the success of any actress named Sarah. They inspected the pictures of this Divine Sarah, read the lavish press agent notices, and decided collectively that she was their long-lost cousin and aunt.

The Finefields bided their time, for in those days all great troupers visited Iowa if only for a farewell appearance. And sure enough, one night Sarah Bernhardt played at Davenport. The Finefields took care to be there, accompanied by some friends who remembered little Sarah King.

As the audience thrilled and chilled at the joys and anguish of *Camille*, the Finefields commented on a fancied resemblance of the leading lady to Norah Briggs, Sarah King's niece. Scott Finefield sent his name to the stage door, but received no invitation to enter. Persistent, he went to the train station, hoping to encounter the actress as she stepped into her own private car. He learned with dismay that the car had not arrived at the station, but had been sidetracked some distance beyond the city limits. When sought out, the porter of the car said the proceeding was a mystery to him; he had served Sarah Bernhardt for several years and she had never done a thing like that before—seemed as though she didn't want to be bothererd by any admirers. It looked as though the assembled friends and relatives of Sarah King would not have

a chance to meet the French actress face to face. And they never did. Then came the astounding episode of the veiled lady, the box of roses, and the country cemetery. It all added up to an increasingly popular legend.

Several explanations may be offered:

The veiled lady's visit to Mrs. King's grave may have been a mere coincidence, bolstered by wishful thinking to a delightful theory.

The veiled lady may actually have been Sarah King and Sarah Bernhardt, in one person.

Or she may have been Sarah Bernhardt, but not Sarah King. Suppose that the girl from Rochester and Muscatine had joined Sarah Bernhardt's entourage, performed some service or endeared herself in such a way that the great French actress went out of her way to lay flowers at Mrs. King's grave.

Or she may have been Sarah King, but not Sarah Bernhardt. She may have been traveling in some capacity with the French actress, taking the opportunity to pay tribute to her deceased mother and seeing Rochester again, without being recognized. If she had indeed been a friend and protegee of Bernhardt, the Divine Sarah might have gone to any length to protect her from visitors and questions.

Probably no one will ever know the truth, but the story, as it stands, provides a pleasing basis for conjecture.

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YULE TIDE CAKE

From Sister Anna's *Wartime Note Book*, 1865

Place a pound of fresh butter in a pan, keep it near the fire till melted; stir into it a pound of powdered loaf sugar, a good tablespoonful each of beaten allspice and cinnamon; by degrees put in the yolks of ten eggs and their whites separately whisked to a froth, add one pound of candied citron peel sliced thin, two pounds of currants cleaned and dried, two ounces of blanched sweet almonds, a pound to a pound and a half of flour; mix well and bake for three hours.

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