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A HARPIST WHO CALLED HERSELF A "GYP WATER PRODUCTION"

The Roaring 20's:



Mignon Faith Laird

When A Western Oklahoma Broadway Star Shone Her Brightest

By Donita L. Shields

Memorial services were held on Monday, May 27, 1985, for Mignon Faith Laird at the Mignon Laird Airport west of Cheyenne, Oklahoma. Many early-day Western Oklahomans remember Mignon as the beautiful, talented daughter of Dr. Henri C. and Elbertine Hutcheson Laird, who lived and traveled in their private Pullman car "Mignon" during the early 1900's. WESTVIEW readers may also remember the article about the Lairds that was published in our Premiere Edition back in 1981.

Dr. Laird was widely known as a pioneer doctor of chronic ailments as well as for his painless pulling of teeth. When the family's "Mignon" pulled onto the railroad siding at a prairie town's depot, people from miles around came to enjoy the Lairds' entertaining shows which were a prelude to the doctor's medical feats.

Even though the Lairds spent most of their time in numerous small towns, they also proved homestead rights on a quarter section of land 1½ miles west of Cheyenne. Mignon sold this property to the Town of Cheyenne Airport Authorities in 1967 to be used for the airport named in her honor. She made plans then that her remains would be scattered across its surface by a Cheyenne Indian chief riding horseback at full gallop.

When Mignon made her last pilgrimage to Western Oklahoma in April, 1982, she finalized these plans in her Last Will and Testament. The Town of Cheyenne elected Reverend Lawrence Hart of the Kiononia Menonite Church east of Clinton to fulfill her last wishes.

Ms. Laird bequeathed all her real and personal property to the Mignon Laird Airport, the Minnie R. Slief Library, and the Black Kettle Museum in Cheyenne. She also requested that a six-foot-tall red granite monument be erected at the airport in memory of her father, mother, her brother Clifford Irl, and herself.

W. W. Jones, the mayor of Cheyenne, proclaimed May 27, 1985, as Mignon Laird Day. During the commemorative services, members of the Cheyenne Airport Commission unveiled this Memorial. Both the library and the museum opened their doors during the holiday for a two-hour showing of Mignon's harp, her jewelry, and other personal possessions. (Many of the Lairds' memorabilia are on display. Other materials will be added at a later date as space is made available.)

Mignon Laird will always be remembered as a talented musician, a dramatist and singer, and a solo harpist and acrobatic dancer in the Ziegfield Frolics and Follies, the famous Strand Theater Roof, the Billie Rose Supper Club, the Everglades, and the Public Theater Productions of New York City. She was a member of the Board of Directors of Ziegfield Club, Inc., for several years after her retirement.

Mignon was born in Oklahoma City on April 7, 1904, and began her theatrical career when she was twenty months old. Her parents billed her as "Baby Mignon," and she immediately became a sensation in the Laird Refined Repertoire Show. According to early-day newspaper clippings, Mignon may have been a child prodigy.

She could count and knew most of the alphabet when she was sixteen months old and entertained her au-



diences by reading the alphabet and picking out letters. According to Mignon, her father, who was skilled in sign language, communicated with her with his fingers and hands. It can be surmised that Mignon was indeed a bright two-year-old, or she wouldn't have responded to this type of communication.

When she was three years old, Mignon became the star of Lairds' traveling show with a wooden shoe dance, a buck-and-wing dance, and a butterfly song and dance complete with colored spotlights and beautiful costuming. At age seven, Mignon was described as the most accomplished child of her age playing in vaudeville at that time.

During her childhood years, Mignon's parents taught her singing, dancing, and dramatics as well as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Her brother, a professional harpist trained in St.

Louis, was her first mentor on the harp and piano. Prior to moving to New York in 1921, Mignon attended the University of Oklahoma one semester where she made A's in two courses of vocal training.

It has been said that Will Rogers introduced Mignon to Florenz Ziegfield in 1921. Mr. Ziegfield was impressed with her beauty and childlike innocence and hired her immediately for a solo part in his Ziegfield Frolics. Mignon took pride in the fact that she was always a Ziegfield solo star. She was too small ever to become one of the "ponies" in dancing chorus lines.

Soon after her arrival in New York City, Mignon became a student of Theodore Crea, the master of Terpsichorean dancing. In September, 1923, she was recognized as Crea's most outstanding pupil in acrobatic dancing. New York's THEATER AND DANCING magazine described Mignon as having "a wonderful ability as a high kicker" possessing the rare accomplishment of being able to kick straight up while holding her body in a perfectly straight yet graceful position.

In 1924, Mignon signed a two-year contract with the Strand Theater. Her brother provided harp music to accompany her unsurpassed acrobatic dancing act. NEW YORK TELEGRAM called Mignon one of the most talented dancers seen on Broadway. She was a "comer" in all respects--appearance, personality, and genuine talent and beauty.

The following year (1925) Mignon developed a solo act with her harp and dancing. Her presentation, the "Pirate Dance," held her audiences spellbound with acrobatic specialties. She became a full-fledged Broadway star at this point, and her name flashed in sparkling electric lights above the renowned Strand Theater Roof.

Within three years she had made it to the top of Broadway with her high-stepping, classical, acrobatic evolutions. Her original twelve-minute act was distinctive and difficult to duplicate. She tied herself in knots, came out of them successfully, and then played the harp for relaxation.

BILLBOARD MAGAZINE, the best-known publication of theater and dancing, described Mignon as taking New York by storm--as one of the best and most attractive dancers that ever appeared before footlights--and as the highest paid star in the show's cast.

VAUDEVILLE NEWS wrote that

she broke the record for consecutive performances--"As of May 18, 1925, Mignon Laird celebrated her 60th week without a layoff--double dating Paul Smith's 'Keep Cool' Company and Earl Lindsay's 'Folly Girls' in addition to her nightly duties atop the Strand Roof."

While receiving raves and roses, Mignon remained the unpretentious and simple girl from Western Oklahoma prairies. Her advice to those wishing careers in acrobatic dancing was merely

"start young, work hard, and be graceful."

She often said, "My head is as busy as the rest of me when I'm dancing. Those who say a dancer's brains are in her feet don't know what they are talking about. I must think of my audience and what pleases them. I can't let my doubt of a certain step show. I must show assurance. An audience likes to think everything is easy for the dancer."

Mignon made her Metropolitan Debut as Premier Dancer at Billy Rose's new

Supper Club in January, 1926, where she entertained for seventeen consecutive weeks. During this period, she registered her original "Harp Dance," a novelty creation, with the NVA (National Vaudeville Association) Protected Material Department.

The billing registration explained that her act consisted of playing a concert-sized harp while standing and doing a contortionist Oriental Dance in front of and around the harp. She used the instrument throughout the dance



as a pagan object of worship. Her only prop consisted of an idol fastened to the crown of the harp.

Then came John Murray Anderson's Publix Production "The Grecian Urn" in which she starred with her harp solo and original dance. This presentation was based on John Keats' poem "The Grecian Urn" and was heralded as the most beautiful of Anderson's brilliant stage creations. The press acclaimed Mignon Laird as one of the country's most talented dancers and as one of the

most prominent dancers in New York City.

However, "The Grecian Urn" was doomed to be short-lived. VARIETY took a critical stand, saying that the entertainment was not the type to provide an audience with novelty and joy. Critics stated that it did fairly well at the opening, but then the orchestra got lost. VARIETY called "The Grecian Urn" a weak sister for the simple reason that the average audience cared little about Keats.

Before "The Grecian Urn" faded away, Mignon stepped into the Everglades nightclub with some real novelties and unusual costuming. In 1927, New York's MORNING STAR said she would be mistaken for an angel if she were equipped with a pair of wings, and that she was "capable of dancing and playing the angel's music box with the best of either class." In addition to her dancing and music at the Everglades, Mignon, a natural-born actor, began staging remarkable impersonations. Her versatility in the portrayal of Madame Nazemova in "A Woman of the Earth" became an overnight success.

Even when the nation's economy took a turn for the worse in 1930, Mignon's star continued to glow. She was a member of an entertainment troupe that toured all the largest cities in the United States and Canada. She constantly received top billings. Critics from theatrical and music circles lavished compliments such as:

BROOKLYN DAILY EAGLE: "She dances well and is the nicest to look at."

NEW YORK SUN "an extraordinarily incongruous novelty act."

NEW YORK EVENING GRAPHIC: "Mignon plays the harp well and dances even better...and offers an eccentric bit of acrobatics in her worship of the harp."

NEW YORK EVENING WORLD: "...a lady contortionist who plays the harp as it has never been played before."

Then the Depression hit. Mignon Laird became its victim as did many other stars—and never recovered. Her days of youthful beauty and supple dancing were lost forever. She became a member of Lamb's Club, a group organized to assist unemployed artists who produced their own show.

Her theatrical group, which was known as "The Satirists," came up with the smartest thing to hit New York that season, a production called "Who Cares." BILLBOARD described

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MONDAY EVENING

Poster from an early Lairds
show

"Who Cares" at Chanin's 46th Street Theater as lacking Flo Ziegfield's lavish costuming and John Murray Anderson's beautiful sets but making up these deficits with bright material and unusual talent. The press complimented "Who Cares" for attempting a daring experiment and succeeding. It was a success because it went a long way toward solving hardships resulting

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California heard him play and made tapes to put in the Folk Music Department of his college. Tapes of him and his band were sent to the Smithsonian Institute on request. On a visit to Hollywood, he played in a talent show and was offered a job on the spot, but Western Oklahoma was home.

For eight years, he has played with a group of retired people who entertain all over the country. They go regularly to four rest homes and occasionally to two more. Recently

they also played at a SWODA meeting in Hobart and at Cars Unlimited in Elk City.

If you knock on Joe's door, he's likely to greet you with a fiddle in his hand. He plays through his little black book of tunes once each week. Besides, his six fiddles need a regular workout. His prized possession at present is a five-string violin that Santa brought him.

Joe Flowers' music has been a pleasure to him and brought joy and inspiration to thousands. ❧

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from the extended period of inactivity and unemployment in legitimate theater.

Mignon helped make "Who Cares" notable by offering a dramatic presentation, a sort of female version of Harpo Marx, who was the non-speaking, harp-playing Marx Brother. As the season progressed, she also played the leading lady in a sketch called "Action." Her other dramatic roles included parts in "Daughter" and "A Big Surprise."

Mignon Laird took work when and where she could find it. She was a member of Shubert's cast of "Artists and Models," which made tours to Toronto, Chicago, and San Francisco. She signed a special contract with Florenz Ziegfeld and made another short run to major cities in cities in Canada.

However, the best opportunity that knocked on her door during the Depression was her winning three scholarships at the New York School of Music. The scholarship assistance allowed her to study harp with A. F. Pinto, the foremost harpist in New York City.

Her greatest problems at that time were food and transportation. More often than not, she had to walk miles for private lessons. Every penny was necessary for food for her mother and

herself. Riding the trolley was a luxury she couldn't afford. If she were lucky, she found dinner engagements in exchange for their meals. No one had extra money to pay salaries.

Even though Mignon's star may have dimmed on Broadway, she continued to be recognized by the press in classical music production. She and nine other brilliant harpists received their fair share of bookings. One of her most important engagements during the Depression was aboard the British BRITANIC on a cruise to the West Indies, Nassau, Kingston, and Havana in 1932. Mignon was the BRITANIC's highest paid musical artist. She and her mother were allowed to travel as first-class passengers. The thirty-day cruise was truly a paid working vacation far away from the dreary, dirty, and hungry streets of New York City.

During the 1930's, the theatrical world changed forever. Flo Ziegfeld's Frolics and Follies closed in 1932--never to reopen. Those nights of glitter, glory, and free-flowing money failed to return. Because of her multi-talents, Mignon usually found work; but her glorious ten years of fame and fortune became memories and yellowed clippings in meticulously kept scrapbooks compiled by Elbertine, her mother, and herself.

During the 1970's, she was among

the last of the Ziegfeld Girls who founded their Ziegfeld Club, Inc., in 1936, four years after the Follies ended on Broadway at 55 West 42nd Street. Of the original 2,000 girls, only 304 of them were still living in 1978, and they were scattered throughout the world.

Mignon Laird lived in the fourth-floor "Penthouse" at 19 West 46th Street in the heart of downtown New York City for sixty-three years. Her studio-apartment was fifty-five steep steps upward, and there was no elevator. It was here that she died alone on August 21, 1984. Her only known living relatives were two distant cousins in upstate New York. During her last lonely years, she always carried with her a favorite quotation written in her own spidery handwriting: "God be between you and harm in all the empty places you must walk."

She had no fear of the streets of New York City. New York had been good to her during the sparkling years of her stardom. Yet her deepest love was for the memories of her parents and her childhood when they traveled from town to town across the spacious, scenic countryside of Western Oklahoma.

Mignon called herself "A Gyp Water Production," and to the peaceful Western Oklahoma prairies she chose to return for her final performance. ❧