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THE SAGA OF Dr. H. C. Laird

— Donita Lucas Shields

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Stacy Riggs, grandson of Chief Black Kettle of the Cheyenne Indians, once made the statement at a pioneer celebration that "Cheyenne some time the greatest city in Oklahoma because she has so great history." Riggs was primarily referring to the Battle of the Washita, which alone provides a historical gold mine of material for the history buff. Even though Cheyenne is noted for Indians, soldiers, and cowboys, it abounds also with the silk and satin of romantic history.

Typical of the cultural beauty of Cheyenne is the life story of Dr. H. C. Laird and his family. In 1900 Dr. Laird and his beautiful wife Elbertine homesteaded on a quarter section of land one mile west of the little pioneer town. Dr. Laird, however, was more than an ordinary farmer seeking a good life for his family. In fact, he was not a farmer at all; he was a showman and a doctor. Yet he wished for a place to call his own, a permanent home, and somehow he actually did live a part of the years on his farm and did prove his claim.

However, Dr. Laird's deepest love was for the theatrical world, and with this love was mixed an even more powerful wanderlust which led him all over the country. He could never resist the glamour of the stage, the applauding crowds,

and the thrill of a successful performance. His talents lay in two areas: the entertainment world and the medical profession. Dr. Laird combined both to develop a remarkable reputation of being a great entertainer and an even greater doctor. Some even believed that he had magical qualities.

All agreed that Dr. Laird was truly a doctor, having passed his examination to practice medicine in 1908. Many claimed that he studied at Johns Hopkins University and that he was a very well-educated and learned man. Most of all he was remembered as being the Painless Dentist and the Lightning Tooth Puller. George Laidlow, a long-time friend of Dr. Laird who worked with him for more than twenty years, explained that Laird pulled teeth with his fingers.

Laidlow revealed, "Dr. Laird wouldn't give anaesthetic or use instruments. He'd just feel around, and the first thing you knew, the tooth was out."

Pulling teeth was a strange thing for which to remember a person, but thousands remembered Dr. Laird because of his painless dentistry even if it was merely a side line with him. He never accepted money for his miraculous dental feats. He made his living by treating his patients by day, and he enjoyed himself by providing free entertainment for people at night.



Dr. and Mrs. Laird began their medical-theatrical career by wagon and horseback. As they galloped into a country town, Mrs. Laird threw clay disks into the air, and he flourishingly blasted them to bits while riding at full speed. After such attention-getting ballyhoo gathered a crowd, the two presented their medicine show complete with singing and dancing. Mrs. Laird played the guitar, and he picked a banjo. Dr. Laird with his wife's assistance then brought forth his tonics and draughts while telling the entranced audience of great miracle cures.

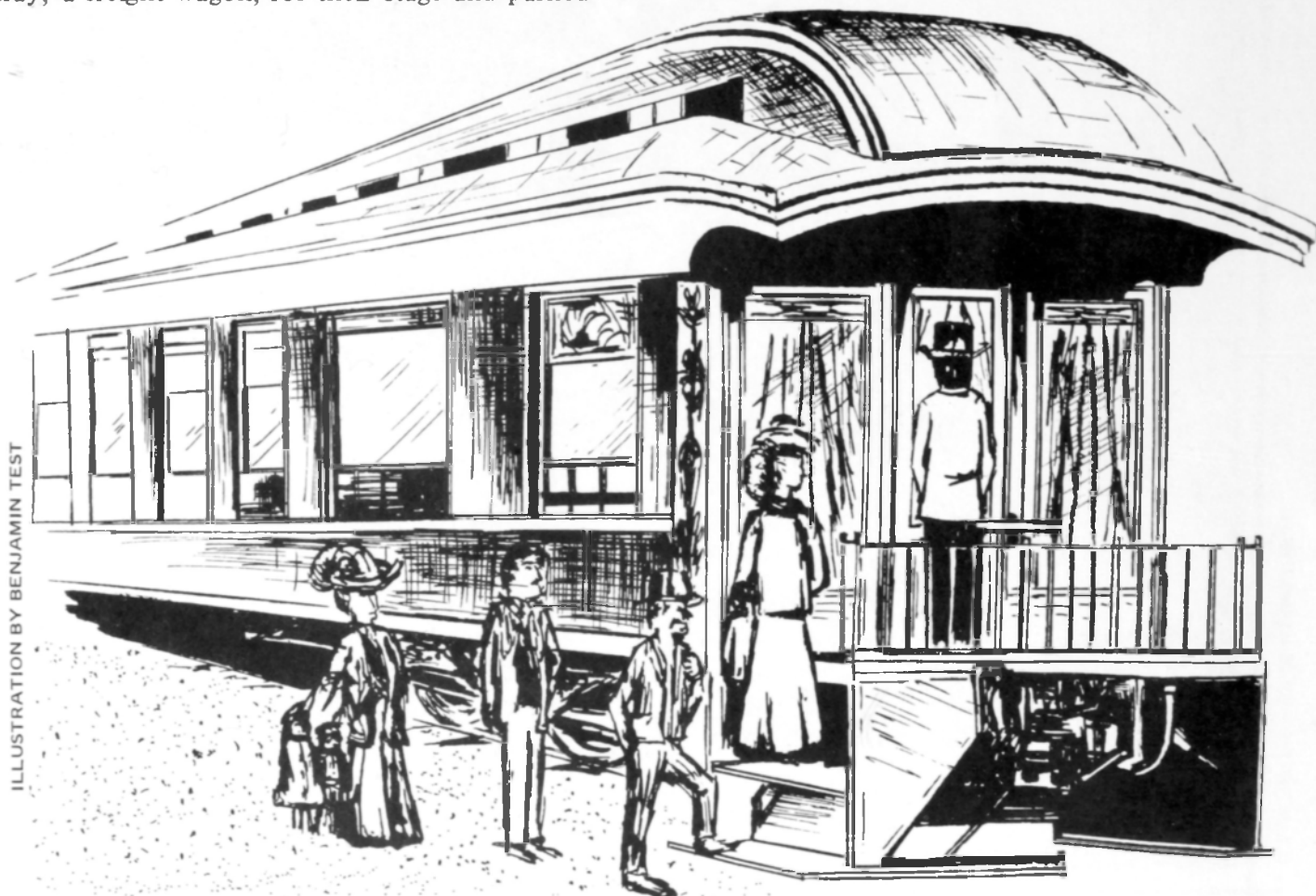
In later years after the advent of railroads, Dr. and Mrs. Laird became prosperous enough to purchase their own private Pullman car named "Mignon," which they always located on the siding near a town's depot. Sometimes they spent two weeks at a particular place. During the day Dr. Laird administered to the ailing at his office in the luxurious Pullman; then at night he and his wife presented singing, dancing, and novelty numbers.

A local fellow always volunteered his large dray, a freight wagon, for their stage and parked

it near their Pullman. Dr. and Mrs. Laird transformed the old wagon into the finest of stages, draped with velvets and adorned with Dr. Laird's bottles of tonics and linaments. At night they brilliantly lighted the stage with ornate gas lamps. Workers constructed makeshift benches of rough planks placed upon tiers of bricks stacked to the desired height, the typical pioneer out-door theater.

Dr. and Mrs. Laird graciously entertained the rough country folk with culture and beauty. Mrs. Laird, a gorgeous dark-haired beauty, glided onto the stage wearing the latest fashions of silks, satins, and ostrich plumes. She was a delightful singer and dancer. All early pioneer remembered and loved her most famous song, "The Bird in the Guilded Cage." Handsome Dr. Laird always wore a long black frock coat, a white ruffled shirt, a white hat, and cowboy boots. His curly dark hair grew below his should-

The Laird's Pullman Car, 'Mignon'.



ers, and he adorned himself with diamonds on his fingers and a huge diamond stickpin in his cravat. Early-day pioneers were astounded with their expensive splendor and responded by generously purchasing tonics, linaments, and ointments.

When the Lairds' little daughter Dottie and son Clifford became old enough, they joined their parents in the medicine shows. Dottie, a beautiful child with long black curls, was extraordinarily talented. Her dancing and singing instantly captured her audiences. Little Clifford, younger than his sister, became her singing and dancing partner until he retired at a young age to live with his grandparents.

As the years passed, the Lairds became an institution as they traveled throughout the country. Each night audiences expected and received something new and exciting from the gifted entertainers. As long as they remained in a town, the makeshift benches held a full house for the evening festivities, and Dr. Laird's Pullman office-home held a long line of patients waiting for his kind words and healing hands. Wherever the Lairds traveled, they cultivated lifelong friends and fond memories.

World War I then created vast changes in their life style. The U. S. government no longer allowed the Lairds to travel on the railroads from town to town since the war effort needed all available space in the trains. The Lairds parked their Pullman upon a spur line in Pauls Valley and attempted to become permanent citizens. However, sedentary life was not for Dr. Laird for he was a true traveling showman and doctor. Also, he and his wife realized that little Dottie was an usually gifted child. Therefore, the Laird saga does not end on that siding in Pauls Valley.

Because of their nomadic way of life, Dr. and Mrs. Laird had always been Dottie's only teachers. Being well-educated and highly-cultured themselves, their precocious daughter undoubtedly received the best of both the educational and the musical world. Dr. Laird was well-known for voicing his personal philosophy far ahead of its time concerning the child progressing and learning at his own rate. Dottie knew her letters and numbers at the age of two and read newspapers at four.

She was born in the Lairds' private Pullman and spent her toddling days with her parents on the dray-wagon stages of numerous towns, both large and small. She never knew the confine-

ment of hot, stuffy classrooms with ink-splattered desks. The entire country was her schoolroom, and the velvet-trimmed stage was her desk. Her father said on many occasions that schools merely "polished pebbles and dimmed diamonds." His little Dottie, of course, was a diamond.

With her parents' training, Dottie's career as a professional dancer actually began in the old Lyric Theater in Oklahoma City. Here critics first recognized that Dottie had potential for stardom. In 1922 Dr. and Mrs. Laird felt their daughter might be prepared for the opportunities of New York City. They traveled East with her, and at this time she became known to the theatrical world as Mignon Laird.

In New York City Mignon danced her way from vaudeville stages to the most exclusive clubs. She climbed onward to Broadway to become a dancer in Ziegfield Follies. Her name



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blazed forth in brilliant theatrical lights as she became famous as one of the greatest singers and dancers both on stage and in the movies. Mignon Laird, the country doctor's little girl who was born in a Pullman car and reared on dray wagons in the prairies of Oklahoma, continued her musical career even further by becoming a great harpist and a member of American Harp Society.

Both Dr. and Mrs. Laird lived with Mignon part of the time, and New York City gave her the first permanent home. However, Dr. Laird was still unable to settle down in one place. Mrs. Laird remained with Mignon, and he returned to Oklahoma in an ornately-decorated travel trailer. Dr. Laird would forever be the traveling entertainer and doctor who had to be on the move. There was no other way of life for him. Again he made his headquarters in Pauls Valley and continued to practice his profession. At one time there were as many as twenty-four entertainers in his troupe.

NOSTALGIA

Then early in June, 1939, Dr. Laird drove to Oklahoma City and parked his trailer home behind Hamburger Stand at 217 South Broadway. It was there he died on September 6th after a three-day illness at the age of eighty-three. Doctors said he died a natural death. He was surrounded by all his old show friends: the pitch men, the med men, the opsy men, and all the old troupers from the days of his golden glory.

His old friends paid tribute to him as they paused beside his remains. They recalled he was both a great musician and a fine medical man, an enviable combination in itself without his magic of painless dentistry. All remembered his fabulous stories about his many feats. Dr. Laird was a great talker and teller of anecdotes.

Yet few of these old friends knew much of his personal life. Some said he owned property all over Oklahoma, but no one was sure. All knew, however, that his travel home was filled with pictures, clippings, and mementos of his early days with his beloved family, his travel troupes, and his remarkable Mignon. All watched tearfully as the deputy sheriff securely locked the doors of his home until his wife and daughter from New York City and his son from St. Louis arrived to give their final tribute.

"Don't ever call Dr. Laird a med opsy man," warned one old friend. "He was a trouper all right, but to call his show a medicine show is like calling an electric light a candle."

Even after Dr. H. C. Laird's death, his saga continued. His story opened again on April 19,

1967, when his pioneer homestead quarter section became Mignon Laird Airport of Cheyenne. At the Fly-In Breakfast Ceremony Governor Henry Bellmon gave the dedication speech. Mignon returned from New York City for the occasion. She responded to her introduction at the ceremony as being recipient in reverse for her father's honors.

Mignon described the Cheyenne area as a tender symbol of her parents' young love and their dream of some day establishing a home upon the land of their choice. She continued by saying, ". . . Papa and Mama's dream of a permanent home was never realized, but instead it became a monument to transportation. . . the Laird destiny to be linked permanently with travel."

Cheyenne could never have given a more fitting monument for Dr. Laird, the showman and doctor who could never settle in one place. Nor could anything have been more fitting for his daughter Mignon who, according to Harp Journal, was the only harpist who already had her wings. For she, following in her father's footsteps, spent her life upon the wheels and wings of show business.

Neither Mignon nor Dr. Laird would have wished it any other way. In return Cheyenne's colorful history is made even more exciting by having been a part of the lives of those famous personalities. The memories of Dr. H. C. Laird and his family are almost as immortal to Cheyenne as are Chief Black Kettle and Battle of the Washita. ■

A glimpse of a possible relic of the future: A Rock Island boxcar. The outcome of this history-making railroad is currently in question.

PHOTO BY ANDREA LEACH

