

THE PIRATES DAUGHTER

By Frances Harrington

She was reported to have been born on the Mediterranean Sea, or was it the Atlantic Ocean, in 1825 or was it 1832? The product of a whirlwind romance and marriage between a young European aristocrat and a pirate of the open seas, or was he a Spanish officer *during* the time of the pirates? Anyway, whatever he was, they say the man's surname was Cladyne.

It was reported, that when the girl got old enough, her parents changed her name, and sent her to be educated in a French convent. After the death of her father in the 1830s, because they were very rich, her mother took the family fortune of \$175,000 (equivalent to about \$5.5 million today) and her children, and left for America where she had friends. They say she bought a large plantation near St. Louis, Missouri, and owned a few slaves, or was it 101 slaves? Anyway, sometime later, but before the Civil War, her mother joined the abolitionist movement. It was also reported, that because of her new beliefs, her mother gave each of her slaves two sets of clothes, \$5 (about \$170.00 today), and gave them their freedom. Two of the slaves, who were old family servants, were given enough money to last a year and passage back to Liberia.

It was also reported, that the young girl got an excellent education in a convent school in America. Besides English, she learned to speak four languages fluently, or was it six languages she learned to speak? She was said to be beautiful, stylish, and the "belle of the ball" in the wealthy social circles of St. Louis. As time went on, she became bored with her life there and left to see other parts of the country. She finally made it to Washington D. C. where she became a government interpreter, or was it a cook in the White House, or was it a stenographer in the Treasury Department? After the Civil War broke out, she reportedly became a nurse on the front lines, or was it a spy for the Union Army? Either way they say, later in life, she received a quarterly pension from the government.

After the war, according to some reports, she was a ballerina, or was it a singer, at the famous Crosby's Opera House in Chicago? And, did she really take part in the musical "Black Crook" (which is said to be the first musical in the U. S.) and then travel to South America with this entertainment troupe?

Some reports say, that at some point, she married John J. Whitcomb or was his name William "Billy" Whitcomb? They were married in Kalamazoo, or was it somewhere down south? After he deserted Lou and their young daughter, she moved around a lot, and started getting into trouble. She ended up moving by herself to Grand Rapids, Michigan, leaving her daughter with friends. It was reported, that she always sent money for the daughter's upkeep until she was grown. Another report said she and her husband moved to Muskegon and lived here for some years, but people in Muskegon who knew her, say she came here alone to make a "fresh start".

So, have all these different "reports" confused you yet? While researching this woman, it sure confused me. Every report about her earlier life was a little different from the one before. In

one article, they reported, that she didn't like talking about her past, so, where did these reporters get all this information about her life - a pirate's daughter, a child of aristocracy, Spanish, German, a ballerina, a singer, a cook, an interpreter, fluent in many languages, a stenographer, a nurse, a spy, etc. etc. She also, reportedly, gained and lost several fortunes in her lifetime. If that was true, it was obviously before she came to Muskegon. In all the accounts of her early days, I could not find *one time* when she, herself, was actually being interviewed.

I tried to find any record of this woman before she came to Muskegon, but I couldn't find anything! Granted, my resources are limited, but you would have thought I'd find something, somewhere. So, who was this pirate's daughter? (I think most of the reporters went with the "pirate's daughter" story because it sounded more exciting than the "officer's daughter".)

What I did find out, (mostly from notices in the Chronicle and not the romanticized stories) was that she was a very sad and troubled woman. Yes, she was well-known throughout Muskegon, for many years, but not for the reasons you think she was. You see, this woman had a terrible addiction – to alcohol. Her name, or should I say the names she used were, Agnes Whitcomb, AKA Lou Whitcomb, AKA "Spanish Lou". Her nick-name, Spanish Lou, was what most people called her, or knew her by. That was the name that was used in almost every article or mention of her I found, and there were plenty! How did she get the name "Spanish Lou"? Apparently, when sober, she acted like a very refined woman, and obviously, very well educated. But, when she drank, which was quite often, if she felt you disrespected her in anyway, she not only cussed you out in English, but in Spanish too, showing her feisty Spanish side, hence, "Spanish Lou". One reporter put it this way, "If jeered at or addressed slightly, she would turn loose vials of wrath, and had a vocabulary of epithets and profanity which would have made a Missouri mule driver green with envy".

One article in the Chronicle, written just after her death, says that she came to Muskegon in 1880, from Kalamazoo, Michigan, when she was about 50 years old. She was employed by Mrs. Mary Scouler, proprietor of the Muskegon House, (later, known as the Foalk Hotel) at 25 E. Clay Avenue, as a cook. There was evidence that she came to Muskegon with the intention of starting a new life, quitting the bad habits that had already taken their toll on her. She managed to stay sober for about three months after she got here, but then she started drinking again, and she was fired from her job. I think, Muskegon in the 1880s, with its abundance of saloons, was a bad place for anyone with a drinking problem, who was trying to stay sober. After that, she reportedly worked as a cook for a number of the other boarding houses in town but she never stayed gainfully employed for long because of her drinking. There were many boarding houses/hotels, or resorts/brothels in Muskegon for all those mill workers to stay and/or be entertained. Unfortunately, there were also plenty of saloons where they could spend all that hard earned money. The places Lou would have worked were definitely not your "high class" establishments. One article put it this way, she was "always sinking lower in her associations because of her intemperate habits", and, "her refuge was the disorderly resorts of the city", in other words, houses of prostitution.

I found many mentions of her going to jail in Muskegon, or to the House of Corrections in Detroit, for being: drunk, a “common tippler”, disorderly, intoxicated, drunk & disorderly, committing petty larceny, and prostitution. Sometimes, she would walk to the jail after a drunken incident because she knew she would be arrested anyway. There were other times where she simply walked up to an officer and ask to be taken to jail. This might have been for her own protection, because I also saw reports of her being physically assaulted or maybe, she just needed a warm bed. Whatever the reason, sometimes, they would let her stay over-night, releasing her in the morning, often without making a formal report. Other times, they would find her passed out on the street or too intoxicated to walk and arrest her on the spot.

Apparently, she could be quite the character. There were reports that said, after receiving her sentences, she was always polite and thanked the Judges. Once, after getting out of jail, she even sent flowers to the judge who sentenced her. Apparently, she wasn’t as polite to all the officers, because one time, she went to jail for 90 days for verbally assaulting the Assistant Police Chief. Another time, she was in jail in Muskegon and transported to Grand Rapids to be a witness in a separate trial. Somehow, during the lunch break, (without the officer guarding her noticing) she managed to get drunk. She ended up spending that night in jail in Grand Rapids instead of being transported back to Muskegon. On one occasion, the judge told her, he wouldn’t send her to jail *if* she left town. She made it as far as Grand Rapids, but decided to come back, and eventually, was arrested again. It would almost be comical, if it weren’t so tragic, that this otherwise, kind and intelligent woman’s life, was ruined because of her addiction.

It was reported in the Chronicle, that for twenty years, she had spent every Christmas in jail. The Grand Rapids Press wrote, “she was a woman with a checkered past that would fill pages,” and, “she served 50 terms in the county (Muskegon) jail and entered the doors of the Detroit House of Corrections 20 times.” Her sentences ranged anywhere from overnight in jail, to a year in prison. Most often, she did the time because she couldn’t pay the fines. No matter how long she was without a drink (because of her incarceration) it wouldn’t be long after she got out, that her addiction took hold of her again. As she got older, she would beg from people on the streets. The merchants started to complain, not because of her begging, but because of how angry and belligerent she became if people didn’t give her anything. The last mention I find of her being arrested is in December of 1906, when, according to the Chronicle, she was found “sleeping the sleep of the unjust” at the lower end of Marshall Street, after being reported missing from the County Home. She was so intoxicated that the Police Chief had to “load” her into the wagon to take her to the jail. The next morning, the judge sentenced her to 30 days.

All that I read about Lou makes me wonder what her early life was really like. What painful events caused her to turn to drinking to try to blot them out? Were any of the stories about her younger days even true, or were they just that - stories she told to hide the ugliness of a life she would rather forget? I guess we’ll never know.

On January 9, 1908, Agnes Lou Whitcomb (AKA Spanish Lou), was walking down Terrace Street when she fell, hitting her head. When she didn't get up, the men nearby, assuming she was drunk again, called for the police instead of a doctor. She told the men, "Goodbye boys, my time has come" and before medical attention arrived, she was dead. She was completely sober at the time. Lou was anywhere from 76 to 83 years old – no one knows for sure. Her death record said, "dropped dead on street – heart trouble" but no post mortem was done. No one ever met her daughter or mentioned her by name, and she didn't show up for Lou's funeral, so it's doubtful she even existed.

After her death, I found articles in papers across the mid-west. Like I said earlier, each one had a little different story about the life of the pirate's daughter from Muskegon, "Spanish Lou".

Over two hundred people showed up for Lou's funeral. I'm curious as to how many of those people had even bothered to say hello to her when they saw her on the street. More likely than not, they only came to see the infamous "Spanish Lou", the character who was mentioned so many times over the years, in the Muskegon Chronicle. Her funeral was held at the Salvation Army Hall with Captain Vandeville conducting the service. During her eulogy, he shared how, several days before her death, Lou had become a Christian. She was buried at Oakwood Cemetery, in an unmarked grave that was probably donated by a friend - Georgia Steiner, proprietor of a number of boarding houses, with whom Lou had lived, on and off, over the years.

Sources: News articles from Genealogybank.com, Ancestry.com, Muskegon Cemetery Dept., Lou's picture is from the Grand Rapids Press (1902) courtesy of the Grand Rapids Library.

