

Mysterious “Mme. Annette” interviewed all—from jailbirds to society matrons

At the turn of the last century, when newspapers ruled the media roost and Bloomington had two thriving dailies, the city’s best reporter might have been The Bulletin’s Madame Annette.

“Mme. Annette,” as she signed her columns, profiled early settlers; interviewed touring actresses; chatted on matters of makeup and fashion; discoursed on new novels and literary trends; reported on social issues like poverty; and visited scenes of local interest, such as the west side coal mine and the county jail.

Annette’s short but productive local journalism career left us with a number of richly detailed sketches of lives lived in Bloomington circa 1900.

Unfortunately, little is known of Annette’s own life. The 1899 Bloomington City Directory lists a Mrs. Anna Ferguson living at 212 1/2 E. Washington St. and working as a writer for The Bulletin. Given the relatively few female reporters at the time, this Anna Ferguson must be the enigmatic Mme. Annette. Further proof can be found in the 1900 U.S. Census, where there’s an Annette Ferguson with the occupation “special writer for paper” living in Bloomington. The Census also tells us that this Ferguson was a 40-year-old widow with no children, born in April 1860 in Iowa.

It’s not known what happened to her husband, though in one column she makes a passing reference to “deploring the fate” that made her a “busy woman” (or what would be called a career woman today). Several crack volunteer genealogists with the McLean County Museum of History tried to find additional information on Annette, but to no avail.

Mme. Annette’s columns for The Daily Bulletin—some of which would run 2,000 words in length—were eminently readable, combining shrewd, worldly observations with cheerful optimism and respect for her journalistic subjects. The Bulletin, a paper for those with Catholic, west side and Democratic Party proclivities (compared to the Republican Pantagraph), enjoyed a 45-plus-year run before being absorbed by its competitor in the late 1920s.

In a representative column appearing in July 1900, Annette let local resident L.M. Temple tell the Twain-like story of how a con artist calling himself Colonel Lord Houghton visited Bloomington in the early 1850s. Pretending to be the scion of a wealthy English family, he borrowed money for a never-realized bank scheme, bilking some prominent locals in the process. The no-good cheat skedaddled, managing to outrun authorities until caught and arrested in St. Louis. “Strange what a title will do in every phase of life, isn’t it?” mused Temple. “And especially strange that a title weighs so effectively on the impressions of Americans, otherwise the most independent people on earth.”

A column from February 1899 detailed Annette’s visit to the McLean County Jail, an imposing brick “Bastille” then located at the southwest corner of Madison and Monroe streets. “They are allowed to play cards, read aloud to each other, and hobnob in the big corridor from early morning till 7 in the evening,” she wrote of the 27 prisoners. Morning and evening meals consisted of “hash and bread and sometimes syrup,” while “dinner” (that is, late lunch) featured boiled meat and vegetables.

During her visit she met George Waterman, an African-American of “undetermined age” who went by the moniker “Frisco Shine.” Across the hall from Waterman was a man known as “Peggy,” so called because of his wooden leg. She also met two professional horse thieves and an Englishman of Irish descent, the latter a jailhouse radical griping about “not enough to eat, and oppression, and giving a man no chance to reform.” Annette, progressive yet wise to the ways of the world, looked at these prisoners with droll suspicion.

A column from the same month offered a leisurely chat with Mary C. Spencer, the 80-year-old widow of former Chicago & Alton Railroad president Hamilton Spencer. Annette allowed her subject to summon up the bygone days six decades past when she attended private school in New Haven, CT. School life was strict and austere, though not always without its charms. “A favorite thing in my day was the serenade,” Mrs. Spencer told Annette. “We always had flowers in our rooms to throw from our windows to the serenading young callers from the garrison. The favorite instruments were the guitar and flute.”

Writing 20 years before passage of Nineteenth Amendment that extended suffrage to women, Annette favored the rights of the “fairer sex” to engage in the public issues of the day. That said, she was not above earnestly reflecting on the latest beauty and fashion news.

Her “beauty bureau” columns featured readers with pseudonyms like “Helen Heyworth” and “Summer Girl” asking advice on topics ranging from complexion brushes to acne. In an age before the widespread commercial manufacture of beauty products, Annette would offer elaborate “recipes” to prepare homemade toiletries like shampoo, suntan lotion and even a bleaching compound to lighten “hirsute appendages in these days of elbow sleeves.”

What happened to Madame Annette? Where did she go? Did she remarry? Did she have children? Where did she die? Although we do not know the answer to these and other questions, we can only hope she kept on writing.

By: Bill Kemp, 2009