

## **Marie Litta (1856 – 1883)**

Marie Litta, originally named Marie Eugenia von Elsner, was born in Bloomington, Illinois, on June 1, 1856. She grew up in a musical family with her father, Professor Hugo von Elsner, a musician from Germany, and her mother, Amanda Dimmitt, whose family were some of the first settlers in Bloomington. Marie was the oldest of five children.

Marie showed a strong talent for music from a young age, getting her musical abilities from her father and her beautiful voice from her mother. Her father was determined that she would become a world-famous singer, and he trained her himself at first. Later, he hired professional voice teachers to help Marie reach her full potential. She made her first public performance when she was just five years old, singing "Tis the Last Rose of Summer" for a group of Union soldiers in Springfield, Illinois. Her sweet voice left a strong impression on the audience.

To help Marie gain more recognition, her father took her to Chicago, New York, and Cleveland when she was around fourteen years old. She performed in each city and received great praise, especially in Cleveland, where many people were of German descent. There, she met Dr. John Underner, the head of a music conservatory, who offered to train her further. At about age sixteen, Marie signed a five-year contract with Dr. Underner to continue her voice training.

By 1879, after years of performing and studying in Cleveland, Marie became so loved there that the people of the city claimed her as their own. However, Marie made sure to express her deep love for Bloomington, calling it her true home in a letter to a local newspaper.

In 1874, at the age of eighteen, Marie traveled to Europe to continue her training. She auditioned in London and studied in Paris, where she eventually made her debut at the Theatre des Italiens in 1878. She adopted the stage name "Marie Litta" to avoid any anti-German sentiment in France after the Franco-Prussian War. Her performance in Paris was a huge success, and she quickly became famous across Europe.

In 1878, after her success in Paris, Marie returned to Bloomington for a visit, where she was honored with a reception and a concert. The people of her hometown were so proud of her that they raised money to build a cottage for her mother. Marie performed again in the U.S. in 1878 with the Max Strakosch Opera Company and became a major star in cities like Chicago, New York, and Boston.

Marie's fame continued to grow as she performed in Europe and North America, earning the nickname "Queen of Song." She even started her own concert company in 1880, touring major cities and receiving rave reviews. At the peak of her career, she was making the equivalent of about \$1.6 million a year today. Despite her success, Marie remained generous, sending gifts to her loved ones in Bloomington.

Sadly, the pressure of constant performances began to take a toll on Marie's health. In the spring of 1883, she became ill but continued to perform. After a concert in Escanaba, Michigan, she collapsed and was sent home to Bloomington. She passed away on July 7, 1883, at just 27 years old.

Marie's funeral was the largest Bloomington had ever seen, with over 12,000 people attending. Her gowns were cut into pieces and given to her fans as mementos. In her honor, a group of men raised funds to erect a monument to her at her burial site in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. The monument, made of Vermont granite, was dedicated to Marie's memory and stands as a symbol of her incredible musical talent and the love people had for her. The

inscription on the monument reads, "She was loved most for her pure and gentle life, and so loving hands weave roses with the laurel in her chaplet of fame."