

Minnie Saltzman-Stevens (1873-1950)

The story of Minnie Saltzman-Stevens is like a real-life fairy tale. She started out singing in a church choir in Bloomington, Illinois, and eventually became a famous opera singer in Europe. However, her career ended quickly due to a throat illness and the outbreak of World War I, after just six years.

Minnie was born in March 1873 to John and Minnie Saltzman, who were immigrants. Her mother was from Germany and her father, John, served as a bugler in the Civil War. After the war, he worked as a health officer and later as a janitor. They had five children, and Minnie was the youngest.

Minnie loved music from a young age, and her earliest memory was of her father singing. Sadly, he passed away when Minnie was just five. After graduating school at age fourteen, Minnie helped support her family by working in different jobs. She couldn't afford voice lessons, but she sang in her church choir, where her pastor noticed her talent. He offered to lend her the money for lessons, which she used to begin her vocal training.

Minnie started taking voice lessons in 1895, and later studied at Illinois Wesleyan University. She became a soloist in local church choirs and joined the Amateur Musical Club in Bloomington. This club helped her become more involved in music and inspired her to pursue a career in it.

In 1899, Minnie married Alexander Stevens, and they later moved to Crawfordsville, Indiana. She continued to improve her singing, and in 1903, she performed in "The Messiah" at Augustana College in Rock Island. Her husband encouraged her to study abroad, so in 1904, she traveled to Paris to study under a famous teacher named Jean de Reszke.

When she arrived in Paris, she was told by de Reszke that she wasn't a contralto (a lower female voice) but a dramatic soprano (a higher, powerful voice). With his help, she worked hard to develop her voice, eventually mastering complex roles from French and Italian operas. She also performed in Wagner's operas, particularly "Brünnhilde" from *The Ring Cycle*. This experience was a turning point, and she became determined to pursue this type of singing.

In 1908, Minnie made her big debut in London at Covent Garden, performing as "Brünnhilde." She was an instant success, and soon became famous across Europe. People were amazed by her powerful voice and her ability to perform in different languages. She continued to perform all over Europe, earning praise as one of the best Wagnerian singers of the time.

By 1910, she had become one of the top opera singers in Europe. Her hometown of Bloomington celebrated her success by organizing a concert in her honor. This "Homecoming Concert" in November 1910 was a huge event, and the audience was thrilled to see her perform. The concert raised over \$3,500 (about \$92,000 in 2020), and Minnie donated a portion of it back to the community to help buy a grand piano for the local music club.

Minnie's rise to fame was extraordinary, and her success in Europe made her a household name in both America and Europe. Sadly, her career was cut short due to illness, but her story remains an inspiring example of how hard work and talent can lead to success.

After a short visit to Bloomington, Saltzman-Stevens went back to Europe. While there, she performed in Madrid, Spain, and Bayreuth, Germany, playing "Sieglinde" in *Die Walküre* and "Kundry" in *Parsifal*. In August 1911, while performing in London, Andrea Dippel, the manager of the Chicago Grand Opera Company, heard her impressive voice and quickly signed her to a three-year contract. She was announced to perform in Chicago for the upcoming winter season.

Saltzman-Stevens made her American debut in *Die Walküre* as "Brunhilde" with the Chicago Grand Opera Company on December 21. She received great reviews, with the Chicago Tribune praising her beautiful voice, which had power, range, and a sympathetic quality. She impressed the audience and showed she was a worthy performer alongside more experienced artists. Many of her fans from Bloomington came to see her perform in Chicago, and she expressed her gratitude in a letter to them, thanking them for their support and the beautiful flowers they sent.

As the reviews of her performances spread, fans from across the United States began attending her shows. By 1914, she had performed in places like Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Portland, and Kansas City. In San Francisco, she played the role of "Isolde" in *Tristan and Isolde*, and critics praised her portrayal for its tenderness and passion.

In December 1913, she performed in Indianapolis, playing "Sieglinde" in *Die Walküre*. The Indianapolis Star called her one of the greatest Wagnerian sopranos of her time, highlighting her unique ability to sing both the contralto role of "Brunhilde" and the soprano role of "Sieglinde."

In the summer of 1914, while performing in Los Angeles, Saltzman-Stevens had a special moment when she sang for Helen Keller, who was both deaf and blind. During the performance, Keller placed her fingers on Saltzman-Stevens's lips and said she could hear the high notes, which amazed everyone in the theater.

Sadly, Saltzman-Stevens's career was cut short. In April 1914, she planned to travel to Italy to learn Italian and expand her performance repertoire. However, with the outbreak of World War I, anti-German sentiment spread across Europe, ending the staging of German operas. Saltzman-Stevens moved to Florence, Italy, where she could continue studying.

She stayed in Florence for the rest of her life, struggling with an illness that damaged her voice. This ended her career as a professional opera singer and affected her self-confidence. Her attorney, Joseph Bohrer, wrote in 1948 that her throat problems led to the end of her musical career.

Saltzman-Stevens's personal life was also marked by loss. Her husband, Dr. Alexander Stevens, died in 1921, and her mother passed away in 1925. Despite these losses, she continued living in Florence, managing her finances with the help of Bohrer. She missed her hometown of Bloomington but was unable to return because of the war and other challenges. Communication with friends and family became difficult during World War II, and she could only correspond through the American Red Cross.

In 1946, Saltzman-Stevens received the sad news of her sister Louise's death. She felt guilty for not being able to return home to care for her sister, but she was grateful for the support of her Bloomington friends. Later, in 1948, she took legal action against Columbia Pictures after a photo of her was used in a movie without her permission. The case was long and difficult, and she eventually settled for a smaller amount than she hoped for.

On January 25, 1950, Saltzman-Stevens died quietly in her sleep at her apartment in Milan, Italy. Her death was caused by heart failure and fluid buildup. Her attorney, Joseph Bohrer, was the first to hear the news. In her will, she left much of her estate to Arthur Stevens Taylor, the son of her business manager. After her death, her belongings were given to friends and neighbors. Her body was returned to Bloomington, and she was buried on February 27, 1950, at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. A memorial service was held later that day at the home of her close friend, Florence Fifer Bohrer.