

## Sophia Huggins 1832-1903

*Much of what is known about Sophia Huggins is based on two newspaper interviews: one with the Daily Pantagraph and the other with the Daily Bulletin.*

Sophia Roundtree Huggins was born in Kentucky on May 4, 1832.<sup>1</sup> According to Sophia her mother was Native American and her father was a Frenchman named Captain Roundtree. Sophia was the youngest of seven children. She claimed that her mother was 67 years old at the time of her birth. In an interview with a reporter from the *Daily Pantagraph*, Sophia was described later in her life as “a colored woman...large and heavy set, has a broad face, square jaws, a rather prominent nose and small black eyes. Her hair is but a trifle kinky and black, with here and there a gray hair. She looks more like an Indian squaw than one of Africa’s daughters.”<sup>2</sup> Sophia was always very vocal with the fact that there was “not a drop of Negro blood” flowing through her veins,” though most documents list her as either colored, black, or mulatto.<sup>3</sup> Sophia said her early life was spent near Indian Territory (possibly near the modern state of Oklahoma) and Iowa when the only inhabitants were Indians with the exception of the American and French traders. “I went to school when I was older when the opportunity presented itself...I speak French even better and easier than my own tongue, but do not read it. I speak in all seven languages but read none but American.”<sup>4</sup>

It is not known exactly when and why Sophia came to Bloomington. Prior to moving to Bloomington, it appeared that she was living in Springfield, IL around 1850. By the next year, she was in Bloomington and married John H. Huggins (also spelled Hugins) on October 23, 1851.<sup>5</sup> They were married by Reverend P.N. Ward.<sup>6</sup> They had at least two children; a daughter named Sophia (born about 1860<sup>7</sup>) and a son named Isaac (born on March 4, 1865<sup>8</sup>). In 1855 John was working as a laborer and Sophia as a seamstress. At that time they were living on the corner of Boon and Clay Streets.<sup>9</sup>

In July of 1863, her husband John enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War. He joined the 55th Regiment Massachusetts Colored Infantry which was one of the first Union regiments that African American soldiers could serve in during the Civil War. At one time, he was stationed at Morris Island in South Carolina where he was a Quarter Master’s Sergeant. A short time later he became ill and was sent to a hospital in Detroit, Michigan and from there was sent back to Bloomington to recuperate. However, his condition did not improve and he died on

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<sup>1</sup> Tombstone of Sophia Huggins, Evergreen Memorial Cemetery, Bloomington, Illinois

<sup>2</sup> “Speak For Yourself: A Pantagraphit Adventurer Penetrates the Domicile of Dame Huggins,” *The Daily Pantagraph* September 28, 1881

<sup>3</sup> Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future,” *The Daily Bulletin*, May 26, 1899

<sup>4</sup> Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future.”

<sup>5</sup> Illinois State Wide Marriage Index for John H. Hugins and Sophia Roundtree, <http://www.ilsos.gov/isavital/marriage>

<sup>6</sup> McLean County Marriage Index, Volume C, page 29.

<sup>7</sup> 1870 United States Federal Census, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

<sup>8</sup> *McLean County Cemetery Records Volume 13: Bloomington Township Cemeteries, Old City, Bloomington, Some Evergreen* p. 85

<sup>9</sup> J.R. Freese, M.D. *1855 Bloomington City Directory*

February 28, 1864 from camp diarrhea.<sup>10</sup> He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery (in the section then known as Old City Cemetery) in Bloomington. Sophia never remarried.<sup>11</sup>

Sophia claimed to be a clairvoyant and made a living using her psychic powers.<sup>12</sup> A clairvoyant is a person who is “able to see images of people, places or things in their mind’s eye”<sup>13</sup> and then described their vision during the reading using senses other than the known human senses. Clairvoyants are not fortune tellers and do not foretell the future, however a reading may involve the future. A good clairvoyant will validate things that have happened in the past and things that are happening in the present. They do this by asking the person who is receiving the reading questions that encourage that person to offer information about them. The clairvoyant will use that information to give the person seeking information the answer they want.<sup>14</sup>

In an 1899 interview with Madame Annette from the *Daily Bulletin* newspaper, “Aunt Sophia” (as she was known to many) claimed to have received her psychic powers when she was born. She asserted that she was “born with a veil over my face, with the power to read lives and see things unknown to other people.”<sup>15</sup> However, in an earlier interview with the *Daily Pantagraph*, she stated that she received her psychic powers at the age of 12.<sup>16</sup> In any case, she touted the fact that she was consulted by “kings and princes with great success.”<sup>17</sup> She also said that she would go on fortune telling tours quite often and had been to “27 of the states and territories, and out of this country, either into Canada or across the big pond 20 times.”<sup>18</sup> When asked to show proof of these boasts, she produced an undated circular about her talents as a clairvoyant.<sup>19</sup>

Her clientele in Bloomington-Normal included “luckless swains, love-sick girls, unhappy husbands and wives, and businessmen in financial distress.”<sup>20</sup> Her prices ranged from one to ten dollars depending on how far she had to “send her mind away to get their past lives.”<sup>21</sup> She also stated that it cost “a half dollar extra for each sitting after two [had been] given, and sometimes, it takes a good many!”<sup>22</sup> Also, if she was not in the right frame of mind, the “day was too cloudy,” or if the person’s life was so bad that she could not bear to think of them, she would turn customers away, unwilling to read them.<sup>23</sup> She became a great curiosity to the people of Bloomington and many men and women sought her advice. Many residents referred to her as the Witch of Endor (a medium called on by King Saul to raise the spirit of Samuel to seek guidance in battle, in defiance to God).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. National Archives & Records Administration. Federal Military Pension Application of John H. Huggins, “Declaration of a Widow for Original Pension,” December 11, 1891

<sup>11</sup> 1866 Bloomington City Directory McLean County Gazzetter

<sup>12</sup> 1899 Bloomington-Normal City Directory

<sup>13</sup> “Medium, Clairvoyants and Psychics,” <http://www.mystic-mouse.co.uk>

<sup>14</sup> “Medium, Clairvoyants and Psychics,” <http://www.mystic-mouse.co.uk>

<sup>15</sup> Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future.”

<sup>16</sup> “Speak For Yourself.”

<sup>17</sup> “Speak For Yourself.”

<sup>18</sup> Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future.”

<sup>19</sup> “Speak For Yourself.”

<sup>20</sup> “Speak For Yourself.”

<sup>21</sup> “Speak For Yourself.”

<sup>22</sup> “Speak For Yourself.”

<sup>23</sup> Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future.”

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.amazingfacts.org/free-stuff/bible-studies/storacle-lessons>

For most of her life in Bloomington Sophia resided in an area of town known as “Pone Hollow,” a very poor area situated on the far southwest side. Local residents called this area “Pone Hallow” for two reasons. First, it was in a low-lying area situated between the high ground of downtown and the emerging German neighborhood of South Hill. Through the heart of the neighborhood ran a tributary of Sugar Creek (which was turned into a major underground sewer). The neighborhood also suffered from pollution produced by the meatpacking plants to the east (known as “Blood Alley”) which dumped blood, offal, and other slaughterhouse byproducts into the creek. This gave the neighborhood a distinctive smell.<sup>25</sup> Second, the name originated with a wager between two sawmill men (who lived in the vicinity of what became Pone Hallow) by the names of Dodge and Rankin. Each man thought that his wife made the best corn pones, corn bread, and rolls. Dodge and Rankin made a wager over who could eat the most cornpone (a type of cornbread) in one sitting which had been made by their respective wives. Dodge beat Rankin, eating about a dozen. The match became the talk of the town, so much so that the area became known as “Pone Hallow.”<sup>26</sup> Sophia’s home was located at 529 North Water Street<sup>27</sup> (later renamed Taylor Street<sup>28</sup>) on the south side of the Indianapolis, Bloomington and Western Railroad “in a low, marshy spot, which was originally an almost impassible slough.”<sup>29</sup> Her neighborhood was full of rundown shanties. Sophia’s home included a little barnyard with a wagon, chicken coop, several ducks and geese, and a family dog.<sup>30</sup>

As Sophia continued her fortune telling business, she began investing in real estate. This included a great deal of land in Pone Hollow. Perhaps she foresaw the cities development of that land and wanted her heirs to benefit.<sup>31</sup> Madame Annette commented that “Aunt Sophia” owned a good deal of Pone Hollow. However, Annette wondered why she owned so much land in such a run down area. She surmised that while the properties did not look “financially desirable,” the land at least was worth something good and “is a financial credit to the woman who has made it all by the reading of people’s lives.”<sup>32</sup> Sophia also purchased property in Livingston County, Illinois

Not much is known about Sophia’s children. Her daughter Sophia became Mrs. Marie Clifford and lived in Indianapolis. Her son Isaac remained in Bloomington and was married several times. His last wife was Anna Crawford who died a few years before him on July 19, 1933. She was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Isaac owned a tract of land in a suburban area of Bloomington where he kept hogs year round. He also collected garbage for the city which he probably fed to his hogs. He lived for several years on Olive Street<sup>33</sup> and at the time of his death was living at 204 Tanner Street.<sup>34</sup>

Sophia became ill about three years before her death. At that time her daughter brought suit against Sophia to declare her feeble-minded, most likely to have her will legally changed.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bill Kemp, “Pone Hollow Once a Tumbledown Neighborhood,” *The Pantagraph*(June 5,2011)

<sup>26</sup> “Pone Hallow: Interview with Dr. John Miller,” *The Daily Bulletin*, August 3, 1900

<sup>27</sup> *Bloomington City Directories* for 1872-1873 and 1878-1879

<sup>28</sup> Nola Marquardt. “Street Name Index: Bloomington-Normal Street and Subdivision Names, McLean County Road Names,” April 7, 2012

<sup>29</sup> “Speak For Yourself.”

<sup>30</sup> “Speak for Yourself.”

<sup>31</sup> Judith Myers, Researcher notes on Sophia Huggins

<sup>32</sup> Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future.”

<sup>33</sup> *Bloomington City Directories* 1893, 1899 and 1905

<sup>34</sup> “Ike Huggins, Aged Character in Colored Population, Dies,” *The Daily Pantagraph* (July 7,1939)

<sup>35</sup> “Ike Huggins, Aged Character in Colored Population, Dies.”

The suit did not follow through because her son Isaac would not allow his mother to attend court on account of the fact that she was dangerously ill at the time.<sup>36</sup>

Sophia Huggins died at her home at 525 West Taylor Street on August 8, 1903<sup>37</sup> of dropsy (the swelling of soft tissue due to the accumulation of excess water which is a sign of congestive heart failure). Her funeral was held at her church, Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church.<sup>38</sup> She was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington. Before her death she had set aside \$100 (which in 2012 would be \$2,500) for the erection of a tombstone at her gravesite.<sup>39</sup> In her obituary, she was remembered as the “sage of her neighborhood and was respected by every colored resident of town.”<sup>40</sup>

Sophia’s will divided her land holdings. The property was left to her son Isaac (then known as Isaac McFadden<sup>41</sup>), daughter Ruth Hunter (a young girl she was raising), and David Rogers (an African American porter at a saloon in Bloomington whose relationship to Sophia is unknown). Nearly a year after her death, the land on which her home was located and which her son now occupied, was to be sold. Isaac attempted to outbid the buyers but was unsuccessful. He later petitioned that the auctioneers had unfairly stopped the bidding causing him (Isaac) to lose out on the purchase.<sup>42</sup> The result of the petition is unknown. Isaac Huggins died on July 6, 1939 of a heart attack and was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his mother and his wife Anna.<sup>43</sup>

By: Emily Swartz, 2012

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<sup>36</sup> Venire for Jurors, Under Insane Hospital Act, State of Illinois, McLean County, July 28, 1903

<sup>37</sup> Tombstone of Sophia Huggins

<sup>38</sup> “Sophia Huggins Dead,” *The Daily Bulletin*, August 9, 1903

<sup>39</sup> Myers, Researcher notes on Sophia Huggins

<sup>40</sup> “Sophia Huggins Dead.”

<sup>41</sup> “The Last Will and Testament of Sophia Huggins, Widow,” July 23, 1903

<sup>42</sup> Petition of Isaac Huggins, March 3, 1904

<sup>43</sup> *McLean County Cemetery Records Volume 13: Bloomington Township Cemeteries, Old City, Bloomington, Some Evergreen* p. 85