

IOWA HISTORY



Mischievous ISU Student Becomes Celebrity

When William Howard Taft was sworn in as president of the United States in March 1909 the parade was cancelled because of a snow storm. However, the inaugural ball was held, and a young Iowa woman was among the attendees.

Flora Wilson wore a Paris creation of “pale blue velvet embroidered with pearls and spangles of gold.” She was described as being of “queenly proportions” and attracted as much attention “as any of the many noted beauties who were there.” Flora had reason to be confident despite the lukewarm review. She was a celebrity in her own right.

Flora had just returned from touring the great capitals of Europe as a renowned soprano. She had performed in London and Lucerne and most recently in Paris, where she had commanded a standing ovation on stage and garnered a hundred pounds of orchids in her dressing room.

The invitation to the inaugural ball came about because Flora’s dad was the secretary of agriculture. James Wilson had also held the post under the two previous presidents—William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. The Wilsons were well-known in Washington circles, and they were originally from Iowa.

James Wilson had grown up on a farm near Traer in Tama County and attended Grinnell College. Flora had grown up in Iowa and graduated from Iowa State University (ISU) in 1892. In those days she was described as a young girl with “dark hair and blue eyes” and a “rarely sweet high soprano.”

Flora followed her dad to Washington where she filled the role of hostess at social events after the death of her mother, Esther. In the early 1900s she moved to Paris to study music. Her career blossomed on the concert stages in Europe and by 1909 she was ready to make her singing debut in America. After touring throughout the United States, she signed a contract with the New York Metropolitan Opera company for the 1910 winter season.

When Flora wasn't appearing in opera stages around the country, she accompanied her dad on campaign tours for Republican candidates. She added a refreshing touch to his political speeches by warming up the crowd with her performances. She sang patriotic tunes that were “designed to make the voters think that the GOP elephant and the American eagle are and always should be inseparable companions.”

Flora had earned notoriety all over the world for her singing, but people who had known her when she was an ISU student had special memories of this Iowa girl. While a student she had been a leading soprano in many college functions including campus church services.

At one church it was the custom to seat the choir immediately behind the pastor hidden behind a curtain during the sermon because “being young and handsome and none too quiet” the choir members could distract attention from the preacher. When he finished and it was time for the choir to perform, the curtain was opened.

One Sunday the minister was especially long-winded and the choir—at the urging of Flora Wilson—decided to go for a walk fully expecting to return by the time he was finished. However, on this particular Sunday the preacher lost his voice and cut his sermon short. In a whisper he announced the choir would carry on with the last hymn of the day. There was a “painful” pause—unbroken by any response from the choir.

When the university president parted the curtains he found the choir loft deserted—except for a lone freshman who was “contently curled up on the organ seat fast asleep.”

The next Sunday no curtain divided the choir from the congregation and “for once the singers were among the most attentive listeners” in the church.

Sources

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