



Courtesy Library of Congress

Hope Glenn performed in opera houses like this in Paris, London and Milan

IOWA HISTORY

Life As Professional Singer: Not All Wine and Walnuts

Experts said Hope Glenn had a “rarely beautiful contralto voice” with “great flexibility and power.” She was “winsome of face” and had a “graceful physical presence.” All these qualities helped this Iowan become a celebrity in 19th century opera houses in America and across Europe.

Hope lived with her family in Iowa City in the 1860s. She said she had an “ideally happy childhood.” She spent her days riding her pony, Peanuts; swimming in Ralston Creek; boating on the Iowa River; and playing croquet on the grounds of the university.

Hope recalled that she had a “tremendously strong” voice as a child. When she was only ten years old, she was the only contralto in the choir of the Presbyterian Church in Iowa City.

The Glenn family lived in apartments on Linn Street. One day a neighbor, who happened to be the director of the Iowa State Normal Academy of Music, heard Hope practicing her music lessons. Professor H.S. Perkins encouraged the Glenn family to allow their daughter to enter his school.

Each year the 6-week term concluded with a “Grand Closing Concert.” The *Palimpsest* magazine described the 1870 event in which Hope starred. The three-hour concert featured piano and violin solos and a “rollicking” performance that “sent the audience home in the best of spirits.” Hope was featured in a solo performance.

Professor Perkins had advised students to avoid eating before the concert. And he warned against wearing tight clothing. Ignoring the professor’s advice, Hope ate a hearty meal and wore a corset reinforced with bone stays. It didn’t seem to affect her singing. It was the general opinion that Hope had a bright future.

This taste of celebrity made an impression on Hope. And she began to dream about the possibilities. Years later in an interview Hope told a reporter that in her early years she had lived “in a very out-of-the-way place,” where “any kind of music training was difficult.”

Not content with the quality of music education available in Iowa City, Hope hoped to convince her parents to send her to Chicago, where she had access to professional singing coaches. And after seeing her first opera, Hope knew she wanted to become an opera singer. “I can hardly tell you, the feelings of the little country girl, when she for the first time saw an opera performed,” Hope said in an 1895 interview.

Although her parents resisted, they finally agreed to allow her to go to Chicago.

“My mother still looks back, to the day when she made up her mind to let me leave home as the most trying moment to her of my professional life,” Hope recalled.

In a performance at the Chicago Musical College she “took the public, critics, and all by storm.” From Chicago, Hope moved on to Paris, London and Milan studying with some of the most renowned singers of the time. Her teachers predicted a “brilliant” future for Hope. Europeans called her “the queen of song,” but knew that America would “beckon her home.”

In 1883 Hope returned to Iowa City, where she performed for a hometown audience that called her back for multiple encores. A listener described Hope’s songs as “so sweet, so touching.” A writer for the *Iowa State Register* said the people of Iowa City “follow her career with great interest” and “rejoice in her triumphs.”

Although Hope continued to travel and perform in the United States and Europe, she never attained widespread fame and fortune. In middle age, she made a living teaching music.

She often struggled to make ends meet. “Unless a girl has a balance at her bank to draw upon, a professional career is by no means all wine and walnuts,” Hope wrote in 1890.

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