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THIS WEEK:

An Iowa Family of Renown

BACKGROUND:

The father founded the Clinton Herald newspaper, the mother was a pioneer of social reform, and the daughter was a world-famous singer and actor in vaudeville.



Charles Leonard

(1829 - 1896)

Founder of the Clinton Herald Newspaper

Charles E. Leonard was the first publisher and editor of the *Clinton Herald* newspaper with his offices in the Masonic Hall on First Street. He later found himself something of a celebrity, although not directly through his publishing work. His wife, Cynthia Van Names Leonard, who was well known in club circles and who helped to open the first soldiers' home in Iowa, took their daughter, "Nellie," to New York after the family moved to Chicago. It was this daughter who was destined to become the famous singing and acting star of the stage, Lillian Russell.

Cynthia Leonard

(1828 - 1908)

Suffragist and Author

Cynthia Leonard was a suffragist, aid Worker, and writer, notable for her pioneering efforts toward social reform in the 19th Century. Born Cynthia Hicks Van Name in Buffalo, New York, she married Charles E. Leonard in 1852. They had eight children, the most famous of whom was the entertainer Helen Louise Leonard (later known as Lillian Russell).

While a young woman in Buffalo, Leonard became the first woman to stand behind a counter as a salesperson and later became a member of Buffalo's first Woman's Social and Literary Club. Four years after her marriage, in 1856, the couple moved from Detroit, Michigan, to Clinton, Iowa, where Charles Leonard founded the *Clinton Herald*, that community's newspaper, still in existence today.



Cynthia was on the executive committee of the Soldiers' Relief Association, which established the first soldiers' home in the State of Iowa.

In 1863, Charles Leonard sold the *Herald*, and the couple moved to Chicago. There Cynthia organized a fair to benefit the Freedman's Aid Society, helped found the Chicago branch of *Sorosis* and was its editor for a time, and was a member of the Chicago Philosophical Society. In 1869, she led the spiritualist faction of the women's suffrage movement at the Music Hall, one of the first women's suffrage meetings ever held in Chicago. Susan B. Anthony was a frequent visitor in the Leonard home.

Cynthia organized the Good Samaritan Society, and after the great Chicago fire, she established a homeless shelter for the "unfortunate" women of the city. She was instrumental in the decision to place matrons in Chicago prisons, and she authored two novels: *Adventures of Lena Rouden, or the Rebel Spy* and *Fading Footprints, or the Last of the Iroquois*.

Lillian Russell

(1861 - 1922)

Renowned Stage Actress and Singer

Lillian Russell was born Helen Louise Leonard in Clinton, Iowa. Her father was newspaper publisher Charles E. Leonard, and her mother was author and feminist Cynthia Leonard, the first woman to run for mayor of New York City. Her family moved to Chicago in 1865, where she studied at the Convent of the Sacred Heart from age seven to 15 and then at the Park Institute. Her father became a partner in the printing firm of Knight & Leonard, and her mother became active in the women's rights movement. Russell, called "Nellie" as a child, excelled at school theatricals. In her teens, she studied music privately and sang in choirs.

When Russell was 18, her parents separated, and she and her mother moved to New York City.

During the era of vaudeville, Russell played on Broadway and in countless theaters and halls.

For many years, Russell was the foremost singer of operettas in America. Her voice, stage presence, and beauty were the subject of a great deal of fanfare in the news media, and she was extremely popular with audiences. Famed movie actress Marie Dressler once recalled, "I can still recall the rush of pure awe that marked her entrance on the stage. And then the thunderous applause that swept from orchestra to gallery, to the very roof." When Alexander Graham Bell introduced long distance telephone service on May 8, 1890, Russell's voice was the first carried over the line. From New York City, Russell sang "Sabre Song" to audiences in Boston and Washington, D.C. She rode a bicycle custom made for her by Tiffany & Co. It was a gold-plated machine that displayed the jeweler's art at its most opulent and unconventional—the handlebars inlaid with mother-of-pearl and the wheel spokes featuring her initials set in diamonds. She had "a cream serge leg-of-mutton sleeve cycling suit with the skirt shortened by three inches, which caused a sensation and set a trend."



For 40 years, Russell was also the companion of famed businessman "Diamond Jim" Brady, who showered her with extravagant gifts of diamonds and gemstones and supported her extravagant lifestyle.

In March 1922, Russell traveled aboard the R.M.S. Aquitania from Southampton,

England, to the Port of New York on the March 11 to March 17 crossing. According to *The New York Times*, she "established a precedent by acting as chairman of the ship's concert, the first woman, so far as the records show, to preside at an entertainment on shipboard."

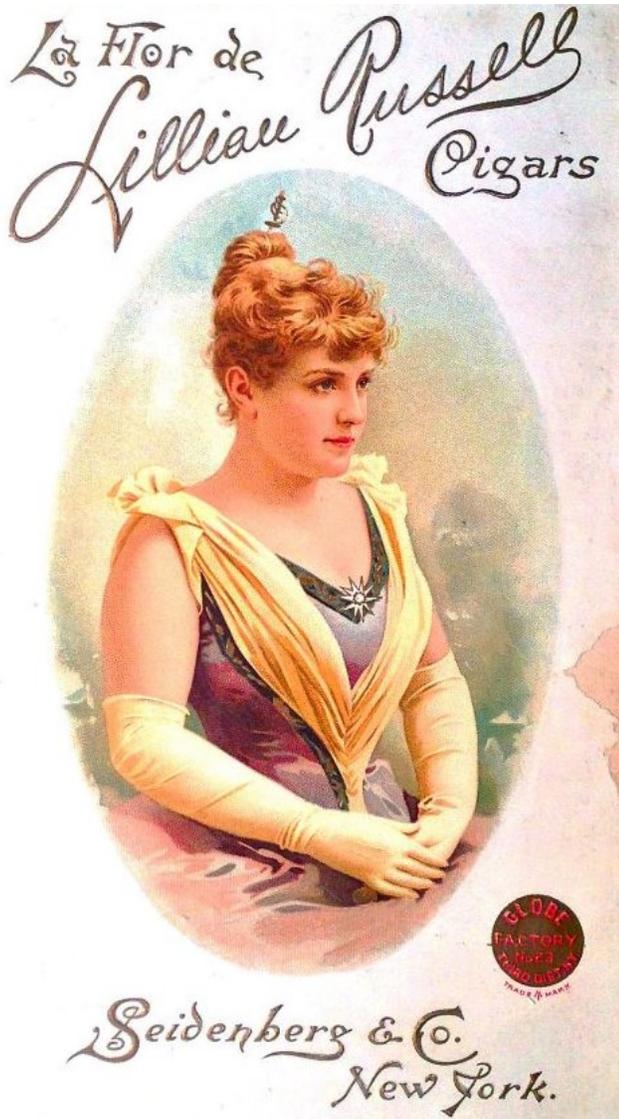
Russell died at her home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on June 6, 1922, shortly after completing a fact-finding mission to Europe on behalf of President Warren Harding. The mission was to investigate the increase in immigration. She recommended a five-year moratorium on immigration, and her findings were instrumental in the content of a 1924 immigration law. She suffered apparently minor injuries on the return trip, which, however, led to complications, and she died after ten days of illness.

Thousands of people lined the route of Russell's military funeral, attended by many actors and politicians, and President Harding sent a wreath that was set on top of her casket. She is interred in her

family's private mausoleum in the Allegheny Cemetery in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

A 1940 film was made about Russell, although it presents a sanitized version of her life. It was directed by Irving Cummings who, as a teenager starting his career, had acted with Russell in the play *Wildfire* in 1908. It stars Alice Faye, Henry Fonda, Don Ameche, Edward Arnold, and Warren William.

The Lillian Russell Theatre aboard the *City of Clinton Showboat* is a summer stock theatre named after Russell in her hometown of Clinton, Iowa. The University of Pittsburgh's student activities building, the William Pitt Union, has a Lillian Russell Room on its fourth floor. In the offices of *The Pitt News*, in the same location where Russell lived when the building was the Schenley Hotel, the room contains a portrait of Russell.



As with today's celebrities, Lillian Russell allowed her name and likeness to be used in product promotion.

