

X: VOYAGE TO THE NEW WORLD: 1923-1927

Whenever I mention my grandmother, nicknamed 'Little Nannÿ,' spent ten years as a performer in American vaudeville and European variety, the listener looks in awe. It's clear I've got something they haven't and I glow with pride. Such heritage is enviable and Little Nannÿ's mother, against her daughter's own wishes, gave my grandmother the experience of a lifetime (and me a story to tell)! Like her father, *Opa Hinsch*, her siblings and cousins, Nanna went '*auf der Waltz*,' becoming a 'journeywoman.' But unlike them, she went beyond Europe and its ongoing recovery from the changes introduced by the war, setting foot on the stage in a 'New World' theatre renowned at the time for being modern society's answer to the prudery and uptight nature of the Victorian age. New York's Broadway, which was to become Little Nannÿ's 'ground zero,' right then was "the antithesis of polite society."¹

My grandmother's life in 'show business' has long fascinated me. Although she spoke relatively little about her time on the stage she kept several scrapbooks of photos. The sole focus of this chapter then is a celebration of her journey to and within the United States, through which I provide the narrative to her photographs - a period where change was the only constant.

Relying on a handful of programme brochure clippings, Little Nannÿ's box Brownie snaps, newspaper archives as well as trade magazines, some of which are available online,² in early 2011 I mapped about 50 or so of the engagements she made in New York State alone. Multiplying this number by 50 (for the contiguous united states), might have given a pretty good indication as to how many performances she gave across the country, or so I thought, and according to her eldest daughter, Little Nannÿ kept a map on which she marked all the points she visited while in the US. "There were many small places alongside the bigger ones," she remarked. That, however, was mislaid and so I've documented her act's performances the hard way.³ However, with 50 theatres in 50 states, might we suppose she clocked up as many as 2500 engagements during her entire spell there? Let's find out..

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_issues_of_the_1920s

² For example, *Das Programm* at the *Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin*, and online resources such as those at www.fultonhistory.com and www.varietvarchives.com.

³ In fact, just one book refers to Little Nannÿ's acrobat troupe by name: "The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville" published by Anthony Slade in 2012. In his entry on Acrobats on pg.3 he writes: "Taking a year at random, 1926, the four most highly promoted acrobatic acts were *The Six Rockets* (six women billed as "the only act of this kind in the world)...". According to Frank Cullen, host of the American Vaudeville Museum at: www.vaudeville.org. "Researching vaudeville is difficult because...there likely were as many as 50,000 performers in vaudeville, at one time or another, between 1900 and 1930" while "The "trade" papers devoted to vaudeville were remarkable terse in describing the acts." (Personal correspondence received 30th April, 2011). See also Footnote 181.

Following World War I, the United States had begun to emerge as a potential world power, having initially 'returned' to Europe to resolve the conflict and impose peace. In American author Scott Fitzgerald's eyes: "We were the most powerful nation. Who could tell us any longer what was fashionable and what was fun?" Before long, America was exporting on a massive scale its material and artistic civilization through jazz, cinema and literature. It was Fitzgerald himself who subsequently coined the phrase: the "Jazz Age," that arose in response to the mood left by the war.⁴

During that era, many Germans prospered in the US, writes Bill Bryson in his amusing tale of American history entitled: *Made in America*.⁵ Movie houses for instance served as a huge magnet for its artists and artisans, frustrated by the economic depression. Among the most well-known who left Germany in the early 1920s were Pola Negri and Ernst Lubitsch, to be followed not long afterwards by Emil Jannings and Marlene Dietrich. Many more ordinary Germans too were streaming into the USA, fleeing the Weimar Republic with plenty more involved in theatre - including those who supported my grandmother's act.



Immigration to the USA
Source: www.ellisland.org

Germans had been present in America from early colonial times of course - by 1683 they had formed their own community, Germantown near Philadelphia. Waves followed between 1749 and 1754 when 90,000 arrived and again during 1830-1850, when fleeing harvest failure, poverty and famine during the so-called 'Hungry Forties,' migrants settled in mostly urban areas along an axis that stretched from New York through to Buffalo and on into the mid-West; Cincinnati and Cleveland, St. Louis, Chicago and nearby Milwaukee.⁶ A third wave arrived between 1880 and 1930 (as the graphic left shows), amounting to some 2.8 million. Not surprisingly, among those Germans who departed *der Vaterland* in the early 1880s, 93 percent went to the USA, a destination that remained popular right up until the last years prior to the war.⁷

⁴ Jerome Charyn in *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway*. Pg. 192-4.

⁵ Bryson, *Made in America*. pg. 201

⁶ Bryson, *Made in America*. pg. 202. See also: Maldwyn Allen Jones. [American Immigration](#). 1992. Pg. 173.

According to: www.ellisland.org/immexp/wseix_5_3.asp?MID=16225969060912282688&, some 3m Germans arrived between 1820 and 1880.

⁷ For the 22 percent who by that time chose not to go to the US, other popular locations included Canada, Brazil, Argentina and Australia. The popularity of the US reflects several forces, which Timothy W. Guinnane defines as 'path-dependence,' i.e. where migration flows of one period are strongly influenced by earlier flows. A German emigrant was more likely to go to a country that already had a significant number of his own nationality. They may for example have joined a specific person or family. Language too may have been a draw, i.e. the opportunity to be among non-natives - at the outbreak of the first world war, for instance, Baltimore had four elementary schools that taught exclusively in German, according to Bill Bryson's *Made in America*. (pg. 206). German emigrants who had already settled also provided information about the life and economic opportunities available in the would-be host country. See *Germany Since 1800: A New Social and Economic History* Edited by Overly and Ogilvie. Pg. 48-9

Following the outbreak of the war, American attitudes toward immigration began to shift. Nationalism and suspicion of foreigners were on the rise, and immigrants' loyalties were often called into question.⁸ In 1915 an editorial writer in *The Houston Post* jibed; 'Germany seems to have lost all of her foreign possessions with the exception of Milwaukee, St. Louis and Cincinnati.'⁹ Josef Milos, director of the Association of German Variety Employers recalled: "The war...naturally destroyed all international connections...Even after...one could not conceive of working abroad."¹⁰

After a ban on German immigration into the US was lifted in 1921, flows soon rebounded, with the majority of the 720,000 who emigrated the country between 1919-1939 continuing to prefer the US their destination of choice.¹¹ Ties between the US and Germany remained strong during this period, American commercial interests financing Germany's rebuilding and reparations' efforts right up until the onset of the Great Depression in 1930.¹²

On Saturday July 28th, 1923 my then 15 year old grandmother sailed out of Hamburg on the American Line's 'SS Mongolia.' Ahead of Marlene Dietrich by seven years (!), she departed together with her new 'family,' five other 'Artistin,' most of whom had been Leipzig-based.¹³ The adjacent photo shows her on the right, sporting the modern *Bubikopf* haircut, a timid smile and more than a spot of makeup. They were shepherded by their 'representative,' Oswald Büttner (56) and his 23 year old son, Arno, who was often (but not always) referred to as their manager.¹⁴ They all sailed first class.



Motley Crue:

Little Nannÿ (right) sporting a bob on board the *Mongolia*, 1923. From left (assumed): Erna Prokop and Annedore Frenkel, confirmed: Melanie Geidel, Elisabeth 'Miss Lissi' Huebner and Gertrud Tafel

⁸ http://www.ellisland.org/immexp/wseix_5_3.asp?MID=16225969060912282688&

⁹ Bryson, *Made in America*. pg. 202.

¹⁰ Josef Milos. "Zwischen Seil und Trapez. Deutsche Varietékunst im Ausland," *Berliner Tageblatt*, 26th March, 1926.

Sourced from Marline Otte. Pg. 83

¹¹ Guinnane, pg. 58.

¹² Indeed, the close relationships between American and German businesses became an embarrassment following the Nazi rise to power in Germany in the early 1930s. See:

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aftermath_of_World_War_I#United_States

¹³ According to the ship's manifest at: www.ellisland.org/search/shipManifest.asp?MID=16225969060912282688&PID=602362030032, Gertrud Johanna Maria Tafel (5'0, 17 years old, born Oct. 9th, 1905 in Lansdberg, Sachsen-Anhalt

according to her father's EWMK and in Leipzig since July 1920 with her parents) was from *KuhturnStr. 9, Lindenau*; Melanie Elisabeth Geidel (17, 5'5) was from *NatalienStr.19, Volkmarshdorf* (Leipzig east); Annedore Frenkel (18, 5'5/6) lived at *Rosstauer Str.12, Gohlis* (her next of kin was her uncle while she was born 6th May, 1905 in *Tolkewitz*, Dresden

according to data included on her husband's birth certificate); Elisabeth Huebner (17 and a half, 5'1), was from N. Jaeger Park 4/12 in Dresden (her next of kin was her mother); and Erna Prokop (17, 5'1), whose father was in Breslau.

¹⁴ According to Frank Cullen, host of the American Vaudeville Museum at: vaudeville.org he told me in early 2011; "Few performers in vaudeville, circus, burlesque, etc had managers." Only the most successful and highly paid acts

The portrait, which might have been intended as some sort of publicity shot, was the work of *Carl Müller & Sohn*, Hamburg-Altona-based photographers. Copies were likely delivered to Richard Gey's '*Internationales Reisebüro*' in Leipzig, since his stamp appears on the photograph's reverse. According to American Line advertisements which appear in various editions of the *Leipziger Messeadressbücher* from the early 1920s (see Chapter IX), Gey managed its 'principal office' in Saxony which I imagine then served as a holding address for certain return mail. Curiously he was located no more than a stone's throw from *Wintergartenstrasse* where one of Leipzig's most important variety theatres, the *KrystallPalast* was located.¹⁵

10.1: All Aboard the SS *Mongolia*!

I can still well recall my own first long-distance travel at 14, criss-crossing London by train *en route* to the south coast of England. Fast forward twenty five years and I was to be found dropping off my 15 year old at the airport. It was his turn to travel alone to England by air. Both occasions brought excitement and distress! So I can just imagine what my grandmother and perhaps her own mother felt at the time.



According to the *SS Mongolia's* manifest, my grandmother and her fellow travellers had the luxury of being first class cabin passengers (the *Mongolia* carried some 1800 passengers in total. Besides those 350 in first class, 68 were accommodated in second and the majority - 1,400 - in third, also known as steerage). I guess they must have felt like royalty! According to a sister ship's passenger list from 1929, breakfast was typically served at 8AM, while lunch was at 1pm and dinner at 6.30PM. Letters, telegrams, cablegrams and radiograms could both be transmitted and received while deck chairs as well as rugs could be hired for a dollar. Passengers' heavy baggage that was too large for their own rooms could be stored in a special baggage room that was made available twice a day, while all had to bear the owners' initials, besides a label with their name and address. Deck games and amusements (e.g. chess, draughts, dominoes etc.) were available upon request, while library books could also be loaned!

The ship actually came with plenty of its own baggage too. It was built in the USA in 1903 and in 1917 had been used for troop transport service. In the first armed encounter for an American vessel after the US's entry to World War I, it actually drove off (and possibly sunk) a U-boat seven miles southeast of Beachy Head, in the English Channel! In 1920 it was then sold to the American/White Star Line for the Hamburg to New York service as a passenger and mail ship.

Sources:

www.ellisland.org/search/shipimage.asp?pid=602362040001&fromShip=y&letter=m&half=2&name=Mongolia&year=1923&date=08/08/1923&port=Hamburg&page=; [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Mongolia_\(1903\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Mongolia_(1903)); and www.navsource.org/archives/12/171615.htm

The troupe arrived in New York Harbour on Wednesday August 8th, docking at the island of Manhattan's Hudson pier (see map overleaf). According to family lore, however, Little Nanny's entry into the US was delayed at a nearby island "until she reached her sixteenth," since only then could she legally enter the USA. Her birthday indeed fell on August 7th, so had she been referring to 'Ellis Island'¹⁶?

could pay a manager a salary. Those managers who found work, in fact made more than most vaudevillians or burlesquers themselves! With Oswald Büttner, the six girls were of course 'his' act.

¹⁵ According to: adressbuecher.genealogy.net, Gey continued to be a Leipzig travel agent up to 1949.

¹⁶ Ellis Island sits within New York Harbour in the upper bay just off the New Jersey coast. It lies under the shadow of the Statue of Liberty and for the majority of migrants who were temporarily detained there, it became a symbol of and portal into the United States: in effect the 'gateway' to the New World.

According to Pola Negri in her autobiography, *'Memoirs of a Star,'* when she herself sailed to New York in September 1922, her ship, the (White Star Line's) *Majestic* first docked at Ellis Island.¹⁷ However, according to the island's archives, only third class passengers were expected there for medical and legal inspection while first and second class passengers were more typically transported back if they were sick or had legal problems, for example, if they were an illegal contract laborer.¹⁸

Since the affidavit of the *SS Mongolia's* surgeon (contained within its manifest) reveals Little Nannÿ's medical inspection was positive, it's clear she was not detained. Furthermore, in the eyes of Ellis Island archivist, Ron Maldonado: "It didn't matter what age you were. According to the manifest, she was an artist working for theatre who paid for her passage to the US. Someone had to pick her up otherwise she would have been deported, and there is no indication she was."



Manhattan, 1918: The Hamburg-American Line docked at pier 65 as the map right shows (see '1'), the White Star Line at pier 60 (see '2'). The heart of the city's theatre district was nearby ('3'), alongside Germany's *New York Group* of its *International Artists Loge* ('4')

Map Source:
www.davidrumsey.com

So what then caused her 'delay'? I was fortunate to come across an online website called the *theshipslist.com*, which offers press clippings regarding ships' arrivals during 1923.¹⁹ Although the only reference to the *SS Mongolia* concerned its departure ten days later,²⁰ what is clear is how immigration officials struggled at the time to administer the swathes of would-be American citizens.

Throughout the early 1920s, a series of laws was passed to limit their flow, while the 1924 act was to mark the end of immigration on a mass scale. Hopeful entrants therefore made the most of the last months' opportunities in a dash literally to enter the country and not miss their nations' allocated quotas. Ships raced to enter port which caused a not insignificant risk of casualty.

¹⁷ *Memoirs of a Star*. Pola Negri. Doubleday and Company, 1970. Pg. 199

¹⁸ Ellis Island archives note that not only first and second class passengers but third class passengers too were typically ferried back by barge from the New York Harbour piers. In other words, arriving ships did not first port at Ellis Island before heading to New York. For more, see: www.ellisland.org/genealogy/ellis_island_history.asp

¹⁹ www.theshipslist.com/ships/Arrivals/1923.shtml

²⁰ The ship nevertheless does earn some media coverage on August 17 owing to a blaze in the No. 3 hold the previous morning! See: www.theshipslist.com/ships/Arrivals/1923c.shtml#aug17b.

In an article published in the *New York Times* on August 1st, 1923, for instance (six days before Little Nannÿ arrived), Commissioner Henry H. Curran at Ellis Island said that with so many steamships making for the Quarantine station there was some danger of collisions.²¹ The article continues: "Because of the dense fog off Nantucket Lightship [which lay about 215 miles east of Manhattan²²], the rush of liners bringing immigrants here for the August quota was confined to ten vessels." I began to wonder then if it could have been that fog that delayed my grandmother? Had she then been referring to Nantucket Island?

With customs officials typically processing about 5,000 arrivals per day,²³ delays in disembarking were hardly surprising. Headlines come August 2nd read: "15,000 Aliens Arrive On 16 Liners; Piers Jammed By Friends" and "Eight Quotas Believed to Have Been Exhausted With the First Rush."

According to the August 2nd edition of the *New York Times*; "The big White Star liner *Majestic*, which had 2,428 passengers from Southampton and Cherbourg, did not reach her pier at the foot of West Eighteenth Street until after 4 o'clock. The vessel is going to be dry-docked in Boston and will take her 1,082 steerage passengers to that port tomorrow," it reported.

Since we know Little Nannÿ's ship docked on August 8th, that suggests passage took eleven days and rather than the usual nine. That tends to confirm a delay occurred and so, based on the clippings above, probably her arrival was postponed thanks to Atlantic fog, congestion along the shipping lanes between Nantucket Island and New York and the immigrant rush to the harbour which stranded her at Ellis Island, rather than her age! Perhaps it was her fellow artistes who came up with that joke then, but whomever she played that one on, it was Little Nannÿ who enjoyed the last laugh for decades to come!

After disembarking and passing through customs at the piers, the troupe will have been free to enter the United States.²⁴ Imagine the scenes that will have greeted the girls;

*"Once landed on Manhattan the new immigrants would immediately find ... manifestations of the wondrousness of America. At the landing point they would often be approached by fellow countrymen who spoke their language, but who were friendlier, easier in their manner and far more nattily dressed than any they had seen at home. With astounding magnanimity, these instant friends would offer to help the newly arrived immigrant find a job or lodgings, and even insist on carrying the grip into which he had packed his few valuables – one couldn't be too careful in New York, the immigrant would solemnly be cautioned. And then at some point the immigrant would turn to discover that his new friend had vanished with his belongings... Few newly arrived immigrants were not fleeced in some way within their first days."*²⁵

²¹ www.theshipslist.com/ships/Arrivals/1923b.shtml

²² Minnesota's passenger list from 1929 – see centre page

²³ Bill Bryson, *Made in America*. Pg. 196. See also:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellis_Island#Immigrant_Inspection_Station

²⁴ www.ellisland.org/genealogy/ellis_island_history.asp

²⁵ Bill Bryson, *Made in America*. pg. 197

The acrobats and the Büttners were most likely welcomed not by a swindler but by the chap who paid for their passage: *Louis Redelsheimer*, who I imagine was there precisely to assure there were no legal hiccups: his act was far too valuable to lose!²⁶

Typically abbreviated to Lew or Lou, he was what was known in show business as a booking agent: a 'booker' of acts. Yet his *curriculum vitae* was more colourful than that alone. According to industry trade paper, *Variety* magazine, he was a show producer too. In November 1918, for instance, he was quoted as having put two burlesque stock²⁷ shows together, and the following year was seen to be advertising for "Good Chorus Girls," offering them a "Long Season... Good Salaries. Fares Paid to New Orleans."²⁸ A few months later he'd been "engaged to stage an indoor circus at the 5th Regiment Armory, Baltimore."²⁹

Redelsheimer's office was located in the heart of New York's theatre district and lay just a stone's throw from the city's most famous street, Broadway.³⁰ I daresay it was probably one of Little Nannj's first stops in the city! Yet I am sure Büttner had other acquaintances he also wished to show off the rockets to...

For instance there was his old 'pal' *Herman Blumenfeld*, who worked out of the Strand Theatre on Broadway itself – see '3' on the earlier Manhattan map. Besides him, another fellow-countryman in the neighbourhood was *H.B. Marinelli*, a former acrobat and contortionist turned booking agent (and Blumenfeld's boss up until 1914),³¹ whose offices were less than a minute's walk away.³² Then there was the 'New York Group' of Germany's International Artists Loge (IAL – essentially its artists' trade union), seven blocks south at West 38th Street (see '4' on the same map).

According to an article from June 14th, 1923, Blumenfeld specialized in vaudeville and cabaret bookings together with impresario, Max Lowenstein,³³ while in George Hamid's words (his business associate until a few months prior), he was "a thrill act importer."³⁴ Advertisements posted in *Variety* magazine during late 1923 and early 1924 (see overleaf for example) tell us that Blumenfeld became Büttner's troupe's 'exclusive representative.'³⁵ Alongside Marinelli and the IAL, these immigrants all played a key role in the acrobats' success over the coming years.

²⁶ Failing him, it might otherwise have been a rep. of the New York Group of Germany's International Artists Loge, according to a missive transmitted in *Das Programm's* June 17, 1923 issue particularly to German artists arriving in the US to work.

²⁷ Stock shows were essentially 'resident' companies that belonged to a particular theatre and did not travel. They included a handful of principal acts as well as choristers (i.e. chorus girls).

²⁸ *Variety* magazine, November 1918

²⁹ *Variety* magazine, January 1920

³⁰ No. 225, West 46th Street.

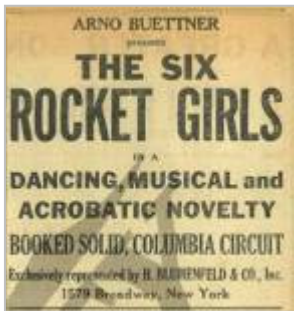
³¹ See Blumenfeld's Obituary. *Billboard* magazine, March 29th, 1952. Marinelli was born in Thuringia, Germany.

³² At 245, West 47th Street at least until 1924 when according to advertisements placed in *Das Programm*, Marinelli was based at No. 226, West 47th Street.

³³ According to Blumenfeld's Obituary which appeared in *Billboard* on March 29th, 1952, they had earlier established the Blumenfeld-Lowenstein-Johnson (booking) agency in 1914. It was then Lowenstein, later associated with the Wirth-Blumenfeld Co., who paid for Büttner and his act's passage in 1921.

³⁴ Hamid was one third of the Wirth-Blumenfeld Co. See: George A. Hamid Snr and Jnr's; *The Acrobat: A Showman's Topsy-Turvy World...* from Buffalo Bill to the Beatles. Published by Comteq Publishing in 2004. Pg. 189

³⁵ *Variety* magazine. Jun 14, 1923 and Jan. 31, 1924 editions.



From the moment they arrived, however, the troupe will have been straight into rehearsals, practicing their routines before the theatre season got underway at the end of August. Their act, nicknamed The Six Rockets and billed a 'dancing, musical and acrobatic novelty,'³⁶ was to find its place within a new revue touring North America called the 'Queens of Paris.' It was produced by theatre veterans, Henry C. Jacobs and John G. Jermon.

The show was to be presented in two acts and contained 12 scenes. According to press reviews it featured a Swedish comedian named I.B. Hamp whose "method of merrymaking" was "to affect a Swedish dialect and swing through comical situations as the 'boob' who gets the worst of the argument most of the time." Ann Myers sang songs called the 'blues,' while the show also included Hawaiian harmonists known as the Frazier Trio.³⁷

The Six Rockets, however, were deemed to have been an "extra feature" directly imported.³⁸ An announcement I picked up in *The Schenectady Gazette* described them as musical artists making their first tour of America.³⁹ They were featured as the programme's "vaudeville attractions."⁴⁰ An introduction to what was meant by vaudeville is given in the text box overleaf.

Advertisements conversely bill the 'Queens of Paris' as "clean, profitable burlesque,"⁴¹ which together with subsequent ads, according to host of the American Vaudeville Museum, Frank Cullen, says much about The Six Rockets' entry into vaudeville. In his view they "entered...after its heyday, which may be why their act was booked into burlesque houses. By 1920, one-quarter of the vaude houses in the USA had converted to movies." That in turn obviously meant fewer opportunities and fiercer competition for vaudeville attractions. So was burlesque intended as the rockets' launchpad to bigger things? Or was it simply where the work was at the time? And just what was meant by 'burlesque'?

Like vaudeville, burlesque was variety theatre too. But it was a form where sexual titillation distinguished it from its rivals, writes Cullen in his *Encyclopaedia of Variety Performers*. It was more typically found in working-class concert halls and saloons, says Jerome Charyn in his book: *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway*, although variety of this nature was strictly for males.⁴²

In truth, however, the art form had been going through something of an identity crisis ever since the American Civil War came to an end in 1865! At that time it branched into two directions, with one heading towards musical comedy and travesty and the other opting to glorify limbs, bosoms and buttocks – effectively producing the ancestor of the girlie show.

³⁶ According to Jan. 31, 1924 issue of *Variety*.

³⁷ *The Schenectady Gazette*, Jan.12, 1924. Pg. 14

³⁸ *The Utica Observer*, Jan.2, 1924.

³⁹ *The Schenectady Gazette*, Jan.12, 1924. Pg. 14

⁴⁰ *Variety* on Aug. 11, 1922 reports that the Queens of Paris's predecessor show, "Flashlights of 1922-1923," omitted any sort of acrobat act.

⁴¹ According to the Jan.12 and Jan. 16, 1924 issues of the *Schenectady Gazette*.

⁴² *Thunder's Mouth Press*, 2003. Pg.27.

10.2: From *vau de Vire* to *voix de ville* to Vaudeville

The name derives from the fifteenth century and allegedly refers to the valley of Vire (Middle French *vau de Vire*), which characterised a kind of drinking song. By the eighteenth century the name had become *voix de ville* (street voices) and depicted songs which were often inserted in spoken or pantomimed dramas. In the nineteenth century, the term *vaudeville* came to refer to stage entertainment made up of several individual acts or presentations by a single entertainer or group of entertainers - acrobats, family acts, musicians, comedians etc. ¹ Frank Cullen in his "*Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers*," recalls the term was appropriated for American use as early as 1840 to look good on a programme or to sell a product. ²



From the late 1870's to the 1930s, vaudeville became a phenomenon and movement in North America. It was a type of light theatrical entertainment which was appreciated across class boundaries. By that time it was based on a variety of stage shows that featured fast-paced, unique acts - comic sketches, dances, acrobatics, songs and other novelty acts - that appealed to the masses.

An American impresario, named Tony Pastor had a lot to do with this. Occasionally referred to as the "Father of Vaudeville," he was a variety performer and theatre owner who became one of the founding forces behind American vaudeville in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.³ According to Jerome Charyn in his book about 1920s New York: "*Gangsters and Gold Diggers*," Pastor took the wickedness and a touch of chaos out of variety and turned it into a brand-new art form that would dominate the theatre for over thirty years. Pastor maintained a strong commitment to attracting a mixed-gender audience, the latter being something revolutionary in the male-oriented variety halls of the mid-century.⁴

What made vaudeville unique was this, continues Charyn: "Audiences felt that each show was being invented for them." The separate acts that composed a complete bill would often change from night to night. There was minstrelsy (blackface comedy) where African Americans were imitated, a bit of burlesque, musical numbers leading toward the eighth act - where the star performed alone on stage, minus the busyness of clowns and jugglers - and the ninth and closing act, a piece of fluff that might include trick animals or trapeze artists," something to calm the audience after the disappearance of the star.

On the whole, however, vaudeville and musical theater were not considered legitimate theatre. Sara Billeaux calls it a form of "secondary entertainment - the jazzy black sheep of the theatre family." Even though it was generally considered "low brow," it had "perhaps the biggest influence on theater in the 1920's."⁵ Almost all the great stars of the 1920's - Al Jolson (of Lithuanian origin), Fanny Brice (Hungarian), Sophie Tucker (Ukrainian), the Marx Brothers (2nd generation Germans) and Charlie Chaplin (English) started out in vaudeville. And virtually every community of any size had its vaudeville theater.

Many groups performed vaudeville and it became a culture whereby the same acts, songs, and entertainers were known throughout the country. Uniquely vaudeville entertainers (or 'vaudevillians') traveled from town to town, 'vaudevilling'. Vaudeville thus grew into chains, or circuits "which radiated from New York City in the east and Chicago in the West, like an octopus with a brain on Broadway and tentacles reaching far into the country."

Debutants, however, were constantly on the road, living out of suitcases, from boardinghouse to boardinghouse" hoping that they would eventually "play the Palace" - the focal point of vaudeville in the heart of New York's theater district on Broadway (pictured above).⁶ On Monday afternoon the first show would kick in there and the house would be filled with performers from all around town. They'd come in for the matinee and all the Broadway talent scouts and agents would come down, because how you went over determined what your future bookings would be. Being a hit at the Palace was just thrilling!⁵

Sources:

1. Encarta, <http://www.encyclopedia.msn.com>
2. F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Routledge, 2006. Pg.xii.
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tony_Pastor
4. Jerome Charyn; *Gangsters and Gold Diggers*. *Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway*. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. Pg.29-30
5. <http://voices.yahoo.com/history-broadway-1920-1929-817247.html>
6. www.bestwebsites.com/vaudeville/index.shtml and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palace_Theatre_\(New_York_City\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palace_Theatre_(New_York_City)) (image)

By 1898, burlesque producers were clucking their tongues at upstarts besmirching its fair name with 'turkey shows.' Some of the more established theatre managers and producers thus founded the Columbia Amusement Company, an association of clean burlesque operators. "To them, the ideal was to produce shows that were affordable to every man and woman in town, and clean enough (just) not to offend. They still featured sly comedians and a line of young women kicking and flouncing."⁴³

By the early twentieth century there were two theatre circuits offering burlesque that competed with vaudeville. 'Columbia Burlesque' referred to a network of over 80 theatres that belonged to the 'Columbia Wheel' and stretched from New York to Omaha in Nebraska in the US Midwest, while the Empire Circuit formed the so-called 'Western Wheel' servicing western USA.

"The Columbia Wheel was exclusively a chain of burlesque theatres, but it offered the best in burleycue (slang for Burlesque)," Cullen continues. The circuit's name was derived from the fact that as touring shows moved from city to city, they were like revolving spokes on a wheel, following a largely circuitous route until returning to home base. Fitted out with an ostensibly new production, they began playing the wheel again. Columbia (like the Empire Circuit) thus provided a steady stream of shows one predictably following another, keeping theatres booked and show producers earning income. On and on that went, for over two decades.

If that was the world of variety my grandmother 'fell' into, 'burlesque' was not so much an entry point as a return for her and her mentor's act. As the text box below reveals, Büttner's ties with the circuit went back decades and it was likely the show's producers, Jacobs and Jermon, who brought him and his act back to the US amidst a return that became feasible only once the dust had settled on world war one.

10.3: The Six Rockets - Refueled!

'The Six Rockets' monicker was not exactly new and Oswald Büttner knew that better than most - he first managed the troupe way back in 1905!

According to an original postcard discovered in the US and posted online at redpoulaine.blogspot.com, the act operated out of Leipzig Eutritzsch's *Gräfestrasse 11* (the same address from which Büttner managed his 'other' act, the *Dornfels Ensemble*).



More interestingly, however, was the following, picked up among Variety's newsbriefs in 1908: "The Six Rockets; a European dancing, singing and musical sextet of girls which has never played over here, has been booked for the following season through Walter Plimmer for a show being produced by Jacobs and Jermon called 'The Golden Crook.'"¹

Shipping manifests from 1921 confirm Büttner last set foot in the US in 1911, so we can deduce he spent the period from 1908 or three theatrical seasons engaged with *The Six Rockets*. In fact, they toured the 'Eastern Burlesque Wheel.'

After the war, Büttner returned to the US in 1921, this time with the '*Six Stellas*.' The act, consisting of acrobats according to the ship's manifest, may even have featured in The Golden Crook upon its final sojourn of the Columbia Wheel prior to being discontinued after 20 years.² Such was the demand for his services, in summer 1922 Büttner returned to Germany to found a new act. Or perhaps I should rather say, revive an old one; The Six Rockets!

Sources: 1. *Variety magazine*, May 30, 1908. Pg.5; and, 2. *Variety magazine*, Aug. 4, 1922. Pg.7

⁴³ F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Routledge, 2006. See 'Columbia Wheel.' Pg. 253.

An article in *Variety* magazine that ran on August 2nd, 1923 – almost a week before the Six Rockets set foot in the US – show the circuit numbered 38 theatres that offered a corresponding number of shows across 41 northeast American cities.⁴⁴ Entitled 'Columbia's Official Openings,' shows got underway on August 27th. Those in turn kept its artists busy right up until the following May – no wonder ads described the troupe as being 'booked solid!' Six of those venues were in New York (including neighbouring Brooklyn lying across the East River). That in turn means America's 'Big Apple'⁴⁵ slowly became their hub (as it was for most 'vaudevillians'). An introduction to the city in its New World context appears overleaf.

Yet those figures also hint the circuit was not what it once was: just compare '38' theatres in 1923 with the '80' or so which it called its own at the turn of the century – no wonder Cullen describes the Columbia Wheel as 'fading' by the early 1920s! To boost its shows' appeal, performances engaged African Americans and introduced black-and-white chorus cuties alongside specialty acts, or a top-notch act which was added as an extra attraction in order "to put a bang in the box office."⁴⁶

That certainly explains why The Six Rockets were billed an "EXTRA," as the ad left reveals. But there was more to their forthcoming success than just a full 40-week calendar and 'top' billing: maintaining healthy balance books too for instance. Columbia Burlesque held an advantage over vaudeville (even if it paid less salary) in that it reimbursed the costs of the artists' transportation, plus their equipment storage and transfers. That was important since the troupe had to cart about ladders and a musical abacus, not to mention its costumes. As to what they were being paid – that's anybody's guess. However, an "extra" equestrienne attraction in the 1922 Columbia show, "Chuckles of 1922," was said to have earned USD 1,500 a week!⁴⁷



The act's real draw though was its quality. For the season opener, the Queens of Paris kicked off in Pittsburgh – just three weeks after the girls arrived.⁴⁸ Throughout the autumn the company weaved its way throughout the Midwest on up to Chicago, Detroit and Toronto in Canada before spending Christmas week at Rochester's Gayety Theatre (see ad). The show was presented twice a day with a matinee around 2:15 PM and an evening performance at 8:15 PM, which in theatre-speak was defined as "big time."

⁴⁴ Auburn, Elmira, Asbury Park, Perth Amboy, New Brunswick, Chicago, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Utica, Rochester, Binghamton, Schenectady, Albany, New York, Brooklyn, Niagara Falls, Buffalo, Paterson, Newark, Canton, Yorkville, Providence, Philadelphia, New Haven, Waterbury, Bridgeport, Trenton, Baltimore, Washington DC, Wheeling, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Toledo, Dayton, Kansas City, Omaha, Detroit, Toronto, Schenectady, Boston.

⁴⁵ A term first popularized as a reference to New York City by John J. Fitz Gerald in a number of *New York Morning Telegraph* articles in the 1920s. See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Apple

⁴⁶ F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Routledge, 2006. See 'Burlesque'

⁴⁷ The act was the Wirth troupe of Australia, according to www.circopedia.org/May_Wirth. NB: Obviously a sum like that was split between the performers (including the horses), the act's manager, their representative.

⁴⁸ *Variety*, Aug. 2, 1923 issue

10.4: New World Snapshot

By the turn of the century, New York was the most cosmopolitan city the world had ever seen. By 1925, it was the most populous in the world, overtaking London. Eighty percent of its five million inhabitants in 1900 were either foreign born or the children of immigrants. During the 1920s, Manhattan then experienced large arrivals of African-Americans during the so-called Great Migration from the American South and the Harlem Renaissance. Yet already during the 1880s, Herman Melville, an American writer, best known for his novel *Moby Dick*, wrote: "We are not so much a nation as a world."



The 1920's boom time also witnessed the appearance of skyscrapers competing for the skyline. Yet as cities became bigger, busier, and more confusing, two new words entered the language: *rush-hour* and *traffic jam*. That was hardly surprising: already by 1915 America had two million cars and by 1920 that figure had risen to ten million. Michigan alone had more cars than Britain and Ireland put together, and by 1925, America would be producing 85 percent of the world's cars. The automobile industry, which hadn't even existed a quarter of a century earlier, was the country's biggest, thanks largely to Henry Ford.

To connect the US, the first transcontinental highway in the world – the Lincoln Highway – was officially opened in 1923. Almost overnight it became, as the postcards proudly boasted, America's *Main Street*. Others followed including the *Jefferson Highway* between Detroit and New Orleans, the *Dixie Highway* from Bay City, Michigan to Florida, and the *William Penn Highway* across Pennsylvania. The infamous *Route 66* meanwhile was built in 1926. These new highways spawned an incredible number of drive-ins, motels, shiny multi-purpose restaurants known as diners, roadhouses and so-called greasy spoons (small, cheap, sometimes rather unsanitary, archetypal working-class restaurants or diners) during the mid-1920s.

Even if New York's 'streetcars' (which had carried almost one billion passengers annually since 1902) and the city's subway (which opened in 1904) helped bind the city together, despite their initial popularity, trams were seldom profitable. In 1921, the 300 largest streetcar systems made a collective profit of just USD 8000 each. With the rise of private car ownership and other forms of transport such as buses their fate was sealed. Over the next decade, the number of streetcar miles in America almost halved!

The 1920s also saw the birth of many well-loved snack foods which Little Nanny can not have not failed to miss. These included the 'Good Humor' bar and the 'Eskimo Pie' (both chocolate covered vanilla ice cream), 'Popsicles' (ice pops) in 1924, 'Milk Duds' (chocolate coated caramel) in 1926 and 'Dubble Bubble Gum' in 1928. Furthermore, in 1925, the hungry New Yorker could choose from among 17,000 restaurants, double the number that had existed the decade before. Coca-Cola too was huge, whose ad campaign in 1929 was 'the pause that refreshes.'

Sources: Bill Bryson, *Made in America*. pg. 195-197; 272, 278, 337;

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_24\\$deal#The_20th_century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_24$deal#The_20th_century) and memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/touring/place.html

(Photo, which shows a 1919 view of Manhattan's Singer City with the ship terminals at the foot of the shot).

At their next stop in Utica, the city's *Observer* gives us our first glimpse as to what the critics thought of the act. On January 2nd, 1924 it wrote: "Their method of producing harmony from unusual and unexpected sources is said to not alone be entertaining but is made laughable through their devices for comedy." Not all acts in the programme received such glowing reviews. In neighbouring Schenectady just the following week, its *Gazette's* correspondent wrote: "The show is good in spots and there are other parts that might have been eliminated." However, "the Six Rockets from Belgium" were "speedy and clever and display real ability in their line."⁴⁹ In Albany a few days later, the headlines boasted: "The Worlds Greatest Girl Acrobatics" and "The sensation of Europe and America!"⁵⁰

In smaller towns where there was insufficient demand to run the same show for a week, circuit programmers squeezed in two venues in a week, creating the so-called 'split-week' (the only alternative was to 'lay off' till the weekend). Split weeks were far from being any performer's favourite and within Columbia Burlesque there were four and half split weeks in the route that season, according to *Variety*, besides two and half lay off weeks.⁵¹

A real curiosity for me is the media's reference to the rockets being "From Belgium." Speaking once more with Frank Cullen, he told me: "It wouldn't be the only time a German claimed to be Belgian" like "an English magician posing as Chinese or an acrobatic act from Harlem calling themselves The Hotentots or..."

The reason for this 'branding,' however was simple. Anti-German sentiment was still strong and worked against an explicitly 'German' act.⁵² To combat this for instance, well-known 'German' comedians Joe Weber and Lew Fields who spoke with thick accents on-stage went over as a 'Dutch Act.'⁵³ Yet Dutch was rather synonymous with Deutsch. For example, the well-known ethnic group the 'Pennsylvania Dutch' was in reality the 'Pennsylvania *Deutsch*.' With Dutch being a language typically spoken in Belgium, the rockets' nationality was I guess a little tongue in cheek – maybe even 'burlesque'!

I've often wished my grandmother kept a diary of her time on the road – a handful of anecdotes only go so far in regards to chapter content! However, it's just possible I have something as good – if not better?

⁴⁹ *The Schenectady Gazette*, Jan.12, 1924. Pg. 14

⁵⁰ Albany Evening Journal, Jan. 1924

⁵¹ *Variety*, Aug.2, 1923 issue

⁵² German actor *Ernst Lubitsch* for instance, was not gladly received upon his first trip to the United States in December 1921, for what was intended as a lengthy publicity and professional factfinding tour. World War I was still fresh while a slew of German "New Wave" releases encroached on American movie workers' livelihoods. After little more than three weeks, he cut his trip short and returned to Germany: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernst_Lubitsch

⁵³ Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg.56



On March 4th, 1924, an entertainer boasting years of experience in the US known only as 'A.Krobat'⁵⁴ provides the cover story within Germany's equivalent to *Variety*; *Das Programm*.⁵⁵ Entitled: "Touring in North America" he explains what would-be entertainers ought to expect there. Curiously he also refers to an incident in summer 1922 when his gymnastic troupe was booked for a circus show (an entertainment genre in which he claims considerable knowledge) by a Berlin-based agent. Combined with his story telling which appears to relate life on a circuit, A.Krobat might well have been the pen name of the rockets' manager, Oswald Büttner?⁵⁶ The choice of pseudonym; 'Akrobat,' was perhaps neither coincidental!

Throughout his article he provides his colleagues back in Germany with an 'unadultered' view of conditions in the USA since arriving.⁵⁷ Fondly referring to Amerika as 'Dollarika,' he begins by stating that the biggest towns; New York and Chicago, are full of first class acts looking for work and that without work, life is not cheap. He calls artists' attention to the importance of having a circuit tour booked before arriving (typically on the basis of one's experience within a circus or fairs), in order to ensure at least 15-20 weeks of work. However, he adds that the best money is to be made after a season's end, on the amusement parks (so-called Luna Parks)⁵⁸, in the summer (county and state) fairs, exhibitions and festivals.

He goes on to highlight the importance of the booking office, which will always show interest in new acts but is not always willing to book for lengthy periods: if suitably impressed, managers may book an act for a tour of anywhere between 8-20 weeks, but adds there is the inevitability of surrendering a cut of the performance fee; sometimes as much as 25 percent. Although fail to impress and your "N.G." rating ('no-good,') travels the circuit instead of you!

My grandmother often opined that "Working in vaudeville was nothing but hard work!" and A.Krobat explicitly notes acrobatic and gymnastic troupes have it hardest. From midday till 2300 it's work. With up to four performances a day, there is neither time for respite nor eating. Before, during and after the show, time is needed for make-up and costumes. On top of that, the matinee show and the first of the evening, the so-called Supper Show, tends to be poorly attended which does little for one's motivation. The first and last act on the bill also has 20 or 30 fewer attendees, owing to the late arrivals and early leavers.

⁵⁴ For example in 'big' and 'small time' theatre, the Orpheum, western circuits, independent theatres, besides parks, fairs and the circus.

⁵⁵ *Das Programm: Artistisches Fachblatt Berlin.. Das Organ der Internationalen Artisten-Loge (IAL), ... des Fach- und Berufsverbandes der Spezialitäten-Künstler vom Variété, Zirkus und Kabarett, Sitz Berlin* (in translation: *Das Programm Artistic journal Berlin .. The body of the International Artists' Loge ... of professional and trade association of specialty artists from vaudeville, circus and cabaret, headquarters in Berlin*). See Issue 1151.

⁵⁶ His presence in Germany coincides with Büttner's return there from America in 1922.

⁵⁷ I assume A.Krobat was male, since I have come across no experience thus far of a female manager in vaudeville.

⁵⁸ See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luna_Park for an interesting introduction

Meals are at the performers own expense, although in the bigger theatres, one may be fortunate to be brought a little food. Typically diet revolves around sandwiches, Graham crackers and cheese or perhaps a tin of sardines! In her own autobiography, stage legend, Gypsy Rose Lee, mentioned how her midnight lunches, consisting of hot cakes and syrup, were her favourite (although six was usually her limit)!⁵⁹ If an act has top billing, however, they may be offered a 'Green Room,' where the decoration and service is a little more tasteful. But that one only finds in theatres where two or three shows a day are put on. Otherwise, one must content themselves with passing their free time in the changing room!

The compulsory tip paid to those who manage the stage, including the electrician adds to one's expenses,⁶⁰ which when combined with laundry bills and hairdressing rapidly leaves little cash left to live from, laments our correspondent, especially when laying-off between shows to fit a circuit's programming schedules. This is more problematic in the west of the country where there are about half as many towns as there are in the west, he adds. Yet on average there are between 25 and 40 percent more engagements in comparison with 1914, which means one can expect to work in one year as much as one does in three or four across Germany.

Gypsy Rose Lee typically found the opening days at a new venue hardest,⁶¹ however, in contrast A.Krobat writes the worst was at the end of an engagement, when one has to dismantle their equipment, pack away their gear and travel, only to unpack, re-build, rehearse and perform all over again in a new venue!⁶²

With travelling week-in week-out for months on end, and sometimes twice every week, one can lose their enthusiasm. Working in North America can lead to disappointment, and if you are successfully booked on a tour, you work whether you like it or not. Quickly you'll realize you are just a small cog in a very big wheel. On the positive side, he adds, the Americans are more than helpful toward Germans, often moreso than toward their own countrymen. In the circus one is particularly respected, he adds.

The correspondent finishes by saying he longs for the opportunity to work in Germany for his daily bread rather than the US, where the benefits are fewer than back home. In fact, one can be happy if he finishes his tour with more in their pocket than when they started! Yet Frank Cullen agrees; "work in the USA, however marginally paid, was preferable to the ire economic conditions in Germany at the time."⁶³

⁵⁹ *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 238

⁶⁰ Stage legend Gypsy Rose Lee described gratuity in her autobiography, '*Gypsy: A Memoir*' as a must and always tipped stagehands and musicians upon arrival, since they "could make or break you," (and bad reviews often travelled fast). *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 82

⁶¹ *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 82

⁶² Which added to the wear and tear of all costumes, properties and apparatus noted *Das Programm* in May 16, 1926 too (see *Fremdsprachiger Teil*)

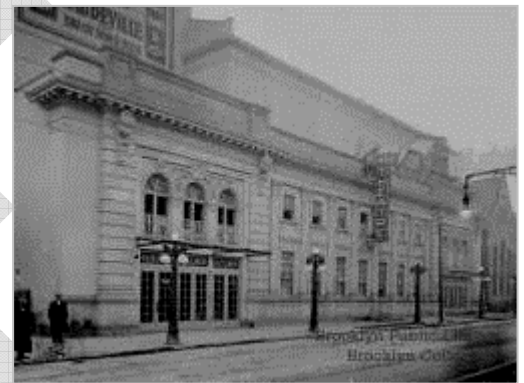
⁶³ Even in 1925, the March 3rd issue that year of *Das Programm* illustrated how difficult the conditions were in Germany for domestic artists, referring to their being forced to go out and seek work elsewhere.

Even if that report wasn't written by Büttner, much of it corresponds with what I recall being said of my grandmother's time in the US, the only difference being that at the time her act was part of a fixed show touring a single circuit putting on two shows a day, as opposed to twice that number.

The troupe returned to New York City for shows on January 20th, the first time they were back there since they'd arrived the previous August. They played the Columbia 'Times Square' Theatre just off Broadway on 7th Avenue – a venue which according to Gypsy Rose Lee was “the theatre of New York.”⁶⁴ Typically it was the premiere point for Columbia Burlesque's season opener,⁶⁵ and it's probably no small coincidence Lou Redelsheimer used to be based out of the same Columbia Theatre Building.⁶⁶

The Queens of Paris toured the East Coast states throughout the first quarter of 1924, fulfilling engagements in Boston, Providence, Philadelphia and Baltimore before returning to New York and Brooklyn's Casino theatre (pictured left) that April.⁶⁷ By mid-May, the Queens of Paris completed their last shows in none other than the US capital: Washington DC.

But instead of heading right back to New York to board a ship bound for Hamburg, the rockets were quickly booked for another year with Columbia as part of Jacobs and Jermon's next revue: “Step This Way.”⁶⁸ With contract in hand, the troupe filled the summer with extra gigs. Consequently there will have been no long holiday break (although I suspect there were a fair few longer lay-offs which may have afforded the girls a chance to enjoy some sun and sand). Barely a month after their DC sojourn, the troupe was lined up as one of four 'Vaudeville' acts to put in a four-day run at the Strand Theatre in Niagara Falls, where they accompanied the top-billing movie: 'The White Moth.' Still, I bet showbiz was second-rate to being at home with younger brother and sister, Theo and Margot.



Above:
Downtown Brooklyn's 'The Casino' (undated)
Source: Brooklyn Public Library

Below:
Niagara Falls Gazette, June 21, 1924



⁶⁴ *The G-String Murders*. Gypsy Rose Lee. Pg. 39. While fiction, according to Erik Lee Preminger's Foreword within 'Mother Finds a Body' (Gypsy's second novel, see pgs. 7, 9), both books drew on her burlesque experience and life.

⁶⁵ See for instance *Variety*, Aug. 2nd, 1923, which advertises "Chuckles of 1923" as the preliminary season opener on August 20th.

⁶⁶ See *Variety*, May 9th - November 1st, 1919.

⁶⁷ According to the April 23rd issue of *Variety*, the show took USD 4,500 at the box-office that 'Holy Week.' If we consider 12 performances were laid on over the course of the week (2 per day for six days), that makes USD 375 per show, which had to be shared six or seven principal acts, ten or so performers and around 16 chorus girls. Not nearly enough in case the rockets were being paid anything in the region of USD 1,500 per week like the Wirth troupe (see Footnote 47).

⁶⁸ The new US immigration law came into effect July 1st, 1924, making a contract prior to this date essential to ensure their stay was not hindered by the new limitations the law introduced.

The rockets' reference to being a Belgian act was notably dropped for the 1924-5 season which got underway in Cincinnati, Ohio on August 25th. Their new tagline was; "*Europe's* surpassing acrobatic sextette." I suppose after a year on the circuit, their company manager was more than sure there was no other act that could lay claim to the same crown – at least not in America.

The show was described by a newspaper journalist in Buffalo in November 1924 as another of Jacobs and Jermon's "big hits" and was pitched as "clean comedy and brilliant wit" in corresponding advertisements. In Rochester a few days later the troupe were described as "six fair European tumblers." In Albany's Evening Journal they were said to have been "brought from Europe especially for this show." For Thanksgiving that year (an American celebration of harvest and the preceding year), the performers put on an "extra big midnight show" at Buffalo's Gayety Theatre, where they were deemed "as unusual as they are entertaining."

The cast was not dissimilar to that of The Queens of Paris, with Swede I. B. Hamp back in the saddle performing among and compering five other acts "interspersed with the action of two elaborate burlettas"⁶⁹ wrote a contented reviewer in The Binghamton Press on November 18th, 1924. Newspaper advertisements call readers' attention to the show's "Famous beauty chorus with a real kick" which I subsequently learned included my grandmother too!⁷⁰ According to reports appearing in Variety, the chorus line was "exceptionally well drilled...The girls look well and really have synchronic dances, which is a distinct departure for burlesque."

The nicest treat though is Variety's reportage that gives us real insight as to what the Büttners' act was up to while on a stage whose sets ran "mostly to flats backed by cycloramas" – a little bit like today's IMAX theatre screens, those cycloramas attempted 360 degree backdrops.⁷¹

"The outstanding specialty hit of the show was the Six Rockets. The girls work on two ladders, then do some excellent ground tumbling. In addition, two of them do a musical stunt upside down, playing on bells with the feet while lying on their backs. The turn was spotted just right and is an ideal one for burlesque."

It's clear Variety's correspondent enjoyed the show, since he adds: "Most of the inconsequential stuff has been eliminated, the show playing snappy and fast from curtain to curtain." Binghamton's reviewer is amusing too when he writes: "The costuming of this show is elaborate and will be a feast for the eyes of the women patrons" (as if they'd be of no interest to men)!

⁶⁹ Comic intermezzos. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burletta>

⁷⁰ "the Six Rockets ...also double into the chorus" Variety, December 17, 1924

⁷¹ See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyclorama>

Costumes, or rather the scantiness of them, was of course a big part of burlesque and in another *Das Programm* article authored by A. Kroat the following February, he claimed as many woes as to be able to write a book (*“Über das Garderobenthema allein könnte ich ein Buch schreiben.”*)⁷² Successfully bringing womenfolk into the audience, however, not only meant higher earnings for the theatre managers but greater social acceptance for variety in general, an issue high on the agenda for Columbia Burlesque as well as for vaudeville in general as they fought for market share.

But battle as they might, Columbia's profits dropped markedly in the years following 1921. As the rockets' second season with Jacobs and Jermon came to an end, new twists lay ahead in the sextette's fortunes. A dispute between the circuit and the American Burlesque Association led to accusations that the Columbia Amusement Company was a monopoly. According to Cullen, "Columbia's show producers flailed about." Some staged dirtier shows, others started putting up money for coloured black and white...vaudeville revues. The Columbia franchise-holders who owned theatres tried vaudeville and then movies - anything to pay the mortgage and the staff. By the mid-1920s, Columbia's shows were far more sedate than any review on Broadway. The chorus girls still wore body stockings! Billy Minsky and Minsky Burlesque were meanwhile redefining burlesque as striptease.⁷³

The rockets' contract with Columbia Burlesque was not renewed. Not only did that leave them without work and income, but without the circuit went their best hope for visa renewal too.

The new US immigration law had entered into force in July 1924, shortly after they'd collected their visas for the next season. Besides limiting immigrants from 'old world' countries to a quota, professionals coming to the US on business were now restricted to a temporary stay of no more than six months. For the rockets' management this was a real concern since larger circuits typically booked acts for a season, i.e. 40 weeks. The consequence was that either they should break their commitment mid-way through the season and leave the country, or present a 40 week contract along with return tickets, cash bonds assuring they'd not become public charges etc. - a tall order for any act and in turn those hiring it, the latter of whom may be inclined to skip the inconvenience and plum for someone local instead.⁷⁴

⁷² *Das Programm*. February 22nd, 1925. Pg. 5-6. Within the article he underlines his experiences of a year ago regarding poor salaries and the costs of touring in the US.

⁷³ By 1927, many of the Columbia Wheel's original theatre owners and show producers retired from the fray, and the once proud Tiffany of burlesque circuits merged with its hated rival, the Mutual Burlesque Association's 'Mutual Wheel.' See F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Routledge, 2006. See 'Columbia Wheel.'

⁷⁴ Interestingly, in rising to foreign artists' defence, *Das Programm's* editorial team implored its US counterpart, "the influential American vaudeville weekly," *Variety*, to assist the "relatively small" number of European artists on US soil to raise its concerns with the State Department (see: *Das Programm*. Sept. 6th 1925. Pgs.11-12). *Variety* in turn obliged and a few weeks later reprinted the response it received, which in turn assured those artists' presenting 40 week contracts that they would be accorded the appropriate visa (see: *Variety*. Sept. 30th, 1925).

Yet a solution presented itself quickly enough. In a testimonial issued June 10th, 1925 by Jacobs and Jermon (see text box below), they announce the act's booking for a third season – only this time with the so-called 'Pantages Circuit.' While at first sight it appears they came to the rockets' rescue, it would appear it was rather Herman Blumenfeld's former business partner, Max Lowenstein who came to theirs. Not many months later, *Das Programm* ran the following news byte; "The Johnson-Lowenstein Office books European acts chiefly for Pantages."⁷⁵

'Pantages Vaudeville' was renowned for its three shows a day policy, known in the business as 'small time.'⁷⁶ The circuit's manager, Alexander Pantages, was a Greek emigrant who owned more than 30 vaudeville theatres and controlled, through management contracts, perhaps 60 more in both the US and Canada.⁷⁷ Those theatres formed a western chain into which he booked and rotated touring acts and long-term contracts, offering up to "35-40 split-weeks worth of engagements."⁷⁸ From 1920 his venues were known as 'combo' houses because he showed Paramount Pictures' films and staged live vaudeville.⁷⁹

10.5: The Six Rockets: The Only Girl Act of this Kind in the World: Currently the Headline Attraction in the Pantages Circuit

We the undersigned, producer and general manager, certify that Oswald and Arno Buettner from Germany were imported and engaged by us along with their ladies' act "THE SIX ROCKETS" for the 1923-1924 season. Although our business principle is to introduce new acts each year, we were led by the great success of the "SIX ROCKETS" among privileged family audiences who visit our shows, to involve the same act for a second season, namely 1924-1925.

As the Buettners renewed the act, improved and Americanized it, success in the second season was so high that we have recruited the act for a third season, and committed them for 1925-1926. Through this commitment, the Buettners with their ensemble "THE SIX ROCKETS" have set a new record within our entire circuit for longevity.

For 30 years we have continuously committed to our shows touring acts, but have never met any as good, pleasurable, lovely and harmoniously collaborative as the "SIX ROCKETS." Rehearsals and practice have always been conducted quietly and diligently, even the entire management, treatment and supervision of Mr. Buettner towards his ladies is perfect in every way and has shown to be highly respectable for which we are also full of praise.

We are ready to be involved with the masters of Germany, Messrs. Oswald and Arno Buettner, at any time and a new act with which we are already familiar, since we have the highest of confidence in them.

NEW YORK, June 10th 1925,

JACOBS & JERMON, INC.
by John & Jermon

Noted among all U.S. trade and daily press, agents and directors as the best womens performance act ever seen in America



⁷⁵ See: *Das Programm*. November, 15th 1925

⁷⁶ Small time circuits typically booked performers in less prestigious theatres in city suburbs, as well in small towns and rural America. Many were often converted saloons, rough-hewn theatres or multi-purpose halls that catered to a wide range of clientele. Small time also paid less and meant 'split weeks,' obliging performers to spend two (unpaid) days each week travelling to the next town rather than one. The distances, however, were shorter, so travel usually cost less as did small town boarding houses or hostels. Small time life was pretty grim, according to 'Mary Miley's Roaring Twenties' at: [marymiley.wordpress.com/2010/02/16/what-was-\"small-time\"-vaudeville/](http://marymiley.wordpress.com/2010/02/16/what-was-\)

⁷⁷ When Blumenfeld's former business partner, Lebanese-born George Hamid's own acrobatic troupe, 'Hamid's Tuzaneens' played 'Pantages Time' in 1915, they opened in Minneapolis, played through western Canada, the Mountain States, California, then back to Texas. See: George A. Hamid Snr and Jnr's; *The Acrobat: A Showman's Topsy-Turvy World...from Buffalo Bill to the Beatles*. Comteq Publishing, 2004. Pg.123.

⁷⁸ See: *Das Programm Ausland: Amerika*. Oct. 18th, 1925

⁷⁹ Rewarded for his pragmatism, Pantages went on to dominate the vaudeville/movie market west of the Mississippi River throughout the 1920s. See: www.hellenism.net/cgi-bin/display_celeb.html?c=86

Not only does Jacobs and Jermon's statement reveal the rockets were booked into 1926, but it also goes to great lengths to congratulate Büttner, extolling the wonders of his act and his management.⁸⁰ Obviously it was meant to impress and I suppose the intended reader was probably the US State Department! In other words, the above attest was a key ingredient in their visa renewal.



Among the rockets' first bookings for Pantages was a string of shows at the end of May for the Strand Theatre in Niagara Falls. "From Sunday to Wednesday" they put in three performances daily at 3, 6:45 and 9 PM, headlining together with Italian magician, Chefalo.⁸¹ They were billed as '5 Big Unit Acts' which means they formed part of a 'complete' programme, rather like those they had been part of for Columbia.

To have followed their 'big time' success in Columbia Burlesque with 'small time' vaudeville for Pantages may have felt something of a disappointment – more typically performers started out in small time with the aim of moving 'up' to the big time. Suddenly everything A.Krobot had written about had become my grandmother's reality!

Yet Gypsy Rose Lee, who played 'Pan Time' herself between 1918 and 1919 wrote in her autobiography that the circuit was full of big timers who happened to be playing small time.⁸² Some consolation! Nevertheless, because the circuit was billing them the joint headline act, Frank Cullen figures "they were likely to be earning more than 90 percent of the [other] acrobatic acts playing vaudeville."

Just how much was that then? Typically "The top dollar The Six Rockets could demand would be about USD 350 a week" says Cullen, although "if they played split weeks that could be as low as USD 200." But "if a vaudeville theatre's talent budget was USD 10,000 a week, the headliner received between a third and a half."

That sounds reasonable, at least until one divides that sum among six girls, two managers plus their exclusive representative(s)! Perhaps at best my grandmother received USD 300 and at worst USD 30 a week! Subtract then overhead (e.g. hotel, transport, food, transfers, liftboys etc.) not to mention the dollars she sent back to Mama (typically most of it) and I suppose she was left with barely more than a few cents to pay for camera film and picture processing!

⁸⁰ See: *Das Programm*. No. 1220. August 23rd, 1925.

⁸¹ Typically, says Frank Cullen, the vaudeville act would open the show and after the fifth act there might be a short intermission before the two-reel (20 minutes) comedy with Charlie Chase would screen, followed by the 90 minute feature length movie 'Soul Fire' closing the show.

⁸² *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Pg. 18.

Columnists nevertheless continue to attest to the quality of the act. In one preview an excited promoter wrote: "The Six Rockets are a group of attractive girls of the athletic type direct from a triumphal tour of the principal capitals of Europe. They will offer a fast and difficult routine of acrobatics that includes some thrilling balancing high in the air on unsupported ladders." (The penmanship is amusing not least for its reference to the tour of European capitals, when clearly the girls had spent the last two seasons trouping the Columbia circuit)!

Subsequent news pieces are more modest but no less flattering: "The Six Rockets, a sextette of charming and talented young women direct from recent triumphs have an electrifying series of acrobatic stunts which they perform with grace and lightning-like rapidity." On June 1st, 1925 a reviewer wrote: "They are one of the hits of the bill" while on June 2nd it was said that "the vaudeville on the Strand program this week is better than ever" and "is a great warm weather show."

At the end of July, the girls were engaged at the LaFayette Square Theatre in neighbouring Buffalo,⁸³ where they performed their "musical act direct from the English halls" with what appears to have been elements from *Step This Way*, given the inclusion of Columbia Burlesque stablemate I.B.Hamp alongside a banjoist. Interestingly, the troupe also spent some of those summer weeks playing venues beyond Pantages. Photographs reveal they were played at least one county fair and in Chris Walczak's view (he being a regular at the online website; www.cinematreasures.org), that shown left was probably taken somewhere in the eastern or midwestern US. In 2011 he wrote: "County fairgrounds - especially in the more rural counties - are characterized by wood frame structures usually painted white" while "exhibitors and performers often were housed in tents during the fair's run."



Above:
A spent rocket? One decamps behind Miss Lissi, illustrating life's not always merry on the road.

Below:
Let's Get Physical!
Little Nanny demonstrates her mettle!

The rockets were likely engaged for the Otsego County Agricultural Society's annual fair, held in Cooperstown (roughly midway between Buffalo and New York City) between 14th - 17th September. Not only were they booked to perform there in subsequent years, but in a series of photographs, Little Nanny limbers up against a skyline that looks just like Otsego Lake's Cooper's Dock (shown right).



⁸³ A Pantages theatre according to: rjbuffalo.com/BECHS/22-palac.doc

The agent behind those fair engagement(s) was probably Büttner's old pal, Herman Blumenfeld. In 1924 he'd joined the Gus Sun Booking Exchange Company to establish an outdoor department.⁸⁴ According to ads posted in *Variety* magazine, its offices were chiefly in the Midwest.⁸⁵ Formerly a circus juggler, Gus Sun ran a 'small-time' circuit that included a variety of theatres between the East Coast and the Rocky Mountains in the west.⁸⁶ From the mid-1920s, however, he began to book acts for carnivals, fairgrounds and amusement parks too.⁸⁷

Playing the fairs reminds me of a tale my grandmother used to share, where she and the girls were chaperoned constantly everywhere. They could not even visit the bathroom unaccompanied! A little background reading, however, reveals the practice was hardly new among highly valued stage acts. According to Marline Otte in *Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment, 1890-1933*, young girls in German circus troupes were practically forbidden to have contact with the male public or romantic involvement with the men in the crew, since either situation potentially endangered a woman's value to the act, not to mention its reputation in the public eye.⁸⁸

On the other hand, chorus girls were "more coveted than any star," writes Jerome Charyn in his snapshot of 1920's America.⁸⁹ Young, with lightning legs, and nervous, narrow hips "even guys...considered very sensible...would go daffy over a doll."⁹⁰ Parodied in a 1919 Broadway hit, 'The Gold Diggers,' they garnered that monicker thanks to playwright, Avery Hopwood's portrayal of a "grasping, greedy girl who 'digs' for success and a big fat marriage" (but who, thanks to her heart of gold, is transformed into an ever-loving wife)!⁹¹

⁸⁴ According to *Variety* on June 14th, 1923, Blumenfeld and Lowenstein sold their share in the New York State-oriented Wirth-Blumenfeld Fair Booking Association (cca. April 19th) to Frank Wirth and George Hamid (following the former's arrival to the US in 1919, Wirth managed Australian Mae Wirth's equestrienne act - see:

www.circopedia.org/May_Wirth, while Hamid was a Lebanese acrobat who'd arrived in the US in 1907 as part of the Buffalo Bill Wild West show). Blumenfeld moved to Gus Sun around the summer of 1924 (see *Variety* August 6th, 1924, pg. 46), a position he retained until Nov. 27, 1928. An ad posted in *Variety* on Nov. 26th, 1924, however, reveals Blumenfeld (through Gus Sun) continued to be 'affiliated with' the Wirth-Hamid Booking Association.

⁸⁵ Its main office (where Blumenfeld was now based) was in Springfield, Ohio at its New Regent Theatre Building although it also had an office in San Francisco by virtue of its connections to the so-called Ackerman-Harris circuit. See for instance *Variety*, Nov. 26, 1924 and Dec. 30, 1925.

⁸⁶ F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Routledge, 2006. See 'Gus Sun Circuit.'

⁸⁷ According to *Variety* on March 4th, 1925, both Gus Sun and Blumenfeld's former partners' Wirth/Hamid were "mining" the fair circuits that year, the latter as far as the west, which resulted in the "fair booking business becoming more split up than in years before."

⁸⁸ Marline Otte, *Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment, 1890-1933*. 2006. Pg. 68

⁸⁹ Jerome Charyn. *Gangsters and Gold Diggers*. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. Pg.13-14.

⁹⁰ Damon Runyon Omnibus. Project Gutenberg Australia. See: gutenberg.net.au/ebooks11/1100651h.html

NB: Runyon was an American newspaperman and author who wrote short stories celebrating the world of Broadway in New York City that grew out of the Prohibition era.

⁹¹ Jerome Charyn. *Gangsters and Gold Diggers*. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. Pg.14 and Pg. 52

While it was to the gangsters that the teen-aged girl appealed most⁹² (a character America was not short on after the war),⁹³ imagine my surprise when I learned of the marriage that summer of one of the rockets: the 'orphaned' Annedore Frenkel, to none other than their 'sensible' manager; Arno Büttner!



In some ways his involvement with a rocket may not have been entirely unexpected: young 25 year old male spends two years on the road and at close quarters with a group of "charming and talented, young, attractive girls." Well, something was bound to happen I suppose. But just consider what that marriage did for team morale: one rocket will have been treated more favourably while the rest remained bereft of certain 'benefits.' Conversely I can only imagine spite and envy!

The Büttners' joy was shared with all *Das Programm's* readers on August 23rd, 1925 and was printed alongside a full German version of the Jacobs and Jermon testimonial. Besides confirming these *a.krobats* shared a relationship with the paper (and that Arno and Annedore's 'home' was now Rochester),⁹⁴ almost certainly the ad was also intended to impress acquaintances back home, Frank Cullen going as far as to say it "was likely devised to set the stage there for bookings after their triumphant return from America."

Coincidentally, the rockets' residency at Pantages lasted only as long as the summer. A string of *Das Programm* adverts reveal they jumped up to the big time and to "the most prestigious circuit in the country," the Keith Albee Circuit.⁹⁵ "Everybody...in the business...longed to book [for] the Keith Circuit!" Blumenfeld's former business partner, George Hamid,⁹⁶ once said. ⁹⁶It was more than just a big break. It was to prove critical to the act's long term success. But I can't help but wonder, who put them there?



The United Booking Office (or UBO) was the sole entryway to the circuit,⁹⁷ and according to an article appearing in *Das Programm*, the biggest booking offices preferred to deal with artists' personal or exclusive representatives, i.e. one who was recognized, rather than the artists directly.⁹⁸ But if Lowenstein brought the act to Pantages, could he have brought them to Keith's too?

⁹² Jerome Charyn. *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway*. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. Unnumbered page containing an image of Ruby Keeler and corresponding caption.

⁹³ In fact it helped create them, many being ex-soldiers who were unable to adjust to the blandness of civilian life, while the prohibition of alcohol in 1920 gave them a cause. Together with bootleggers, they ruled the decade as they nourished the speakeasy: covert bars where alcohol flowed freely. See also Charyn, Pg. 53-54

⁹⁴ Not just according to the *Das Programm* announcement but also subsequent ship manifests while curiously Detroit was also mentioned alongside in Arno's father's manifests of July 15th, 1928

⁹⁵ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 17

⁹⁶ *The Acrobat*. Pg.80.

⁹⁷ Established way back in 1906, Benjamin Keith and his partner Edward Albee founded the 'United Booking Office' (or UBO) to match performers and theatres more efficiently. Use of the service cost artists a percentage of their fee, however, the Keith's Circuit dominated the booking office, which is why it became so important for artists wishing to work on the circuit. Alison Kibler in *Rank Ladies* - see Pg. 17.

⁹⁸ *Das Programm*. 28th November, 1926. *Fremdsprachiger Teil*. Pg. 11-12. NB: Referring to practice up until early 1926.

Probably, yes, is my much contemplated conclusion. Not only was he being referenced as the rockets' exclusive representative the following year, but the earlier referenced *Das Programm* news item ("Lowenstein...books European acts chiefly for Pantages,") could almost be interpreted a disclaimer. Published in late 1925 (after the rockets' signed for Keith's), it implies no real conflict of interest lay with whomever his office booked acts for, but that his priorities lie with Pantages.⁹⁹

With the act originally contracted for a season with Pantages (amidst the uncertainty caused by the expiry of their visas), what now became of that commitment? The circuit wasn't in direct competition with Keith's, by virtue of its servicing western USA, but as the rockets appear to have played no further dates for Pantages, I can only assume they were simply released from the agreement.¹⁰⁰

Being back in the 'big time' meant two shows a day and in principle, week-long stints. Not only that. Keith's became their 'home' for the rest of their US-based touring days. With 34 'big time' vaudeville theatres including eight in New York, four in Brooklyn, two in Boston and many others dotted along the East Coast, in Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky,¹⁰¹ that also meant they'd be spending more time within and around New York City. And what a time to be there, as the text box overleaf reveals!

The earliest Six Rockets' engagement for Keith's appears to have taken place in the week beginning October 25th, when they performed at the E. F. Albee Theatre in Brooklyn, as part of a 'Famous Broadway Stars Week' bill "for which the *Palace* [theatre] is noted."¹⁰² Among the cast were that famous 'German' duo 'Weber and Fields' (see Pg. 305), while the Six Rockets "complete the program."

"Complete the program?!" I suppose one might imagine being the finale as creditable, but according to Alison Kibler writing in her study of vaudeville's women; *Rank Ladies*; "The first and last positions were usually reserved for a certain type of act – a sight act or an act that could be appreciated despite the noise of arriving and departing customers."¹⁰³ That hardly sounds like a 'graduation' from small-time, much less burlesque!

But even Cullen confesses acrobat shows were labeled 'dumb' acts since dialogue was not part of their performance and as a result, they were usually the lowest paid and typically least honored in vaudeville. Whatsmore, only a few broke out of the opening and closing spots on the bill – when people were walking in late, searching for seats and doffing outerwear or leaving early after seeing the headliner in the next-to-closing spot (the latter known as "playing to haircuts" because performers had to glance at the back of each head, as the audience disappeared).¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ A novelty connected to the rockets' arrival at Keith's is the appearance of a news item in *Das Programm* entitled 'Ausland/Amerika' around the same time – October 18th, 1925 – announcing that the Keiths-Albee Vaudeville Exchange (booking office) in New York was now looking to establish permanent representation in Europe in order to identify acts.

¹⁰⁰ Perhaps there was a barter: Pantages 'lost' The Six Rockets but 'gained' Lowenstein's services?

¹⁰¹ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 17

¹⁰² The Brooklyn Eagle on Oct. 25, 1925. Pg. 2E.

¹⁰³ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 151-152

¹⁰⁴ Jerome Charyn: *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway*. Pg. 39

10.6: Manhattan, the 'Roaring' Twenties and Flappers

According to Jerome Charyn, Manhattan in 1924 was the hottest place on the planet. It had become the mecca of a new, energized atmosphere that followed the mood left by the war. The disillusion and fatigue caused by it in turn helped create the flapper; the girl who didn't give a damn, as well as the gangster. "New York" he states, "had all the iridescence of the beginning of the world."



Flappers were a "new breed" of independent young Western women who wore short skirts, bobbed their hair and listened to jazz. Popular writers of the time such as F. Scott Fitzgerald popularized her look and lifestyle through their works and together with his wife, Zelda, they became idols of "the Jazz Age;" a phrase he coined at the beginning of the 1920s to reflect its rise in popularity together with dance.

The 'Roaring' Twenties heralded the birth of an era. Far from being an age of politics, it was a time of infectious consumerism and enterprise. Manhattan (an old Indian word with a double meaning: "island of hills" and "drunken homeland") represented New York City. "Its uniqueness," he continues, "was that even after the British seized it and the American colonialists rid themselves of the British yoke, it would remain Dutch, with a love of business and brawling."

Lindy's, a Jewish delicatessen on Broadway towards the upper end of Manhattan that had opened in 1921 became world famous for its cheesecake. Everybody ate there, Harpo Marx recalling; "cardplayers, horseplayers, bookies, song pluggers, agents, actors out of work and actors playing the Palace, Al Jolson with his mob of fans, and Arnold Rothstein with his mob of runners and flunkies."

Among Manhattan's other biggest celebrities of the era were Mayor Jimmy Walker, Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice of the Ziegfeld Follies, Charlie Chaplin (who'd just finished *The Gold Rush* and who in 1925 was the most famous person that ever lived), besides Gloria Swanson.

Speaking of stars, Hollywood hadn't really taken hold and many still therefore commuted from Central Park West to the Cosmopolitan Studio in East Harlem or Paramount's Astoria Studios across the East River and Hell Gate. The latter's biggest star was Gloria Swanson, an authentic siren of the silver screen. No wonder she became one of my grandmother's favourites, while she would go on to perform alongside Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker! In later life she may well have been forgiven for being heard uttering, "Those were the days"!

Sources: Jerome Charyn. Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway; besides en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flapper and .../Roaring_Twenties
Image showing a fashionably dressed flapper in the 1920s by Russell Patterson: "Where there's smoke there's fire"

On the bright side, Brooklyn's E. F. Albee Theatre had only just opened in January that year. It had crystal chandeliers in the lobby and paintings from Edward Albee's private collection. It also contained a 40 x 70 foot Czech Maffersdorf carpet, itself billed as the world's largest rug!¹⁰⁵

Opulence was very much in line with Keith's strategy of providing "A Palace for the Masses." His theatres had ushers and offered a wide range of amusements within a "buffet of a vaudeville bill" that intended to offer something for everyone. By hosting women and children at matinees, elite patrons in posh-box seats, and the rowdy men and boys in the gallery, his intent was democratic entertainment for the masses.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ See: cinematreasures.org/theater/1302/ Like so many of Keith's theatre 'palaces,' it closed in September 1978 and was demolished that November to make way for the Albee Square Mall (which itself was demolished in the Summer of 2008)

¹⁰⁶ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 24-25, 54

For instance, rude behaviour by audiences was prohibited while crude remarks and risqué costumes were censored from performances. Bare-legged women patrons were asked to put on tights and female performers were ordered to lengthen their skirts and discontinue high kicks. Many phrases were also eliminated from performers' repertoires. For example, "what the devil," "damn," and "son of a gun" were all cut from comedian Chris Richard's 1918 act. Those who sneered at it dubbed it "The Sunday school circuit," while Cullen deemed it a "banner of righteousness."¹⁰⁷

This "respectability" must've been a boon to the rockets, but the pressure to maintain it on the Keith/Albee circuit was conversely among a manager's central concerns. If taming suggestive acts was one of his tasks, the search for novelty was another. Managers showed little enthusiasm for instance, for veteran vaudevillians that had not revised their acts from the previous season and instead praised unusual acts, including women performing traditional male acts. Two acrobats, Tony Wilson and Mademoiselle Heloise, earned Boston manager M.J. Keating's approval: "Another great 'sight' act, which scored a hit. The novelty in it is the woman doing the work usually performed by the male partner and doing it well."¹⁰⁸

Even if that remark was made at the turn of the century, it's clear female acrobats still held appeal in the mid-1920s, which I guess helps to explain why the rockets found their niche at Keiths. Look again at the advert on pg. 315. In the space of two years the rockets had gone from being a 'Belgian act' to 'Europe's Surpassing Sextette.' Before long they were being dubbed; "The only novelty girl act of this kind in the world."

Theatre owners knew that feminine influence could improve their industry's reputation, valuable at a time when variety was fast losing ground to the motion picture industry. As early as 1916 one actress declared: "Vaudeville is kept wholesome by women."¹⁰⁹ Yet at the same time their acrobatic routines were showcases for femininity that promised tantalizing views of their bodies – according to Kibler, most acrobatic acts in vaudeville contained a "sexual enigma," a tradition extending back through the history of the circus. Feminine apparel and display were thus central to these acts.¹¹⁰

Female acrobats also became a symbol of women's liberation, while their muscular bodies represented feminist stance.¹¹¹ Combining "masculine" feats of muscle with lightning quickness, they defied physical limitations by flying through the air (no wonder they were dubbed *rockets*)! As representatives of the 'new woman,' female acrobats were a sexy and assertive improvement over the frail feminine ideal of the nineteenth century. But were they also perceived as mannish with a hint of sexual deviance? It wouldn't be long before a rocket donned a tie!¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Routledge, 2006. See 'Keith-Albee Circuit.'

¹⁰⁸ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 146

¹⁰⁹ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 7

¹¹⁰ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 30, 145, 147-8

¹¹¹ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 143

¹¹² M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 144

The troupe's Brooklyn shows were followed by revue performances at the Keith Albee Riverside on 58th Street and Broadway, close to Manhattan's Central Park. According to *Variety's* reviewer, the rockets closed with "double ladder evolutions and posing."¹¹³



Come Christmas week, the rockets had moved on to central Manhattan and B. F. Keith's Hippodrome on Sixth Avenue¹¹⁴ - officially the Avenue of the Americas. It might not have been much of a Christmas for the girls as they got on with their seasonal special, described by *Variety* on December 23rd as a: "Circusy show at the Hip this week, okay for the kiddies and obviously framed for their particular education." The rockets, advertised as "THE SPEEDIEST EUROPEAN ACROBATIC NOVELTY GIRL ACT," opened the show and were given the thumbs up as "a sturdy female sextet, doing aero, ground tumbling, pyramid building and strong man stuff in keeping with the pace established by their masculine contemporaries."¹¹⁵

The following week (January 4th, 1926), the rockets reached what ought to have been the pinnacle of their vaudeville career, when they played Broadway's Palace theatre (pictured within the text box on pg. 301).¹¹⁶ The Palace was the premiere venue not only of the Keith-Albee circuit but of vaudeville full stop.¹¹⁷ Everyone wanted to play the Palace. In booking agent, George Hamid's words; "The Palace was the prize!"¹¹⁸ while performer Jack Haley wrote:

"Only a vaudevillian who has trod its stage can really tell you about it... only a performer can describe the anxieties, the joys, the anticipation, and the exultation of a week's engagement at the Palace. The walk through the iron gate on 47th Street through the courtyard to the stage door, was the cum laude walk to a show business diploma. A feeling of ecstasy came with the knowledge that this was the Palace, the epitome of the more than 15,000 vaudeville theaters in America, and the realization that you have been selected to play it. Of all the thousands upon thousands of vaudeville performers in the business, you are there. This was a dream fulfilled; this was the pinnacle of Variety success."

Perhaps Little Nanny never really dreamt of playing the Palace, but who cares? She had made it to Broadway! Everyone knows the famous 1960's recording 'On Broadway' but her all-girl troupe was its stars 40 years before the song was written! The textbox overleaf, which centres on that famous street, once again draws heavily on Charyn's look at 1920s New York.

¹¹³ *Variety*, 28th Oct. 1925, Pg. 15

¹¹⁴ According to the 23rd Dec. 1925 issue of *Variety* magazine

¹¹⁵ *Variety*, 23rd Dec., 1925, Pg. 13

¹¹⁶ At 1564 Broadway and 47th street.

¹¹⁷ See: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palace_Theatre_\(New_York_City\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palace_Theatre_(New_York_City))

¹¹⁸ George A. Hamid Snr and Jnr; *The Acrobat: A Showman's Topsy-Turvy World...from Buffalo Bill to the Beatles*. Comteq Publishing, 2004. Pg.81

10.7: On Broadway

Broadway was a vaudevillian's dream where one hadn't to go "out of town." At the same time it was the capital of the night. It started as an old Indian trail that cut a swath across Manhattan and continued through the Bronx (to its north). The Dutch called it *Breede Wegh* (Broadway), back when it was the main road of New Amsterdam.

In 1915, Frenchman Georges Claude invented neon light, which transformed the Big Street into a blaze of green and blue, creating the illusion of a perpetual shimmering night: a modern Babylon. The original "Great White Way," however, was much further down Broadway, next to Union Square. But as Manhattan's theatres and music halls inched up from Park Row and Union Square they began to cluster around the "deuce" – 42nd Street and Broadway. Theatergoing therefore became a long, long march up the 'ribs' of Manhattan, with Broadway its spine or "Main Stem."

Although statisticians argue over exactly how many theatres there were, some say eighty, some seventy, everyone agreed that Broadway's theaters were booming in the twenties. During these years, the number of productions increased from 126 in 1917 to 264 in 1928, which is still the all-time peak. A magical, almost hypnotic interchange existed between the performer and the crowd, a palpable, silent energy that passed from one to the other, a language that could be found nowhere else. In turn it gave birth to names such as Stephen Sondheim, Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein, Cole Porter, and George Gershwin.

Come 1925, the Big Street flowed as a central capitalist space and lived within an exuberant whirl of energy, a signage that lit the night with ads like 'Lucky Strike' and 'Pepsi Cola,' besides a social order that included apartment hotels and rooming houses, delicatessens and vaudeville palaces, nightclubs and cabarets. It was capitalism's Crazy Horse, where everything goes. It was where people fell in love with beautiful girls and beautiful shows.

According to Charyn, almost all the dolls on Broadway were chorus girls from the Ziegfeld Follies, Earl Carroll's Broadway musical; "Vanities," or Missouri Martin's Sixteen Hundred Club. Sophie Tucker was herself a chorus girl from the Sixteen Hundred Club, while Fanny Brice became the biggest and best-loved star of the Follies. To be one of its girls was "The most modern and daring of all female occupations."

Paramount Pictures would raid the Follies and the rest of Broadway periodically and it's surprising perhaps that none of the rockets ever 'sold out.' I suppose that's because there were contracts to honour and reputations to maintain, not to mention promises to their mothers! Still I do wonder whether my grandmother ever considered jumping ship given all those big names about her? Just what would *Mama* have said if she'd done so, recalling she'd been keen on having her own filmstar daughter? I suppose fear of the unknown probably set 'Little' Nanny back most – after all, she was 'only' 18 – still a little too young for gold-digging!

Sources:

Jerome Charyn. *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway*, besides www.barrypopik.com/index.php/new_york_city/entry/main_stem; and www.1920s-fashion-and-music.com/history-of-broadway-new-york.html



Yet playing the Palace was perhaps not the celebration it might have been, despite the Büttners surely having dressed it up so. By 1926 only fourteen big-time theatres remained in the US offering straight vaudeville (besides the Palace). Movies were gradually contributing to its decline and the rockets were already no strangers to sharing top billing with a movie. As Alison Kibler notes, by the 1920s, vaudevillians were more likely to be providing the accompaniment for the main attraction – motion pictures – than to be the main attraction themselves.¹¹⁹ However, it was not only cinema that posed a threat. There was also the new medium of 'wireless telephony,' which is described in the textbox below.

¹¹⁹ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 201

10.8: "Radio has damn near ruined Vaudeville"

The term radio receiver entered the language as early as 1903, but it wasn't until November 2nd, 1920 that the first radio broadcast station opened in East Pittsburgh. The following year the New York Times newspaper referred to the exciting new medium of 'wireless telephony,' and like a new craze, says Charyn "radio began to counter the silent ghosts of the movies, with the clatter, fury and chaos of a world that's like the Big Street."

Beginning in 1922, over the next three years, more than four million radio sets were sold at an average price of USD 55 (NB: each of the Rockets arrived to New York with USD 25 to their names)! Everyday use of the term entered the language that year but only one home in 500 had a radio. By 1926, however, one in 20 had one and by the end of the decade, saturation was almost complete. With the advent of centralized programming from the National Broadcasting Company in mid-November 1926, suddenly radio was spreading Broadway's fast talk and bouncy music to the rest of America so that half the country spoke 'Broadway.' Such was the obsequiousness of the radio networks that by the early 1930s many were allowing the sponsors to take complete artistic and production control of the programmes.

Yet it was already in early 1922 that Gypsy's manager, Sam 'Waxy' Gordon was heard to say: "It's radio Rose. Radio has damn near ruined Vaudeville."

"Radio!" Gypsy's mother's retorted. "Those earphones will never take the place of vaudeville." She wasn't far off being right - it would be cinema!

Sources:

Jerome Charyn. *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway.* Pg. 54
Bill Bryson, *Made in America.* pg. 318 and Gypsy: *A Memoir.* Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 92
F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America.* Routledge, 2006. 'Introduction.'

Besides cinema, vaudeville was also facing greater competition from full length revues, such as the *Ziegfeld Follies*. Whereas vaudeville bills often included spectacular revues as a single act, full-length revues increased in popularity after 1915, employing vaudevillians and stealing many of vaudeville's middle class customers along the way.¹²⁰ (It's perhaps no surprise that when Fanny Brice wasn't in the Follies, her "home" was the Palace, notes Charyn).¹²¹

Between 1907 and 1931 there were 21 editions of the Follies. Its famous extravangzas only required gorgeous showgirls to "walk regally across the stage displaying their charms in the most extraordinary decollegates" said Pola Negri after seeing them for the first time.¹²² However, such productions, reviewed as vaudeville shows through the early twentieth century, used thin narratives such as a trip through New York City, which in turn gave players the opportunity to do comic bits or song-and-dance routines too. Borrowing the chain of intense performances from the structure of a vaudeville bill, the producers added lavish scenery that gave their shows an air of "sophistication."¹²³

That begins to sound like Columbia Burlesque and it was the latter's critics who had already started making their voices heard, noting its shows were now trying to compete with what vaudeville and revue set out to offer.¹²⁴ That conflict of interest eventually contributed to the downfall of Columbia Burlesque and as the market contracted, there was inevitably going to be casualties as players fought to survive.

¹²⁰ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville.* 1999. Pg. 201

¹²¹ Jerome Charyn: *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway.* Pg. 47

¹²² *Memoirs of a Star.* Pola Negri. Doubleday and Company, 1970. Pg. 201

¹²³ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville.* 1999. Pg. 201

¹²⁴ F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America.* Routledge, 2006. See 'Columbia Wheel.' Pg. 253.

Albee's response to the competition was to cut employees' salaries and fire other workers at the Palace in an effort to make the theatre competitive with the posh new movie houses that had moved into the same neighbourhood. The strategy worked, since by 1928 *Variety* reported "a line in front of the Palace's Monday matinee - on its way to the Roxy [movie theatre]."¹²⁵ The circuit's next move (and perhaps most humiliating to vaudeville's live performances) was to stop using drum crashes and spotlights during their acts to avoid disturbing customers who wanted to sleep through these and wake up only for the movies.¹²⁶

But despite my doom and gloom, the rockets were far from being done in vaudeville just yet. A week later they performed in Reading, Pennsylvania, and the week after that they were back in Niagara Falls, performing "Supreme Vaudeville" at Keith's Bellevue Theatre,¹²⁷ the January 16th issue of the Niagara Falls Gazette billing them; "Sensational European Lady Entertainers." That meant four days on the trot, Sunday to Wednesday in a continuous run of shows from 2:00 to 11:00 PM, as part of "a bill that defies comparison."

One of the tales my grandmother most often used to pass on about her time on the American stage was its four to five shows a day routine. I started to doubt that, after reading about Columbia Burlesque two shows a day and then big-time Keiths. But that was exactly what 'Continuous Vaudeville' was all about. Described by Cullen in his *Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* as a 'grind policy,' it meant four to six shows a day that allowed patrons to come and go as they please. This then is how theatres dealt with high weekly talent costs and their overhead when audiences could no longer afford the ticket prices - or wouldn't because cinema offered better value for money. Alas, while it may have been "an accommodating time killer for the customer, it exhausted the performers" says Cullen.¹²⁸

The preview for the Niagara Falls engagements was again positive. The bill was "headed by The Six Rockets, one of the most sensational acrobat turns seen in a long time...a feminine sextette from Europe who present a daring routine in a gracefully pretty manner. These six girls are a versatile troupe. Their forte is acrobatics but they do a little of everything from playing musical instruments up."

From there it was on to Buffalo and then the eastern shores of Lake Erie in Dunkirk, where at the end of January the troupe was described as "an act of great entertaining value...[that] combined a lot of unusual novelty...which brought forth much applause."

¹²⁵ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 200

¹²⁶ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 200

¹²⁷ See: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rapids_Theatre

¹²⁸ F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Routledge, 2006. See 'Keith-Albee Circuit' and 'Circuits and Theatres.'

By April, The Six Rockets' marketing machine was beginning to employ new tricks in their advertising. The ad right is for the Jefferson Theatre in Auburn, New York.¹²⁹ It shows the troupe was now being promoted via their portraits, which in turn became photographs in the *Binghamton Press* on April 1st (see below), when the paper previewed "Attractions Coming to Binghamton's Theatres." For the first time we see the outfits the troupe wore on stage.



According to another 'telegram' posted by A.Krobat in *Das Programm* in February 1925, photos like these would have been placed in front of theatres, in the windows for instance or in the lobby (at the same time he bemoans their cost: 100 photographs costs at least 25 to 40 dollars)!¹³⁰

According to the Jefferson show's preview, "Their offering abounds with daring stunts and performances." Yet coincidentally, the choice of wording is almost identical to that which appears in the *Fredonia Censor* on January 27th, suggesting editors typically 'copy pasted' from press releases or advance 'information for editors' notices.

Little Nannÿ makes it into the papers at last! She's on the left in the ad above, published on April 12th, 1926 in the *Auburn Citizen* as well as below, published in the *Binghamton Press*, April 1st. The inset is our original, but without the ad, I could never have dated the photo(s)!



A fascinating theatre anecdote appeared in the *Auburn Citizen* 80 years later under the heading: "Reminiscing about Auburn's theaters" on June 18th, 2006. In it Carmelo Signorelli shares:

"When I was a child our family lived... behind the Jefferson. Several of us...would... look...at performers in a basement dressing room. If we were seen...we would be yelled at, and we'd beat a hasty retreat."

I can't help but wonder, what if he'd been caught gawping at my grandmother?!

A curiosity in the above ad is the use of the word 'photoplays' which according to Bill Bryson in *Made in America* was intended to replace the term 'movies,' which had begun to take on an unsavoury tone from 1912 (clearly it never took on)!¹³¹



Quiz Question: how many times a week did the rockets visit the hairdressers?

¹²⁹ cinematreasures.org/theater/18949/. According to www.cayugacounty.us/portals/0/history/nowthen/index.html it had been a Keith's Theatre since 1925

¹³⁰ *Das Programm*. 22nd February, 1925. *Ausland/Amerika*.

¹³¹ Bill Bryson, *Made in America*. pg. 357



Many more photographs of the troupe arose as a result of the move to Keith's. That left is among my all-time favourites – it simply sums up an era! For a start, just look at those hats and low-waisted dresses. My grandmother (on the steps, right back) smirks alongside 'Miss Lissi' Huebner, while the 'it girl' at the forefront, Melanie Geidel, in her tie and with hand on hip, brims with confidence and boyish indifference.¹³² Getrud Tafel to her right grins and enjoys the joke. In pleasant sunshine with a spring breeze to go, the brownstone building, contrasting black and white tones and little more than an iron fence to lend continuity from fore to background, only someone with a real photographer's eye could have composed it. The shot is informative too, although at the same time it is something of an enigma since it may not have had much to do with Keith's at all!

10.9: The Mad Hatters

The majority of the headwear (but not all) that we see the rockets wearing in the above and subsequent photos was known as the *Cloche* hat. It is a fitted, bell-shaped hat that was invented by Caroline Reboux in 1908, and became especially popular during the 1920s. It continued to be commonly seen until about 1933.

Cloche hats were usually made of felt so that they conformed to the head. They were typically designed to be worn low on the forehead, with the wearer's eyes only slightly below the brim (as can be seen clearly in the photo above). Its name is derived from *cloche*, the French word for 'bell.'

Not surprisingly, the hats shaped hairstyles too: the so-called Eton crop – the short, slicked-down cut worn by "the highest-paid chorus girl in vaudeville," Josephine Baker – became popular because it helped showcase the hat's shape. Another popular style was of course the Bob cut, not quite as extreme but popularly worn by flappers.

Some photos of the rockets without their hats demonstrate this point exactly – just look at the photo of the girls at Atlantic City on Pg. 330. The author of *www.1920s-fashion-and-music.com* is not far off when he writes of the women's short hair movement: "It wasn't very flattering!"

Sources: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloche_hat; www.1920s-fashion-and-music.com/1920s-hairstyles.html; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920s_in_Western_fashion and www.fashion-era.com/hats-hair/hats_hair_7a_hat_styles_1920_1930.htm (image)



¹³² 'It' was defined as a quality of mind as well as of physical attraction. The expression reached global attention in 1927, with the film *It*, starring Clara Bow. See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It_girl

According to Cullen's vaudeville encyclopedia, Keeney's Theatres represented "one of the smallest of the small-time outfits." It had theatres based on Third Avenue in Manhattan, while this on Livingston St. and Hanover Place was to be found in downtown Brooklyn.¹³³ The photo was probably made at the back or side of the theatre, near the entrance for stage performers. It was a 'palatial' venue whose policy then was feature film and vaudeville. I suspect it to have been taken in the summer of 1926, since the theatre was sold to Loew's Inc. that June, reports *cinematresures.org*.¹³⁴ According to the vaudeville poster in the background, the program changed on Mondays and Thursdays and performances ran from 1130 AM to 11PM, suggesting continuous vaudeville combined with feature film presentations.

The rockets' presence at the theatre was probably down to their affiliation with Blumenfeld, since Gus Sun maintained a stake in Keeney's.¹³⁵ Whether the rockets actually put in a show at Keeney's though is another question considering their commitment to Keith's (although by early summer their season should have at least finished).¹³⁶ I suppose Keeney's may have urgently needed an act because another failed to show up, and if so, I suspect the rockets would have likely played anonymously (and in so doing have been nicknamed: 'The Disappointment Act)!'

If not for posterity (assuming it went up in the window) the photo was probably taken to woo potential customers! However, one of the nicest aspects of it is the fact that the girls appear to be having fun. Being seen in fashionable street clothes was also an important part of publicity, especially when people saw you walk down the street, "putting up a front." Lest we forget those in the booking office! According to Gypsy Rose Lee's former family act manager, "If you let the managers think you have money in the bank, they won't insult you by offering a small salary."¹³⁷

If Blumenfeld brought the rockets to Keeney's, it was again Lowenstein who introduced them to one of New York's grandest: the Strand Theatre. Located on Broadway in Times Square, it had one of the largest stages in the city when it opened in 1914.¹³⁸ It later went on to become one of the earliest movie palaces.¹³⁹ Tinseltoes, another denizen of *cinematresures.org*, told me in early 2011 that if my grandmother's act was good enough to play a major theatre like the Strand, the company that represented them was probably one of the top agencies, i.e. Johnson & Lowenstein.¹⁴⁰

¹³³ F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Routledge, 2006. See 'Keeney's Theatres.'

¹³⁴ However, it didn't visibly become a Loew's theatre until early summer 1927. See: cinematresures.org/theater/4149/

¹³⁵ According to an ad published in *Variety* in December, 1925, his booking office's vaudeville activities were under the auspices of the Sun-Keeney Vaudeville Agency. See *Variety*, December 30th 1925. Pg. 76

¹³⁶ According to Alison Kibler, "If performers...played for...competition, they could be blacklisted from performing on the Keith circuit in the future." *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 17.

¹³⁷ *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 26

¹³⁸ See: cinematresures.org/theater/2975/ and www.nycago.org/Organs/NYC/html/StrandTheatre.html.

¹³⁹ Stage shows were then dropped in 1929 and it was later demolished in 1987 to make way for the the redevelopment of Times Square. See also: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Strand_Theatre

¹⁴⁰ Coincidentally, 1914 also happened to be the year the Blumenfeld-Lowenstein-Johnson booking agency was founded, therefore I suspect the company had probably been located there since that date.



Above and Below:
Athletic Beauties in Picturesque Posing
(and skimpy costumes!)
Gertrud Tafel (left) and Melanie Geidel
(right) warm up for what was in all
likelihood another fairground gig.



Whether the rockets actually played the Strand, however, is again as much of a mystery as that which concerns Keeney's. The poster right is one of the few my grandmother kept from her vaudeville days and at first glance it looks like a theatre performance poster too. Regrettably text has been clipped from the top and grammatical convention would suggest a pair's name appeared there (it would otherwise say 'presents'). But what those missing words were is anybody's guess. Johnson & Lowenstein perhaps, or Büttner & Büttner?

Of course the clipping may simply have been part of the troupe's promotional arsenal for putting up in theatre foyers. Fortunately though, the flyer tells us a great deal more about the act. First of all it contains a photo, which gives us another glimpse of their costumes; strong on feminine glitter that emphasize beauty and appearance, important elements in balancing a vaudeville bill. It also gives us the next best thing to a photo of the girls in action – diagrammes! Not only does it name their novelty tricks: The Human Top, the Musical Risley and Arabian Pyramids but we also get a peek as to how the acts were performed.

The musical risley was an abacus with bells on, which as one can see from the flyer, was played while lying on one's back with both feet raised upwards. In this case the rocket rather made use of her feet, just as a juggler does with his hands.¹⁴¹

According to John S. Clarke writing in *Circus Parade*, a man named Risley introduced this form of acrobatics into the circus around the year 1868. "Risley acrobats are amazingly clever," he adds. "They juggle with and throw the human body as easily and with as much accuracy as they do a barrel." Usually they are spring-board artistes as well, varying their act with forwards and backwards somersaults.

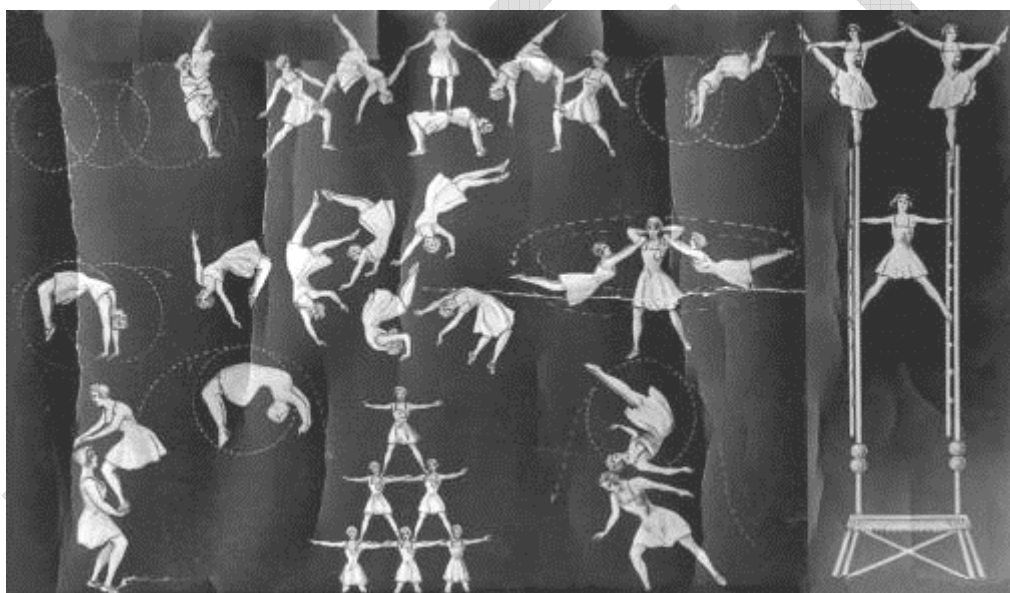
The rockets also made great use of a pair of ladders in their act, something which had been part and parcel of it since they set foot on Uncle Sam's shores of course! The ladders were obviously freestanding, so retaining one's act while performing the routine added a measure of difficulty, writes Cullen. A juggler (perhaps the lass who played the musical risley) tossed hoops, spheres and clubs while attempting to retain her balance at the top while acrobats would perch on the rungs, walk their ladders across the stage, and perform handstands and other tricks, keeping the apparatus upright as they moved into various positions.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ See also: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Risley_\(circus_act\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Risley_(circus_act))

¹⁴² F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. See 'Ladder Acts.'

Then of course there were those elements of the show where no props were used, such as the *Arabian Pyramid*. In a first part, the act's members would build-up their formation, where an understander would support those other five who climbed up on her shoulders. They would then lean forward, fall to the stage, and roll to a standing position. Little Nannÿ forever reminded her daughters she was always the one on top, the so-called 'topmounter.' However, in acrobat-turned-booker George Hamid's words; "Although number one in altitude, topmounting is the lowliest status in the troupe."¹⁴³

Pure acrobatics involves a great deal of tumbling too, where the acts' individual members run forth into 'handsprings' (forward somersaults, hands touching the ground), 'forwards' (full forward somersaults in tuck position, without touching), 'flip-flaps' (backwards somersaults, touching), 'backs' (backward somersaults, not touching), 'tinsicas' (handsprings into cartwheels), 'pirouettes' (acrobatic spins) – or a combination of these.¹⁴⁴ The poster below, which fortunately also remained among my grandmother's souvenirs, shows the extent to which tumbling was a key part of the act too.



Mix with these turns head and hand balancing including *The Human Top* – probably a form of human spinning top (although online literature is extremely hard to come by) and invariably the acrobats required the full stage in which to work.¹⁴⁵ That also means that each and every time they visited a new venue, the technical limitations of each theatre had to be taken into account. The next trick was being able to perform all these showstoppers at lightning speed and with such energy that it took the audience's breath away, and not just their own!

¹⁴³ George A. Hamid Snr and Jnr's; *The Acrobat: A Showman's Topsy-Turvy World...from Buffalo Bill to the Beatles*. Published by Comteq Publishing in 2004. Pg.43. See also Footnote 83 and 85.

¹⁴⁴ This description is sourced from: George A. Hamid Snr and Jnr's; *The Acrobat: A Showman's Topsy-Turvy World...from Buffalo Bill to the Beatles*. Published by Comteq Publishing in 2004. Pg.29

¹⁴⁵ According to personal correspondence with Frank Cullen on 5th March, 2011; "In vaudeville the stage was divided into three or four areas: acrobatic acts usually needed either "in two" (i.e. half of the entire stage) or "in four/full," i.e. the entire stage."

But excelling was not nearly enough. In George Hamid's sometimes hilarious autobiography, 'The Acrobat' he recalls his own capers performing as part of the 'Sons of the Desert' at the Palace cca. 1915; "We were all so terrific," he writes that "none of us looked very good at all."¹⁴⁶ Instead, as Cullen writes, the real trick is to ensure the act is of a "comedy persuasion," which judging by the rockets' reviews, Büttner helped them master this to a 'T.' (In Hamid's case, success only arrived after they involved a bunch of freshmen who thanks to a combination of inexperience and comic accidents brought the house down in laughter and applause).

Sadly, the only element of the rockets' acrobatic show we can't elicit is the music. "Two marches and a gallop" from the orchestra is what George Hamid's next acrobatic enterprise, the 'Tumbling Terrors' got by on.

To ensure the act remained a success, the girls will have practiced constantly, predictably in the morning hours outside of their shows, from nine until noon – if not in the theatre then in the hotel's rehearsal room (where other artists naturally vied for space and time).¹⁴⁷ In her autobiography Gypsy Rose Lee recalled of one theatre she visited in Vancouver, Canada; "circus acts would rehearse every morning...working on their trampolines, webs and trapezes."¹⁴⁸

In correspondence with Frank Cullen, he describes the likely scenario as follows:

*"Every monday at band call (late morning to about an hour before the vaudeville matinee) the new acts ran over their routine with the musical director and the orchestra pit band. For example, the tempos for singers and dancers (plus any desired frills the music director agreed to), the musical cues for comedians and all physical acts including ba-da-bing! Drum rolls, wha-wha on the trombone, and crash! on the drums & cymbals. The electrician who ran the lights and the stage manager who tells the stage hands which curtain to drop and how to set the stage also had to be present."*¹⁴⁹

Typically it took years of practice not only to perfect the mechanics of an acrobatic feat but to disguise the discomfort with graceful nonchalance, since the trick with all feats of strength and agility was to make the move appear deft and graceful.

Marline Otte highlights the importance of rigour: "Only the utmost discipline can make the manifestations of discipline disappear. Or to put it differently, a semblance of chaos, lightheartedness, and chance requires meticulous choreography, and well-trained performers. The spectator's pleasure is thus based on a deception."¹⁵⁰

How my grandmother became a professional with barely a year's training is not only a credit to her discipline but a tribute to her masters. Whatsmore, I know of no single episode where any of the rockets ever fell and injured themselves.

¹⁴⁶ George A. Hamid Snr and Jnr; *The Acrobat: A Showman's Topsy-Turvy World...from Buffalo Bill to the Beatles*. Comteq Publishing. 2004. Pg.82.

¹⁴⁷ *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 63

¹⁴⁸ *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 80

¹⁴⁹ Personal correspondence with Frank Cullen on 5th March, 2011

¹⁵⁰ Marline Otte, *Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment, 1890-1933*. 2006. Pg. 60

Needless to say, thanks to her childhood, Little Nannÿ knew all about discipline. In the early 1930s, Marlene Dietrich was once noted to have said: "I am Prussian... The most important thing in work is beauty, discipline."¹⁵¹ In 1936 for instance, after filming 'The Garden of Allah' in the desert beyond Yuma in Arizona, she was asked what the conditions had been like. "I was never thirsty," she replied. "I was trained not to be...ever since I was a small girl. I was never allowed to complain." As far as Dietrich was concerned (and most Prussians), pleasures had to be earned before they could be enjoyed.¹⁵²

Generally acrobats did not earn the same respect from vaudeville that they enjoyed in the circus. Part of this was down to the fact they didn't interact very much because of their need to practice constantly, which left them less time to socialize. In addition, however, many could get by without speaking English, which in turn contributed to their isolation or detachment within the vaudeville fraternity. Sadly, in all my grandmother's years in America she grasped very little English. Simply, she never had to. And oh how that disadvantaged me when I wished to ask her about her origins...

Being an all-girl female troupe in what was still a man's world also led the troupe to become more self-contained and closed off from other acts. Although Keith announced that he catered to and pampered women in his theatres, as recently as 1917 his circuit had, according to the White Rats, been a dangerous place for female players.¹⁵³ Being chaperoned constantly by the Büttners therefore was not just part and parcel of safeguarding a precious act, but also helped keep them out of harms way (both inside the theatre and beyond). Nothing would be more detrimental to the act than a careless or hasty attachment that resulted in a rocket falling - pregnant!¹⁵⁴

With their commitments fulfilled for season three, the troupe's members earned a little time off to sightsee. Four of them went to visit the capital; Washington DC and from the photo series, it's clear they relished the occasion. The photo right is another telling one of the era. Clearly the girls were not only fond of hats (note the popularity of the wide-brimmed variety too) but heels, jewellery and stockings too. It looks almost as if they are in their Sunday bests!



Týrallas then (1926) and now (2011): At the US Capitol Building's Lower West Terrace (celebrating great success)

¹⁵¹ "The most important thing in life is love, duty." Written into one of Dietrich's film directors notebooks. His name was Rouben Mamoulian. Retrieved from: *Dietrich*. Alexander Walker, Pg.8

¹⁵² Dietrich's discipline stood her in good stead. The film's director, Richard Boleslawski was unaccustomed to such ingrained fortitude and drank some of the desert water. He subsequently caught an infection and died soon after finishing the film. See: *Dietrich*. Alexander Walker, Pg.11

¹⁵³ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 186. NB: The White Rats (of America) was a fraternal order of vaudeville performers. See Kibler, Pg. 171.

¹⁵⁴ Girls that performed on acrobats and with revolving ladders got so fat they eventually had to lay off. *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 62

According to *Wikipedia*, the 1920s were “characterized by two distinct periods of fashion. In the early part of the decade, change was slow, as many were reluctant to adopt new styles. From 1925, the public passionately embraced the styles associated with the Roaring Twenties.”¹⁵⁵ Looking at my grandmother’s photos, I’d be inclined to agree.

The online reference source describes some of the changes of that era. In the late 19th century, “artificial silk,” after being patented in the United States, went into production in the US in 1910. The fiber became known as rayon and rayon stockings became popular in the decade as a substitute for silk stockings.

Furthermore many garments before the 1920s were fastened with buttons and lacing, however, during the decade, the development of metal hooks and eyes meant that there were easier means of fastening clothing shut. Hooks and eyes, buttons, zippers or snaps were all utilized to fasten clothing.



Low-waisted dresses with fullness at the hemline, like those we see my grandmother and her troupers wearing, allowed women to literally kick up their heels in new dances like the Charleston dance. For the first time in centuries, women’s legs were seen with hemlines rising to the knee and dresses becoming more fitted. A more masculine look also became popular, including flattened breasts and hips, and of course short hairstyles. And speaking of heels, new heights also came into vogue at the time, reaching 2–3 inches (5–8 cm) high, just like those my grandmother and Melanie Geidel are seen to wear above.¹⁵⁶

Above: Flappers with muscle! In DC.
Below: Google la 1926.
The Six Rockets read the June 6th, 1926 issue
of *Das Programm* on
Young’s Million Dollar Pier in Atlantic City

That June, the girls also made their way to America’s premier holiday spot; Atlantic City, off the New Jersey coast (see the text box overleaf). Young’s Million Dollar Pier had just opened and they were there, not just to enjoy the sun, sea and sand but to perform too.



According to *Das Programm*, the pier (the city’s fifth!) opened on June 21st at a construction cost of USD 5m.¹⁵⁷ ‘Our’ correspondent continues: “*Es ist sehr schön und nett hier*“ (it is very beautiful and pretty here) while “*Für Artisten sind Apartementshäuser reserviert*“ (apartments have been reserved for artists). Is it any wonder then, I muse today, the photo overleaf ended up in my grandmother’s collection?

¹⁵⁵ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920s_in_Western_fashion

¹⁵⁶ See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flapper>

¹⁵⁷ *Das Programm*. 11th July, 1926. *Ausland/Amerika*.

It took an almost endless hunt to determine the photograph was made in Atlantic City. The shot was probably intended to append the accompanying text, as well as to serve as a promotional snap for the paper. I can just imagine the caption: “*Even on Young’s brand new Million Dollar Pier, Das Programm’s not to be missed.*” On this occasion, however, only the newsbyte was included but it’s another rousing piece of evidence that Büttner was a *Das Programm* contributor. From his prose, it’s clear this was the troupe’s first visit to Atlantic City.



10.10: Atlantic City: A Kingdom of Dreams Built on Sand

Absecon Island, or “Atlantic City” as it came to be known, was “The World’s Playground.” It was a place where, for a reasonable sum of money, any man, woman or child could be treated like visiting royalty. There was nothing the city didn’t offer – legal or illegal – once the railroad had made it accessible to the average working person. The latter’s arrival in 1852 was pivotal. About 150km south of New York, “AC” became a popular day-trip resort.

Because of its willingness to ignore prohibition, conventioners flocked to the city and the resort became the premier convention venue of the nation. As Atlantic County treasurer, “Nucky” Johnson, himself once said, “We have whiskey, wine, women, song and slot machines. I won’t deny it and I won’t apologise for it.”

In the days before television and widespread home radio, its seven mile (!) Boardwalk rivaled New York City’s Great White Way as a national showcase for promoting consumer products and introducing new entertainment figures and productions. During the Roaring Twenties, the Boardwalk became known as the nation’s ‘Second Broadway.’ A production didn’t go to New York unless it first showed in Atlantic City. Typical of the twenties was the year 1920, which saw a total of 168 shows open at three main theatres: the Apollo, Globe and Woods. By 1925, the city had twenty-one theatres.

There were hundreds of Boardwalk theatrical tryouts with famous stage names that drew wealthy playgoers throughout the entire northeast, many of them arriving in their own private railroad cars. Indeed, by 1925, ninety-nine trains went in and out daily in the summer (there were 65 in the winter). Of the 16 fastest trains in the world, 11 were in service to Atlantic City, while more than 1,200 hotels and boardinghouses sought to accommodate nearly 400,000 visitors at a time.

However, the resort was more than just a try-out town for theatrical productions; it was a showcase for comics, singers, musicians and dancers. It was also filled with quirky extraordinary exhibits. Maybe it was on this occasion that Little Nanny’s eye caught a sign that read; “All the World Loves a Baby,” which called visitors’ attention to the rarified sideshow of the doctor who exhibited tiny wrinkled babies, tightly swaddled and closed to the world around them in incubators. If so, she’d have no doubt reminded her girlfriends she herself arrived premature, but that all she needed was a cubby hole next to a warm oven to save her life! (see also Textbox 6.1 in Chapter VI).

According to Terence Winter, Executive Producer of the HBO series, *Boardwalk Empire*, Atlantic City was a microcosm of America: “loud, brash, colourful, full of hope and promise.”

Sources: *Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Times and Corruption of Atlantic City*. Nelson Johnson (including Terence Winter’s Foreword). Plexus Publishing. 2010 (Pgs. 87-89), and

www.pressofatlanticcity.com/blogs/scott_cronick/article_89b9eb56-d992-11df-bdf7-001cc4c03286.html

Photo: A branch of Fralingers candy store in Atlantic City in 1926 (from my grandmother’s archives).



Above: At ease in Atlantic City after the show.
Below: Little Nannÿ blows a kiss on what might well have been her birthday celebration that year; 1926

Getting there and away left me wondering, just how did artists' criss-cross the continent in order to meet their engagements, particularly with all their equipment in tow? It wasn't easy.

To begin with, getting off Manhattan Island will have been an adventure. Ferryboats were an essential means of transport for reaching the continental mainland and typically belonged to the railroad companies.



Although it would appear simple enough, determining the location of the ferryboat photo left was an endeavour in itself. Even today I don't know exactly where it was taken, however, the most likely clue is the logo of the 'New Jersey Central' or more correctly, the 'Jersey Central Railroad,'¹⁵⁸ which is visible through the barrier fence on the left side.¹⁵⁹

The railroad ran from Jersey City (the terminus for the passenger ferry following the short ride from New York) west through New Jersey and across the Delaware River to Pennsylvania. Branches stretched into southern New Jersey to Delaware Bay. It networked New Jersey and formed part of what many would unhesitatingly call "the most powerful railway system in the world."¹⁶⁰

Bill Bryson does the system no disservice when he writes; "American trains were plusher, faster and equipped with lavatories at a time when Europeans had to hope for either a strong bladder or a short trip...A new craze from 1924 was the crossword puzzle. It quickly became a national passion, to such an extent that the Baltimore and Ohio railroad companies put dictionaries in its passenger compartments for the benefit of crossword addicted travelers."¹⁶¹

America's towns were therefore connected by a plethora of railroad companies. One glance at the map overleaf shows the 'Erie Railroad' network which the rockets will have relied on to meet many of their commitments.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ See: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jersey_Central_Railroad.

¹⁵⁹ Other photos from the occasion reveal ferry slips that were used for ocean-going cargo ships and which were common on the Jersey side of the Hudson, while taller buildings and finger piers which are also visible were more typical of Manhattan, writes author Brian Cudahy in our correspondence of May 11th, 2011.

¹⁶⁰ Brian Cudahy. *Over and Back: The History of Ferryboats in New York Harbour*. Fordham (1990). Pg. 57, 59

¹⁶¹ Bill Bryson. *Made in America*. Pg. 312 and XXX

¹⁶² Or more formally, the New York, Lake Erie and Western Railroad. See: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erie_Railroad.

NB: My idea to recreate my grandmother's lost map by marking up all the points she visited here was soon ditched!

In fact, from this chapter's pages it becomes clear that the majority of the towns The Six Rockets travelled to for their engagements were usually in the Midwest and along the East Coast (suggesting my estimate at the start of this chapter of their having visited some 2,500 venues across the continent largely optimistic, although we've also to bear in mind the rockets' touring days were still far from over).

Frank Cullen elaborates on the importance of railroad networks as one of the key ingredients in the development and commercial success of the vaudeville industry (alongside the telegraph and telephone, the popular press and not least of all, the vaudevillians themselves).¹⁶³ Paula Lupkin, a professor in the American Culture Studies Program at Washington University in St. Louis, even goes one step farther, noting; "The [theatre] circuit was an experience designed from a business perspective to make efficient use of the existing rail lines to offer as many shows as possible on consecutive nights."¹⁶⁴

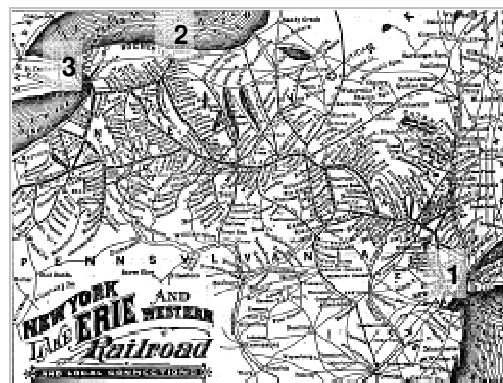
Despite the apparent 'simplicity' of it all, Alison Kibler reminds us that travel was frequently a problem for performers. Managers often wrote about their arriving late or with little time to spare, often without their luggage.¹⁶⁵ Illustrating the hectic, uncertain lives of performers, in Gypsy Rose Lee's autobiography, she regales an occasion when she and her mother's troupe literally delayed the train to ensure they didn't miss it:

"Hold the train!" their manager shouted, throwing his suitcase into the first open Pullman door. Startled passengers watched him through the windows.

*"Hold the train! We're a show troupe! We've got to make Rochester in the morning!"*¹⁶⁶



On a Whistlestop Tour:
First a ferry to make the run between Manhattan and Jersey City (Above Top).
Next: All aboard! (Above): A high-step train on the Erie Railroad, whose spaghetti-like network (Below) puts the entire state of New York, the East Coast, Midwest and Canada within reach
(NB: 1 reveals the location of New York, 2; Rochester and 3; Niagara Falls)



¹⁶³ F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. See: 'Introduction.'

¹⁶⁴ Vaudeville circuits and regional architecture. See: blogs.utexas.edu/culturalcompass/2010/09/02/scholar-explores-vaudeville-circuits-and-regional-architecture/, posted on Sept. 2nd, 2010

¹⁶⁵ See: www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/msc/tomsc400/msc356/oldkibler.htm

¹⁶⁶ *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 39

I bet the rockets knew just how Gypsy's family act felt, though my grandmother never mentioned her troupe ever missed a train (being Prussian probably helped)! Nevertheless, *A.Krobat* gives us a German perspective of transportation in the US when he cautions would-be artists as to the cost of inland travel, describing the US as 'huge'.¹⁶⁷ In addition, one must be ready to pay a dollar apiece for the transfer of baggage to and from the railway station (so-called 'drayage'), while he reminds readers there are limits as to how much one can physically transport. Luggage including one's costumes and equipment is frequently lost, he laments.¹⁶⁸



In early August, 1926, the Rockets posted an advert of their own in *Das Programm*.¹⁶⁹ It was published on August 8th and a similar ad ran until November 1927 (while at the same time it grew in magnitude also)!

A short while later a second news byte followed on August 18th that explains "upon personal request, The Six Rockets were introduced as a French act in Cincinnati, Ohio, owing to the weight attached to being presented as Germans." It goes on to state, however, that they were the first German act to perform there since the war. To my mind this may have been a bit of playful advertising, since in principle the rockets opened their 1924-25 season on the Columbia Wheel in August that year in Cincinnati. Nevertheless, what is clear is that the troupe was 'talking' to potential German bookers.

That September, the girls' fourth season was underway, performing "BF Keith Vaudeville" about 70 miles north of New York City at the Bardavon Opera House in Poughkeepsie (correctly pronounced I later learned thanks to an understanding ticket vendor at New York's Grand Central Station as 'PerKipsy').¹⁷⁰ They were billed "The Greatest Female Sextette in Vaudeville" and "Sensational European Lady Entertainers."

The rockets continued 'station to station' for Keith's within the eastern US until March 1927 when curiously they gave their first performance at a Loew's Theatre in Rochester, New York.¹⁷¹ The gig is interesting, particularly because it wasn't a Keith's venue at all. Marcus Loew was one of the leaders of small-time vaudeville, who according to Alison Kibler, began offering a combination of films and live performances in theatres as early as 1905. By 1918, he had a circuit of 112 theatres in the US and Canada, whose houses were where "the man with the wage or small salary looks for an evening's pleasure."¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ An article posted in May 1926 illustrates this by drawing the following comparison: "Germany from one end to the other in its maximum extension including the intervening Polish 'corridor' is only about the distance from New York to Cincinnati or Detroit. *Das Programm*, May 16, 1926. "Fremdsprachiger Teil."

¹⁶⁸ *Das Programm*, 4th March, 1924. Issue 1152.

¹⁶⁹ *Das Programm*. 8th August, 1926 - November 1927

¹⁷⁰ The name derives from a word in the Native American [Wappinger](#) language, roughly *U-puku-ipi-sing*, meaning "the reed-covered lodge by the little-water place," referring to a spring or stream feeding into the [Hudson River](#) south of the present downtown area. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poughkeepsie,_New_York

¹⁷¹ According to *The Times of Batavia*, NY of March 29, 1927

¹⁷² M. Alison Kibler. Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville. 1999. Pg. 18. NB: His theatres on the Lower East Side of NYC particularly catered to a working class Jewish audience.

I suspect the engagement there could have come about for two reasons. First, we know one of Büttner's homebases in the US was Rochester, thanks to the announcement placed in *Das Programm* regarding Arno and Annedore's marriage (see pg. 315). Second, the Keith-Albee Palace Theater (subsequently dubbed "Rochester's most beautiful theater") didn't open in Rochester until December 25, 1928.¹⁷³ Therefore an agreement may have been reached with Keith's to play those towns in which they had no theatres under their own name. More curiously, however, this was the starting point for many more gigs at Loew's theatres in the future, suggesting a non-exclusivity agreement could well have been reached with the circuit.

The troupe returned to Brooklyn to perform once more at the E.F. Albee Theatre on April 24th 1927. A month or so later they were engaged in a revue at Richmond, Virginia's '*National Theatre*'.¹⁷⁴ The performance was announced in *Das Programm*'s listing of overseas shows on 5th June, 1927, which in turn sets it apart from their usual Keith's gigs. In fact it's thanks to that and more than a little luck, that I was finally able to confirm the location of the photograph right.

That month of May was a big one, not only for the rockets, but for the US as a whole. The months that followed were so exciting that a number of books have been written on it, the most recent being Bill Bryson's '*One Summer: America, 1927*.' The headlines and more are summarized in the textbox overleaf, however, when the author was asked in a recent radio interview; "What was America like in 1927?" Bill Bryson responded:

"It was a fantastic time...to be alive in many ways because there was this euphoria. America was so much on top of the world in economic [terms]."

"And what did the rest of the world think of us at that time?" the interviewer asks.

"They thought of Americans as pretty...friendly and open and American culture had a certain importance because of silent movies. But it wasn't anything like the dominant player in the world that we know now."¹⁷⁵

Of 1927, Robert Morris, one of the online book seller; Amazon's Top 50 reviewers writes; "Arguably no other single year (before or since) embraced the scope and depth of human diversity that 1927 did. So many authentic celebrities: Capone, Chaplin, Coolidge, Darrow, Dempsey, Ederle, Edison, Ellington, Fitzgerald, Ford, Gershwin, Grange, Jolson, Jones, Mencken, Rockne, Ruth, Sacco and Vanzetti, Tilden, and Tunney." There's just one identity he omitted: In 1927, Mortimer Mouse became Mickey Mouse!¹⁷⁶



Fraulein Týralla (with new hair do) takes time off in Richmond, VA before its City Hall, just weeks before heading home to Germany - no wonder she's grinning like a Cheshire cat!

¹⁷³ See: cinematreaasures.org/theaters/5229

¹⁷⁴ See: cinematreaasures.org/theaters/14061

¹⁷⁵ Bill Bryson interviewed by Diane Rehm on September 30th, 2013. See: <http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2013-09-30/bill-bryson-one-summer-america-1927/transcript>

¹⁷⁶ Bill Bryson. *Made in America*. Pg. 363

10.11: The Headlines in Summer 1927

- **The Bath School disaster**

It began badly on May 18th, 1927 when a madman, Andrew Kehoe, went into a public school in Bath, Michigan, and planted a explosives in the basement. The biggest slaughter of children ever, he killed 43 people, 37 of them children, before killing his wife and himself.



- **The first non-stop flight from New York to Paris**

Two days later, Charles Lindbergh, a 25-year-old air mail pilot flew across the Atlantic in 34 hours (with little more than a sandwich to go). Gypsy Rose Lee recalled of May 22nd; "A radio from someone's apartment blared noisily through the court. A frantic voice was shouting through the static: He made it. Lindbergh has crossed the Atlantic! Three thousand six hundred and ten miles in 33 hours, 29 minutes and 30 seconds - two ham sandwiches - a tiny kitten in his pocket." For the United States it was a big psychological moment, says Bryson. It was the first time it had really come first at something. Twelve years after his daring flight, Pan Am inaugurated regular passenger flights across the Atlantic.

- **The Great Mississippi flood**

The biggest natural disaster in American history: 50 miles wide, 99 miles long, and 30 feet deep. In June 1927, the United States "essentially had a new Great Lake in the middle of the country, it was that big." It came about simply because it rained and rained and rained, starting in the beginning of August 1926. A winter of rain like nobody had ever seen followed, and by the spring, the ground all over North America was sodden. More heavy rain followed in March 1927 and so the whole of the Mississippi-Missouri river system, which drains 40 percent of America, just flooded. It obviously all rushed south towards New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta, until eventually the levies wouldn't hold.

- **Sacco and Vanzetti, notorious anarchists executed on August 23rd, 1927**

Two Italian immigrants, anarchists, were executed for a payroll robbery and murder of two people in Braintree, Massachusetts, for which they almost certainly weren't guilty of, given dubious evidence. Across the world people got angry with America for proceeding with the executions, provoking global riots that summer.

- **Mount Rushmore sculpture**

Approved by Congress in March, 1925, work on sculpting the colossal 18m high carvings of U.S. presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln got underway on October 4th, 1927 with the aim of representing the first 130 years of American history and boosting tourism in the South Dakota area. (It was finished on October 31, 1941).

- **Baseball hero Babe Ruth hits his 60th Homerun on September 30rd, 1927**

Sources:

<http://thedianerehmslow.org/shows/2013-09-30/bill-bryson-one-summer-america-1927/transcript>;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Rushmore; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacco_and_Vanzetti;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Mississippi_Flood_of_1927 and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bath_School_disaster

Gypsy: A Memoir. Gypsy Rose Lee. 1957. Pg. 132

Bryson, Made in America. pg. 312.

As the Richmond photograph of my grandmother reveals, she received something of a makeover that summer too. Gone was the matted cloche hat hairstyle and in came a glamorous new blonde look, complete with permed hair.

According to Jerome Charyn, Broadway during the twenties was a world where “gentlemen preferred blondes.”¹⁷⁷ It was also not many months earlier when Gypsy Rose Lee addressed her mother (who still bossed the act) and told her: “Just think how much better we’d look if we were blondes!” That spawned a new name which included six blondes reborn as ‘Rose Louise and her Hollywood Blondes.’

As the photo right reveals, her new look probably was connected to a portrait session that would be key to securing new bookings for the act. Yet just a few weeks after the rockets’ performance in Richmond, the rockets were suddenly on their way home!



The Spirit of 1927:
Nannÿ Týralla, New York

I’d always known that my grandmother spent four years in the US but the precise date of her departure eluded me. According to the Ellis Island Foundation, its database contains information on entry through the Port of New York alone and not departures. The fact that six rockets’ engagements then continued to appear within New York State newspapers throughout the autumn and into the winter of 1927, only brought confusion.

Fortunately the rockets’ exclusive representatives, Johnson & Lowenstein, came to my rescue when on June 19th, 1927 they published a full page ad in *Das Programm*, rather like that from 1925 (see the text box overleaf). Only this one offered even more detail about the act than I had managed to garner through online and archival research.¹⁷⁸ It advertised the rockets’ return home on May 31st, 1927 for a well-deserved two months break, having been on the go four years non-stop.

The ad confirms all the theatre circuit associations I had so far identified but in addition, flags another, the less well-known ‘Amalgamated Circuit.’¹⁷⁹ What is more telling is that Büttner was slated to return in August, whilst performers interested in being part of a new all-girl or family act were invited to approach him.

That in turn raises the prospect that should Little Nannÿ choose to return, her younger sister might conceivably join her. Of course if Little Nannÿ had had her way she never would have been one sixth of an acrobat troupe in the first place. Even if there were hundreds if not thousands of vaudevillians who would have gladly traded places with her.

¹⁷⁷ Jerome Charyn. *Gangsters and Gold Diggers*. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway. Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003. Pg.184

¹⁷⁸ *Das Programm*, 19th June, 1927

¹⁷⁹ According to a *Variety* article from January 25, 1923, the amalgamated circuit was a territorial arrangement between Wirth-Blumenfeld and the Gus Sun-Four-Cornered Amalgamation in Chicago.

10.12: Büttner and his Rockets Head Home

Herr Oswald Büttner, proprietor and manager of the 6 Rockets and his ensemble travelled to Germany on the steamer: "Thuringia" on 31st May, in order to enjoy a well deserved two months break. During the last four years the rockets have worked for Columbia Burlesque/Pantages Circuit/Marcus Loew's Circuit¹/Amalgamated Circuit²/and for the last two years without interruption, the Keith Albee Circuit.

Since the day of their arrival until the day of their departure, the Six Rockets have been exclusively under our management and have broken all the records for European acts, which was only lost for five weeks across their four years employment here, unavoidable due to the great distances travelled.

Following the armistice, Herr Oswald Büttner brought the first German act here in 1920,³ the so-called Six Stellas. After a year, Herr Oswald Büttner handed over the members of the act. In the meantime, two have since married here in the US. Alone the act continues to be successful and is known across America today as the Four Clifton Girls.⁴

In those seven years, the act has been booked chiefly by us and has worked 45 weeks annually, while it is already booked until 1928.

Herr Oswald Büttner returns to America at the beginning of August when he will bring his new troupe over. We have the biggest trust for Herr Oswald Büttner and have committed his new troupe unseen for three seasons. Herr Büttner already has a binding contract, to begin work immediately upon his return to America.

We are willing to take on another troupe of women or a family act under our management and have thus commissioned Herr Oswald Büttner to share with us suitable material, because we know he precisely understands American interests.

The members of the troupe who come to America should be more than willing to be bound under contract with Herr Büttner. He himself lives in Leipzig, Mockau, Grünert Str. 10.

Herr Oswald Büttner will review all potential act members without any cost to themselves.

JOHNSON & LOWENSTEIN, INC.
America's best-known impresarios for foreign acts.
1579 Broadway Strand Theatre Building, Suite 219-220
NEW YORK CITY

¹ Which took them way out west of Nebraska

² Under Frank Walker from 1930

³ The year actually appears to be in conflict with 1921's shipping records, which imply Büttner was last in the US in 1911.

⁴ The troupe made a series of 'appearances' in Variety magazine throughout 1925 and 1926 alone (despite a search of the period 1920-1932), which suggests the act and its line-up evolved thereafter.



As promised, that September, The Six Rockets were back on stage, first as "Athletic Thrillers" at the Rochester Exposition between September 5th-10th, and then on the New York State fair circuit between September 13-15. 'Once again' they played the county fair in Cooperstown and then later the Ambassador in St. Louis, Missouri on October 26th, 1927. There they were described as a "house stock girl ensemble." This last engagement was picked up in *Variety* on November 2nd and was even accompanied by a short description of the show's proceedings when the master of ceremonies, Ed Lowry, apparently "used one of the girls very neatly several times during his act, calling her 'Winnie.'" *Variety* describes the rockets as "the best."

My grandmother, however, was in Germany during the autumn of 1927, so what incarnation of The Six Rockets was this? Was it an entirely different group of girls? It's "Not at all unusual" Frank Cullen tells me "for personnel to change in an act unless it is pulling down major salaries." I guess that solves several mysteries. First, now I know why the individual names of the rockets themselves proved impossible to research.¹⁸⁰ Second, it's clear how important it was to sustain the act while its original members took time off (which reveals in turn how important the act was to their manager and in turn how reputable he was). And third, it lends weight to the argument that The Four Clifton Girls might have been involved as substitutes during the rockets' absence.¹⁸¹

But who then managed the act in the absence of Oswald? By and large it was Arno! He and Annedore returned to the US in late September for approximately two months, which suggests his wife may have returned to the stage during that period too.¹⁸² Conversely that also means some members of the troupe probably re-grouped briefly in Berlin that June or July. I suspect they had plenty on their agenda to discuss, the results of which will become clear in *Chapter XI*. But from May 31st, 1927, it was nothing but a joyous return on the American Line's steamer; *Thuringia*, an occasion well documented in the 'gallery' overleaf.

A couple of anecdotes remain from that return. Little Nannÿ grew smitten with one of the ship's crew. In turn a romance of sorts blossomed between the pair to the extent she fell head over heels in love with him! Her admirer appears to have been one 'Roy Werner,' who later sent a signed photograph of himself to her some months after her return. Little Nannÿ used to say her heart skipped a beat around him!

The second tale is in connection with my grandmother's coat. Claiming it looked like a dartboard, her fellow rockets would rib her claiming she ought to look out for arrows! No wonder she's always smiling!

¹⁸⁰ Jerry Dickey, Ph.D., Associate Dean and Vice Director of Theatre Arts at the University of Arizona (UA) who is responsible for the world's largest vaudeville memorabilia collection wrote in March 2011: "I have searched the inventory listing of our vaudeville archive and find no separate file devoted to Nannÿ Tÿralla, Margot Tÿralla, Oswald Buettner, the Six Rockets, or the Six Marinelli Girls. It is certainly possible that one or more of the above might appear in some of the programmes or journals in our collection, but that would require a time-consuming search that is beyond what I can offer.

¹⁸¹ If it were the *Four Clifton Girls*, that would help explain why no further engagements of their own were recorded beyond 1926. Cross-checking the names of The Six Stellas who toured in 1921 thanks to shipping manifests, however, yields a Cecilie and Hildegard (sisters), Marie, Karmen, Elisabeth and Helene, none of which are 'Winnie,' or could be shortened as such. NB: *the manifest omits second or even third Christian names*

¹⁸² They sailed in steerage/IIIrd Class from Southampton on Sept. 14th aboard the White Star Line's *RMS Majestic* (formerly HAPAG's *SS Bismarck*), subsequently arriving on Sept. 20th, 1927. Shipping manifests, courtesy of the Ellis Island Foundation, indicate their home was the 'Cedaline Apartment' on 8th Avenue between 46th and 47th streets.

Clockwise starting from top: Mad Hatters en route home; And then there were three, Little Nannÿ in the middle, Melanie Geidel to her left and Annedore Frenkel to her right; Oswald Büttner on the left stands with three rockets (and two ship staff in uniform) while crouching is his son, Arno, and wife, Annedore Frenkel; On board the Thuringia, June 1927, with Little Nannÿ, now almost 20 on the far left; Roy Werner, the deck officer; and lastly, my grandmother



There's perhaps one more significant event in 1927 that has been omitted from the above collection of headlines, although it was perhaps of the greatest significance to vaudeville acts like The Six Rockets. On October 6th, a movie called *The Jazz Singer* was released by Warner Brothers. Ostensibly a silent film with several tinny-sounding songs, audiences nevertheless heard Al Jolson (a singer, film actor, and comedian dubbed 'The World's Greatest Entertainer') sing on the silver screen for the first time. The movie was a box office hit and subsequently opened the floodgates for the so-called 'Talkies,' photoplays that offered sight and sound for the lowest ticket price around.¹⁸³ In Alison Kibler's eyes, vaudeville's dramatic decline after 1926 corresponds roughly to the talkies' introduction.¹⁸⁴

It was not over for The Six Rockets, not yet anyway. But what future lay ahead for Little Nannÿ? She'd gone from Burlesque star to vaudeville major. Would she be making a triumphant return, riding on a wave of Six Rockets' success? Would she excitedly report to her mother, siblings, grandparents or even cousins just how popular they'd been? Or was it simply 'job well done' and back to bourgeois Prussian routines? Contrarily, her daughters were so impressed in 2011 by the ads and testimonials presented throughout this chapter that Irene uttered in disbelief: "I never knew my mother was that famous. She never told me that!"

Once home could Little Nannÿ make a living in a Germany now savouring the Golden Twenties? If yes, would it be on the stage or was there a role for her in the flourishing German movie business? Her mother would have relished chit-chat on one or other sunny urban café terrace over the merits of German cinema and its stars and the possibilities for her not so little anymore Nannÿ. And if she returned once more to the US, how long was she supposed to continue supporting *Mama* from her stage earnings, which would surely only last while vaudeville continued to prosper and Büttner's immigrant network had work itself.

For now it didn't matter. As far as the rockets' were concerned, they were heading home and saying goodbye. But where exactly was that? Not only had Little Nannÿ grown accustomed to a different outside world, but the homefront had changed a too. For a start it was no longer Leipzig, but Berlin, probably the second hottest place on the planet at the time.

Charyn jokes that in 1927, "Every other grandma is bobbing her hair."¹⁸⁵ The question was, just how did Little Nannÿ's indomitable mother herself fit in to the modern world that now characterized Berlin too?

¹⁸³ F. Cullen. *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. Routledge, 2006. 'Introduction.' NB: *Three dollars in 1927 was enough for two to visit the movies.*

¹⁸⁴ M. Alison Kibler. *Rank Ladies. Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. 1999. Pg. 201

¹⁸⁵ Jerome Charyn. *Gangsters and Gold Diggers. Old New York, The Jazz Age and the Birth of Broadway*. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. Pg.59