

# “A GAL NAMED LOU”

**Shelby Randall Edwards**

**I**n 1962, a house near Cedar Lake in Minneapolis changed owners. Perhaps the new residents of 2838 St. Louis Avenue knew something about why the house had gone on the market less than 10 years after it was built or perhaps not, but they soon found, stashed in the attic of their new home, hundreds of photographs and other papers belonging to a woman named Lou.

The new owners gave the items to a family friend soon thereafter. Decades later, in 2015, that friend decided the materials would have a better home in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. The photos and papers tell the story of Lou Murray, a young woman involved in the Twin Cities vaudeville and burlesque scene. A little research revealed that, unfortunately, the presence—and thus, the later discovery—of the papers in the attic was related to her tragic end.

Lucille “Lou” Murray was born in St. Cloud on December 29, 1898, and appeared to have an interest in show business at an early age. Although she married an assistant pharmacist, Lester “Les” L. Safro, in Winona in 1917 when she was 19 years old, she continued dancing and per-



forming professionally in burlesque and vaudeville shows under her maiden name. Lou made frequent appearances throughout the 1920s and early '30s at entertainment venues well known to those seeking the sensual and comedic productions of the burlesque variety in the Twin Cities. She appears to have been a regular on the stages of the Empress, later known as the Lyceum Theater, located at 479 Wabasha Street in St. Paul, and the Gayety Theater at 101 Washington Avenue North in Minneapolis (next door to the present-day Runyon's).<sup>1</sup>

Burlesque, and its more sedate sister, vaudeville, gained popularity in the late nineteenth century. Both forms of variety entertainment featured multiple acts

**SHELBY RANDALL EDWARDS**, an associate curator of manuscripts at the Minnesota Historical Society, most recently published “Brown & Bigelow’s Charles Allen Ward” in the fall 2015 issue of *Minnesota History*. She is currently interested in researching and writing about women in the twentieth century, particularly those in traditionally male pursuits such as politics, art, business, and the military.



# GAYETY

## PROGRAM

Phone Geneva 8252

DINE AND DANCE

### Oak Grove Country Club

THE FAVORITE NIGHT CLUB OF THE TWIN CITIES

BENG and his SERENADERS

EUGENE RERAT, CHEF DeLUXE

DAN MORIARTY, Manager

No Cover Charge at any Time

Drive out Central Avenue Highway No. 5 to Fridley Road then turn left at our sign.

### A Few Facts About the Gayety Theatre

#### DO YOU KNOW THAT

The Gayety Theatre paid Minneapolis people \$82,000 in salaries last season.  
The Gayety Theatre gives employment to 73 people who have families depending on them.

The Gayety Theatre is a 100 per cent Minneapolis institution.  
Not one cent of income of the Gayety Theatre goes out of Minneapolis.  
Gayety Theatre spent \$48,000 with Minneapolis merchants last year for, Printing, Newspapers, Lumber, Paints, Canvas, Cleaners, Supplies, Lamps, Coal, Rent, Light, Electrical Supplies, etc.  
Gayety Theatre is 100 per cent Union.

WE ASK FOR YOUR SUPPORT

### PURITEE DRUG CO.

RITZ HOTEL

Corner 2nd Ave. S. and Washington

Let us take care of your Drug Store Needs—  
If we haven't what you want, we will get it for you.

Fountain Lunch in Connection

### GAYETY SWEET SHOP

Across the Street from Theatre

CANDIES, CIGARS, SODAS  
AND LUNCHES

Private Booth Service

A NEW SHOW EACH SATURDAY MATINEE

HOME  
OF  
MUSICAL  
COMEDY  
PHOTOPLAYS

# EMPRESS

CONTINUOUS  
1:00  
TO  
11:00 P.M.

WABASHA AT NINTH



HARRY (Irish) BERNARD

SUNDAY, MONDAY,  
TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY

HARRY (Irish) BERNARD

—in—

### "TWO NAUGHTY DADDIES"

—with—

MILES OF SMILES  
REVUE

THURSDAY, FRIDAY and  
SATURDAY

EMMETT LYNN

—in—

### "OH YOU WILD CAT"

—with—

TIP TOP REVUE

THE ONLY THEATRE IN ST PAUL OFFERING MUSICAL  
COMEDY AND VAUDEVILLE ODDITIES  
AT POPULAR PRICES

FACING: Lucille ("Lou") Murray. THIS PAGE: Programs from two theaters Lou performed at regularly in the 1920s and early 1930s, the Gayety in Minneapolis and the Empress (later known as the Lyceum) in St. Paul. Lou was a "Tip Top Girl" in the 1924 production of "Oh You Wild Cat" at the Empress (right).

lasting from seven to twenty minutes. A vaudeville show had a larger assortment of acts than burlesque. In addition to comedy, music, and dancing, vaudeville audiences might see jugglers, magicians, animal acts—anything or anyone who would attract customers. With its coarse comic sketches and skimpily costumed chorus girls, burlesque was aimed at the lower middle and middle class, while vaudeville prided itself on clean, family-friendly entertainment. Entrepreneurs built chains, or "circuits," of theatres where they presented continuous, multiple daily performances. Many circuit names are familiar to this day, such as Orpheum, Palace, and Gayety. This arrangement explains how Lou performed at the Gayety in Minneapolis and the Gayety in Milwaukee in the same year.<sup>2</sup>

In 1924 Lou was billed as a "Tip Top Girl" in the Tip Top Revue's production of "Oh You Wild Cat," at the Empress

Theater in downtown St. Paul, a venue that advertised itself as "offering musical comedy and vaudeville oddities at popular prices." (Also on the bill: "Two Naughty Daddies" by the Miles of Smiles Revue.) Judging from her autograph book, Lou appears to have been a part of several revues after 1925. Revues were conceived by vaudeville producers in response to declining audiences. Lavish production values, intriguing themes, and longer runs characterized revues; the Ziegfeld Follies, begun in 1907, is probably the best known.<sup>3</sup>

Lou traveled the country with the Carrie Finnell Show revue during its 1926–27 inaugural season, where she was one of 16 "Red-Headed Blonds" that accompanied Finnell onstage for large acts. Finnell was well known nationally as a burlesque performer from the 1920s up until her death in 1963. That year she performed at the Gayety on Washington Avenue in Minneapolis, "where she was billed as 'the girl with \$100,000 legs' and 'Minneapolis' sweetheart.'"<sup>4</sup>





June 11-1929

To Lou -

What can I say on  
short acquaintance? Hope  
I'll work with you again  
and get to know you better.

Best Wishes to you, for  
everything nice.



Kitty M. Coy  
Gayety - Milwaukee



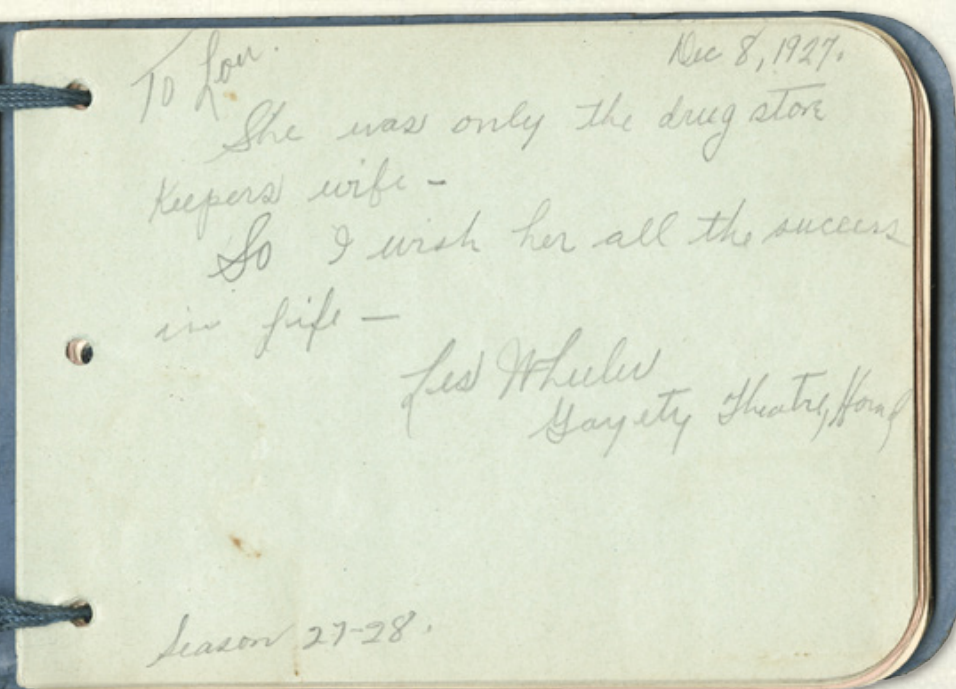




To Lou  
 Lots of love  
 may we meet  
 again —  
 Carrie Finnell  
 Feb 5th 26



Feb 5th 26



To Lou.  
 Dec 8, 1927.  
 She was only the drug store  
 keepers wife -  
 So I wish her all the success  
 in life -

Lester Wheeler  
 Gayety Theatre, Hong

Season 27-28.

Burlesque and vaudeville performer Lucille ("Lou") Murray saved hundreds of photographs and other papers that chronicled her life as a performer from 1915 to 1931. CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Lou in flapper costume; nationally known burlesque performer Carrie Finnell. Lou travelled the country with the Carrie Finnell Show revue during its 1926-27 inaugural season. Finnell's photo is inscribed to Lou and her husband Lester, then a pharmacist; a routine from the Finnell revue (Lou appears to be the dancer at the 9 o'clock position); Lou's autograph book. Note the inscription on the right refers to her as "the drug store keepers wife."



Lou worked in several show biz capacities over the next decade. The 1928 Minneapolis city directory lists her occupation as manager for the Ted Brown Producing and Booking Agency, which was located in the Loeb Arcade, at the southeast corner of Fifth Street and Hennepin Avenue. Two years later, a Lyceum Theater playbill featuring "The Big Revue," a musical burlesque presentation with "pretty girls in 24 scenes and 14 comedy episodes," credits Lou as "ballet mistress." A 1931 program for the Gayety in Minneapolis lists her as a performer in a show called "Footlight Flashes: A Red Hot Burlesque with Plenty of Paprika."<sup>5</sup>

Starting in 1932, however, there are no additions to Lou's cache of theater programs and autographed fan photos from other burlesque performers. By 1934 she

appears to have settled down into married life. "Lou Murray" disappears from the city directory, replaced by Lucille, wife of Lester Safro. The couple did not have children. Lester by then was in the business of "beverages"—the alcoholic kind, apparently. He appears in city directories from 1934 to 1954 as owner and operator of two liquor stores in downtown Minneapolis, the latest located at 236 Third Avenue South, on the edge of the Gateway District, Minneapolis's oldest quarter. As it happens, the location of Safro's liquor store played a role in the beginning of the end for the couple.<sup>6</sup>

Between 1959 and 1963, after years of lawsuits and battles with local preservation advocates, the Gateway District—also known as Skid Row—was transformed. Two



A young Lou (left) and friend.



hundred buildings, representing 40 percent of downtown Minneapolis, were leveled in a large-scale urban renewal project to make way for new construction (and, as it turned out, parking lots). In addition to decrepit bars, flophouses, and liquor stores, the project also brought down beloved landmarks, notably the Metropolitan Building on the corner of Third Street and Second Avenue, a few blocks from Les's liquor store.<sup>7</sup>

After the store was torn down, Les reportedly became a recluse. On the morning of September 26, 1962, he apparently reached a breaking point. Lester Safro shot his sleeping wife of 45 years in the head, killing the "gal" affectionately known as Lou before turning the gun on himself.<sup>8</sup>

The next day, trying to make sense of what happened, the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* reported neighbors saying that after losing the liquor store, Lester had withdrawn from the world and "hid from guests and had not been out of the house since June." The afternoon *Minneapolis Star* reported that the former liquor store owner had been "despondent."<sup>9</sup>

The Lyceum Theater and the burlesque circuit, Skid Row and the Metropolitan Building, and the house on St. Louis Avenue are all gone. But Lou Murray's life is preserved in her collection of photos and papers at the Minnesota Historical Society. ▣



## Notes

1. Sarah McKenzie, "What's old is new: Downtown's burlesque history," *The Journal* (Minneapolis), April 30, 2007, <http://www.journalmpls.com/news/2007/04/whats-old-is-new-downtowns-burlesque-history/>.

2. Information on the history of burlesque and vaudeville is from John Kenrick, "A History of the Musical: Vaudeville," 2004, n.p., <http://www.musicals101.com/vaude1.htm>, and Wayne Keyser, "Vaudeville & burlesque history and lingo," undated, n.p., <http://www.goodmagic.com/carny/vaud.htm>.

3. Empress Theater program, 1924, Lou Murray Theater Papers, 1915-1931, Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS).

4. Irene Robb, "Late stripper may be recalled," *Evening Times* (Cumberland, MD), Nov. 21, 1963; McKenzie, "What's old is new."

5. Lyceum Theater playbill, Jan. 12, 1930; Gayety program, 1931, Lou Murray Theater Papers, MNHS.

6. *Donaldson's Minneapolis City Directory*, 1934, 1944, 1946, 1950, 1953, 1954.

7. Edwin C. Hirschhoff and Joseph Hart, *Down and Out: The Life and Death of Minneapolis's Skid Row* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 4.

8. "Recluse kills wife and self, police report," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Sept. 27, 1962.

9. "Deaths ruled murder, suicide," *Minneapolis Star*, Sept. 27, 1962.

All photos, playbills, and autograph books are in the Lou Murray Theater Papers, 1915-1931, Minnesota Historical Society; photographed by Jason Onerheim/MNHS.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission: [contact us](#).

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#). Include the author's name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

#### **Students and researchers**

- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: <http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

#### **Teachers**

- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

#### **About Illustrations**

- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](#).