

Assassination of Lincoln Is Recalled by Niece Of John Wilkes Booth



BLANCHE
De BAR
BOOTH, at
19, from A
PICTURE TAKEN
in New Orleans

Blanche De Bar Preparing for Stage Debut When Shot Was Fired.

Mother Had Played With Slayer in Richmond Just Before the Tragedy.

The narrator of the following reminiscences, known on the American stage for many years as Blanche De Bar, is a daughter of Junius Brutus Booth 2d by an early marriage. Miss De Bar was born in Philadelphia in 1844. Her mother was Clementina De Bar, an English actress of some prominence before the Civil War.

Her father, the eldest son of the famous tragedian, went to California. Her mother played in the North several years thereafter, and her last stage appearance was in Richmond, Va., with John Wilkes Booth, shortly before the assassination of President Lincoln.

Miss De Bar, who in private life has been known as Blanche Booth, now lives in Minneapolis, where until recently she taught dramatic art. Her last public

engagement was as leading woman with the Sanford Dodge Stock company, which played in the West and South.

By Blanche De Bar Booth

MINNEAPOLIS, Minn., Jan. 3.—My first recollection is of the home of my grandmother Booth, near Baltimore, Md., when I was a small child. I was born in Philadelphia, when my father, Junius Brutus Booth 2d, was barely twenty-one, my mother about the same age. Both my father and my mother had been playing in Boston. Later my father managed successfully the tours of both his illustrious father, Junius Brutus Booth, and his brother, Edwin Booth.

My mother was Clementina De Bar. She came from a family of English actors, her brother, Benedick De Bar, being a comedian of exceptional talent. She was a straight-laced woman, of great mental ability and wonderful education.

My father was a handsome man, and much attracted by beautiful women. During an engagement in Boston, when I was hardly more than an infant, he became enamored of an actress named Harriet Mace. My mother has told me that Miss Mace was an attractive woman, a fiery woman who would have her own way, one whom I would assume to have been the direct opposite of my mother. There were many quarrels and reconciliations before the actual separation took place.

Father in Gold Rush.

That was the time of the great rush to the California gold fields. My father and Miss Mace joined this rush. My father was but a youth, barely twenty-one, and temperamental in the bargain. Not for nothing was he the son of Junius Brutus Booth.

Shortly after the separation my mother obtained a divorce. I know nothing of the subsequent career of Harriet Mace. No doubt she played with my father in his earlier appearances in California. I know there was no marriage, and at the time when his second wife appeared in his life there was no mention of Miss Mace.

My mother took me to the home of my grandmother DeBar, at Newark, N. J., for a short visit, and then my first real recollection, as I say, of the home of the elder Booth near Baltimore.

There were at home then, as I remember, my aunt Rosalie, who died unmarried in 1885, my aunt Asia, who became the wife of John S. Clarke, John Wilkes Booth, a lad of twelve, as my memory serves me, and Joseph.

Of all the family, my favorite was John Wilkes Booth, a lovable lad, who was to end his career as the assassin of a President of the United States and shock the whole world by his mad act. Then he was a handsome boy, with beautiful black eyes and curling hair. His disposition was as beautiful as can be imagined. Even then he gave evidence of great dramatic ability, as I know it now.

History has given him a place merely as an assassin. His career was cut off at twenty-six, when he was a mere youth as life on the stage goes. Had he lived, with no terrible

blemish upon his career, I firmly believe he would have been as noted as his brother, my uncle Edwin.

I think of all the sons of Junius Brutus Booth, John Wilkes inherited more dramatic talent. His was a talent bordering genius, eccentric genius if you will, but it was a spark from the great fire that burned in his father.

I remember little of the elder Booth, my grandfather. That, also, is true of my uncle Edwin, if you count recollections of him as a boy. He was older than John Wilkes, almost a man, when I arrived at the Booth farm, and already engaged in dramatic efforts with John S. Clarke, who afterward became my uncle.

My grandfather was at home very little and soon after my arrival he left for California with Edwin to join my father, who had made some headway there as an actor-manager. I remember one experience which left me in fear of my grandfather.

Spelling Displeases Junius.

He had called me to his side and had asked me to spell several simple words, which I managed, I think, without too much trouble. Then he asked me to spell the word "sugar."

I recall that I spelled it every way except the right way, "sugir," "suger" and "sugger," when he gave me up in disgust.

Striking one of his poses—he was a violent man when he was crossed—he declared to my grandmother that I possessed no such intelligence as was natural to a Booth.

My grandfather never came back alive from the trip to California. He died on a Mississippi River steamboat. His death, in 1852, left my grandmother alone with her daughters, Rosalie and Asia, who soon was to marry Mr. Clarke, and her two sons, John Wilkes and Joseph.

Soon after the death of the elder Booth I was taken by my mother to the home of my uncle, Ben DeBar, in St. Louis. My uncle Ben DeBar was both father and mother to me and taught me my early knowledge of the stage. I still recall him as a great actor, a great comedian, fully entitled to his name, the Great DeBar.

I was educated at a convent near Springfield, Ky., and at St. Agnes's Academy, near Memphis, Tenn.

My uncle Ben DeBar owned at that time two theatres, the Ben DeBar Theatre in St. Louis and the celebrated St. Charles Theatre in New Orleans. He managed both and played in both. I had inherited talent, naturally, and after I had finished my studies I was anxious to follow my mother on the stage. To this my uncle assented. This was in the spring of 1865.

I had visited New Orleans two years earlier, soon after I returned from the convent, and had been entertained at the home of Judge Lord of the Supreme Court there. Judge Lord was a close friend of my uncle and had been interested in my coming stage career.

Morning of Her Debut.

I remember standing in my bedroom, one morning in April, taking another look at my costumes, all ready for my debut. I was the happiest girl in the world. We had had

word that the war was over. Lee had surrendered, and although it caused us sadness, it had been a relief, too. There had been discussions in our home, in which bitterness and chagrin at the defeat of the South had been mingled with resignation and a determination to make the best of what was to follow.

You must remember that we, as a family, were of the South. All our interests were there, especially those of my uncle, Ben De Bar. My mother had been in the South during the years of the war, nursing Southern soldiers and singing in Southern hospitals. All her sympathies were with the South, from the conception of the Confederacy to its bitter defeat.

All members of the family, I say, were for the South, except my uncle Edwin. His interests, financially and in other ways, were with the North. I think he had a clearer vision, or, at least, he was in a different environment. He was living in New York, acting there, engaged in the business of theatre owning. His wife, Mary Devlin, who died in 1863, had lived in the North and had been on the stage there.

But at that period in our lives we felt differently. We were secessionists, for the Confederacy, and grieving because it had fallen.

My uncle, John Wilkes Booth, had been an ardent follower of the Confederacy and the war had disturbed his budding career on the stage. He had played an engagement at Richmond, Va., shortly before this happy day of mine, with my mother a member of the company. Earlier, before the war began, he had shown his feelings toward the North when he suddenly left a rehearsal in Richmond to go to Harper's Ferry at the time of the John Brown raid.

First News of Tragedy.

I had examined, over and over, my costumes, every one of which represented hours with the needle, and my thoughts were of my coming debut in my uncle's company, when our little Irish maid, as Southern in her sympathies as myself, came running into the bedroom.

"Miss Blanche, Miss Blanche!" she cried. "I can't tell you! Something terrible has happened!"

I caught her in my arms and she fell on her knees.

"John Booth has killed Lincoln," she finally sobbed out. "John Booth has shot Lincoln."

I could not believe it. I pressed her for more, but she could say nothing more than "It's in the papers."

Booths had played in tense scenes on the stage. All the Booths, except Edwin, had lived through the war with its tense moments, its suffering, through hours when hopes arose and victory seemed certain, and they had come to the wreck of those hopes.

Now the Booths were playing parts in a drama of their own making. Not that I wish to convey the thought that the mad act of John Wilkes Booth was condoned for a moment by members of his family. No one regretted the terrible tragedy more than we. I think I am sure that was true of all the South.

But a member of our family, that family which had gained a foothold

on the stage in America never to be challenged, had shot down the President of the United States and was being hunted as an assassin, with every hand turned against him.

I do not know what would have happened had John Wilkes Booth won through the lines of pursuers to a temporary haven among his kin in the South. Human nature fights for its own in the face of everything. I have lived long enough to know that if every life was a book many pages of every volume would be torn.

Three in One Performance.

I only know that a young woman, on the threshold of happiness, was plunged into the depths of despair. John Wilkes Booth had been like a brother to me, and I remembered him as a loving brother more than as an uncle. To be sure, our lives had been separated. I had been in a convent in the South, he making his first appearances on the stage. Before the war there had come to me letters telling of triumphs, small though they may have been in the light of stage history. His mother, my grandmother Booth, had witnessed a performance in which three sons—Edwin, Junius Brutus 2d, my father, and John Wilkes had appeared.

Now this terrible thing had happened.

My first thought was for my Uncle Ben De Bar. I seemed to sense at once that the Booths, and all who were of the Booths, would be under suspicion.

My uncle came to the house, stricken by the news as I had been. We waited for more news, and the word that John Wilkes had been captured. We never for a moment believed he would escape.

During the long hours while John Wilkes was being hunted, was caught trying to escape and shot, we were prisoners in our own home practically. St. Louis at that time had many Southern sympathizers, but none who defended the act of my uncle.

Crime Blow to Family.

My Uncle Ben De Bar's theatre was closed. Although no blame was attached to that kindest of men, it was natural that the family of the assassin would bear the burden he had placed upon it.

The news of Lincoln's death added to our misery and made our position harder than ever.

In the North, my Uncle Edwin, always loyal to the Union cause, was obliged to retire. Indeed, there had been no hesitancy on his part. He suffered more than any one could know.

A continuing instalment of Miss Booth's narrative will be published by The World on Sunday.