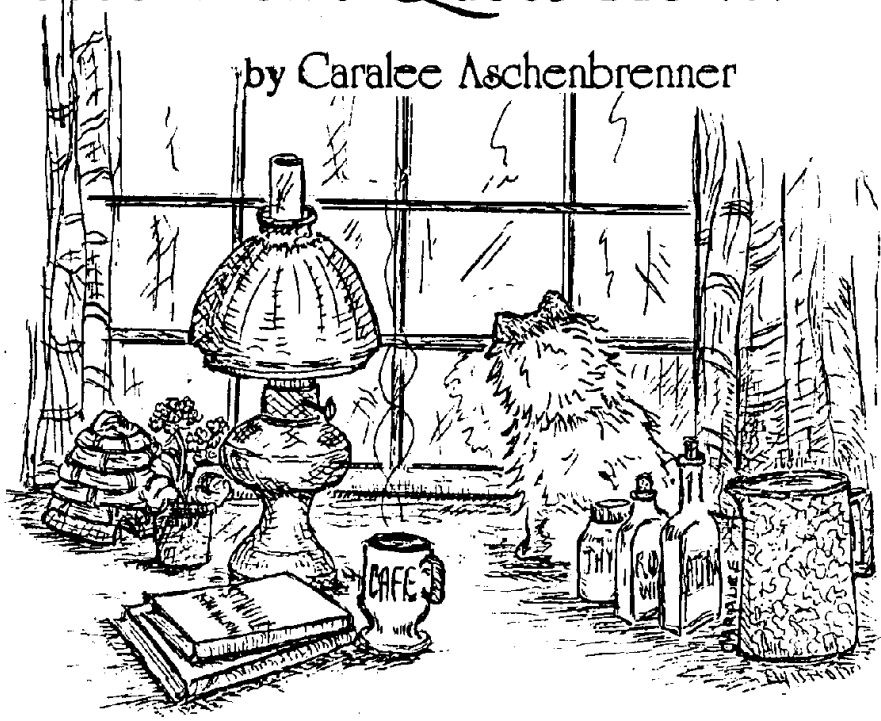
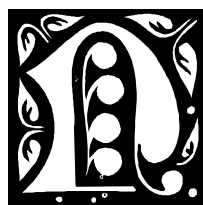


# Please Don't Quote Me ...

by Caralee Aschenbrenner



## Part V - The End



o history of Sabula would be complete without mention of its tent shows," states some history about the town. Few places can boast of being the home of one old-fashioned tent show let alone two, but such was the case of the featured town this month.

### A tent show?

They were theatrical companies which traveled the countryside bringing laughter, drama, entertainment of all kinds to mostly isolated communities where audiences could see music, performing animals, costumes, magic, song and dance... whatever was a crowd favorite.

Brooks' Stock Company was the inspiration of Jack Brooks who was born in 1883, a talented musician and actor. He entertained on "excursion" boats which were so much a part of river life for several decades. Those offspring of the fabulously appointed earlier steamboat whose lush accommodations were the inland waters cruise ship of earlier times were an anticipated fixture earlier in the 1900s. Excursions were often "one-night" stands, meaning that a boat would moor at a town and play perhaps for a matinee and evening performance. Or there might just be a band or orchestra to play for dancing. These continued up until between the world wars and then were somewhat revived into the 1950s. The "excursions" today pale somewhat in comparison.

When Jack Brooks' troupe landed at Sabula in 1905 a local girl, Maude Tomlinson, caught his eye and his heart. She joined the show and in the next few seasons they opened their own show at the Sabula Opera House which traveled over a wide territory for an extended period of time. For the next ten years they appeared at opera houses throughout the Midwest. Nearly every community had an "opera house," usually second floor rooms for meetings, sometimes school assemblies but more known for good-times-had-by-all.

By 1921 movies had taken the public fancy and reserved the local house for their use. The Brooks' then enlarged their show and put it under canvas. Touring lasted for forty-one years, surely, a wonderful chapter about which we hear little today. Brooks' show traveled in Iowa, Illinois and Western Wisconsin where traditionally they opened in Cuba City.

Contemporaneous was another tent show from Sabula, the "Marshall Players," which always opened at Sabula. Henry Marshall had been an associate of Jack Brooks until organizing his own troupe. His wife, Kate, was the mother of Brooks' wife. If this increased or enhanced competition reference does not say. But each created a wonderful world of make-believe which lightened the lives of small towns wherever they played.

They were beginners. But here, in Sabula, we loved them all and soon knew them all by their first names. It was with a feeling of sadness that their last night arrived. The tent would be filled to capacity and they were applauded again and again until, reluctantly, the curtain fell for the last time. Some would be returning next season, others would fade into obscurity and occasionally one



This paragraph describes that better than my own:

"The week before the show opened, the tent went up where the final rehearsals were held. It was an inspiring sight to see the huge tent rise. Back and forth the trucks hauled tents, scenery, chairs, posts, etc. Getting the tent up for the first time in the spring took longer as it was then that the last minute repairs were made. Youngsters in town assisted in the gigantic task. They were often in the way but for the most part they did a good job regardless of the weather. For all their hard work they were rewarded with a free pass to the show each night it was in town. Before the curtain went up there was a candy sale with "a prize in each and every box," then a short concert. Finally, the lights dimmed, the audience hushed and the show began. The shows for the most part were good clean plays with Goodness and Purity triumphing over Villainy and Evil. Between acts were vaudeville singing, acrobatics, dancing and tricks of magic. Many of the actors were well known in the theatrical world and many

of those who had been in our midst so briefly would become a Broadway celebrity."

The Marshall Players struck their tents permanently in the mid-1920s. Henry and Kate retired to Sabula but sometimes joined the Brooks' during their summer tour.

Jack Brooks died in Florida in 1953 and was buried at Evergreen Cemetery, Sabula, with the town band of which he'd been a member, playing appropriate music. In typical show business spirit the show went on the next season with Maude Brooks at the head assisted by some local boys but the heart of the troupe had gone. The show was sold with its performers scattered. Mrs. Brooks also returned to Sabula, dying there in 1972 at the age of 93. She donated land in front of her home for a little park where two shelter houses were built. At first a fountain there was lit with colored lights which "somehow recall the bright lights of the stage that she loved so well; a fitting memorial to those who brought so much brightness and gaiety to the town." This little landmark is at the south end of the commercial district just off of River Front Park and the river.

Entertainment wasn't just a some-time thing at Sabula. It had "moving pictures" at a very early time when the Long's, two brothers, came to town as electricians when the town was aspiring to be electrified in 1912. They conceived the idea that movies would be a popular idea. Before that there were only stereopticon shows with an individual slide projected on a screen but to which piano music was played and the spectators sang.

The first movie shown in Sabula was the classic, "The Great Train Robbery." Soon the Long's had competition. George Madsen of Savanna, alerted to the potential of the moving image, not just the static portrait or local scene, rented a building where the latest films of celebrity or a weekly serial would be shown... a cliffhanger which left one in suspense 'til the next episode. Madsen held a contest to name this theater... it came up "The GEM," his initials. Two movie theaters, two tent shows which called Sabula their home... the entertainment cup runneth over.

Merchants paid a dollar to have an ad flashed on the screen. Tempting come-ons boosted attendance like drawings for a silver spoon or a prize from some local to sing or perform. The pianists made all of a \$1.50 night to tickle the ivories from 7:30 to 11:30!! Coming attractions were flashed on the screen. Or the telephone operator, "Central," could inform rural subscribers. As time passed more sophisticated venue caused the local houses to close until

fool you. It has lots to offer in the way of information.

We didn't take space to tell you about formation of the fire department and lots more. The fire department did talk about organizing as early as 1865. In 1895 they could boast about their thirty leather buckets with which to douse fires. They've come a long way since then. There's always an abundance of water.

Take a little day trip to old Carrollport and environs. Lack of foliage now make the crags and bluffs stand out in bold relief. The view of the river from the bridge is wonderful. You'll see an eagle or two also. The road north to Bellevue is safe today; none of the banditti of old hiding in ambush in the cliffs above you as they once did. There's a high ridge drive westward to Maquoketa which reminds us just how pretty the Midwest can be. The drive south on Rt. 67 will open up into broad vistas before coming into Lyons, the next port-o-call down river. There's a cozy German restaurant just south of the junction on the way besides the cafe and other stores in Sabula. There are several interesting houses in a variety of architecture-styles in the community, too...

In your mindseye see the river scraped clean of snow for ice skating where a huge campfire blazes for light and warmth for a happy crowd of Victorian-garbed skaters silhouetted against the full moon. Picture the plodding "Old Colonel" standing patiently by the hour in the water at Hubbell's Island with the kids diving from his broad equine back to swim. Hear the bang of reports of guns at the Sunday "Schutzenfests" or the tinkle of piano at the GEM... oh, it's so grand to learn that each of our quiet communities has its separate history and are so distinctive from one another. We need more to work on the differences so as not to be rubber stamps. Keep up the history, Sabula, Island City of Iowa.

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