

## Mysterious “Mme. Annette” interviewed all—from jailbirds to society matrons

At the turn of the last century, when newspapers ruled the media roost and Bloomington had two thriving dailies (*The Pantagraph* and *The Daily Bulletin*), the city’s best reporter might have been *The Bulletin*’s Madame Annette.

“Mme. Annette,” as she signed her columns, profiled early settlers; interviewed touring actresses; chatted on matters of makeup and fashion; discoursed on new novels and literary trends; reported on social issues like poverty; and visited scenes of local interest, such as the west side coal mine and the county jail.

Annette’s short but productive local journalism career left us with a number of richly detailed sketches of lives lived in Bloomington between October 1898 through October 1900.

Unfortunately, little is known of Annette’s own life. Research suggests that this mystery woman may have been a Mrs. Annette or Anna Ferguson. According to the 1899 *Bloomington City Directory*, she was living at 212 1/2 E. Washington St. and working as a writer for *The Bulletin*. Given the relatively few female reporters at the time, this Anna Ferguson must be the enigmatic Mme. Annette. Further proof can be found in the 1900 U.S. Census, where there’s an Annette Ferguson with the occupation “special writer for paper” living in Bloomington. The Census also tells us that this Ferguson was a 40-year-old widow with no children, born in April 1860 in Iowa (though this information was probably provided by some other person).

However, new information has recently come to light about the mysterious Mme. Annette. It appears that she was likely born in Iowa in 1865 or 1866 as Anna B. King, the daughter of George and Almedia (Curtis) King. Anna was reared in Panora, Iowa along with several siblings. On May 14, 1884, Anna married newspaper editor William M. “Ferg” Ferguson, who was nine years her senior. The couple lived in Jefferson, Iowa and she wrote a column for his newspaper, *The Souvenir*.

Sometime in 1894, the couple appears to have separated, the reason for which is not known. In one of her *Bulletin* columns, Anna makes a passing reference to “deploring the fate” that made her a “busy woman” (or what would be called a career woman today). That same year, William sold his interest in *The Souvenir* and moved back to his native Ohio to work. He came back to Jefferson, IA in late 1901 or early 1902 to manage and edit a newspaper but died a short time later on April 15, 1902. Anna appears to have moved to Des Moines, Iowa in 1894 and became the society editor for *The Daily Leader* and then later *The Record*. She also edited and compiled a handbook entitled the *Iowa Legislature of 1898*, which was published in Des Moines in 1897. Sometime after this, Anna moved to Bloomington and began working for *The Bulletin* under the pseudonym of “Mme. Annette.” Her first known article published for that newspaper was on October 29, 1898.

Mme. Annette’s columns for *The Daily Bulletin*—some of which would run 2,000 words in length—were eminently readable, combining shrewd, worldly observations with cheerful optimism and respect for her journalistic subjects. *The Bulletin*, a paper for those with Catholic, west side and Democratic Party proclivities (compared to the Republican *Pantagraph*), enjoyed a 45-plus-year run before being absorbed by its competitor in the late 1920s.

In a representative column appearing in July 1900, Annette let local resident L.M. Temple tell the Twain-like story of how a con artist calling himself Colonel Lord Houghton visited Bloomington in the early 1850s. Pretending to be the scion of a wealthy English family, he borrowed money for a never-realized bank scheme, bilking some prominent locals in the process. The no-good cheat skedaddled, managing to outrun authorities until caught and arrested in St. Louis. “Strange what a title will do in every phase of life, isn’t it?” mused Temple. “And especially strange that a title weighs so effectively on the impressions of Americans, otherwise the most independent people on earth.”

A column from February 1899 detailed Annette’s visit to the McLean County Jail, an imposing brick “Bastille” then located at the southwest corner of Madison and Monroe streets. “They are allowed to play cards, read aloud to each other, and hobnob in the big corridor from early morning till 7 in the evening,” she wrote of the 27 prisoners. Morning and evening meals consisted of “hash and bread and sometimes syrup,” while “dinner” (that is, late lunch) featured boiled meat and vegetables.

During her visit she met George Waterman, an Black man of “undetermined age” who went by the moniker “Frisco Shine.” Across the hall from Waterman was a man known as “Peggy,” so called because of his wooden leg. She also met two professional horse thieves and an Englishman of Irish descent, the latter a jailhouse radical griping about “not enough to eat, and oppression, and giving a man no chance to reform.” Annette, progressive yet wise to the ways of the world, looked at these prisoners with droll suspicion.

A column from the same month offered a leisurely chat with Mary C. Spencer, the 80-year-old widow of former Chicago & Alton Railroad president Hamilton Spencer. Annette allowed her subject to summon up the bygone days six decades past when she attended private school in New Haven, CT. School life was strict and austere, though not always without its charms. “A favorite thing in my day was the serenade,” Mrs. Spencer told Annette. “We always had flowers in our rooms to throw from our windows to the serenading young callers from the garrison. The favorite instruments were the guitar and flute.”

Writing 20 years before passage of Nineteenth Amendment that extended suffrage to women, Annette favored the rights of the “fairer sex” to engage in the public issues of the day. That said, she was not above earnestly reflecting on the latest beauty and fashion news.

Her “beauty bureau” columns featured readers with pseudonyms like “Helen Heyworth” and “Summer Girl” asking advice on topics ranging from complexion brushes to acne. In an age before the widespread commercial manufacture of beauty products, Annette would offer elaborate “recipes” to prepare homemade toiletries like shampoo, suntan lotion and even a bleaching compound to lighten “hirsute appendages in these days of elbow sleeves.”

Annette’s final article interviewing the Mandel family about their four-month long trip through Europe appears in *The Bulletin* on October 17, 1900. Her life after that remains a mystery after that, begging the questions of where she went. Did she remarry? Did she have children? Where did she die? Although we do not know the answers to these and many other questions, we can only hope she kept on writing.

By: Bill Kemp, 2009, updates and additions by Carol Straka and Candace Summers, 2024