

# The Incarnations Of Minnie Lawing

by Shirley Stewart

(Research by Mark DiVecchio and Mabel Phillips)

This is a journey of discovery to find the real Minnie Lawing, an Ozarks woman of mystery who left a trail of unanswered questions. We will try to discover some of the answers and reveal the woman, herself.

Little is known, but it is known that she was born Minnie Maxwell on July 17, 1886 in Missouri to Mandora Maxwell and Henry Lee Maxwell. We also know that she died on July 18, 1970 in Nevada County, California. It's the story in between that leads us down unexpected pathways.

While still a very young woman, Minnie married a man from a prominent Ozark family, Dr. Ernest O. Lawing. While Dr. Lawing was busy with the successful dental practice that he'd established in his home town and county seat of Christian County, Minnie pursued her own vocation as a music teacher at the local public school.

When a group of Ozark businessmen converted an old church into the Club Theater, they called on Mrs. Lawing to arrange many of the entertainments. She drew on the talent of her students to perform musical programs that were immediately popular with the ticket-buying community. Gertrude Hunter Roper attended these programs as a child.

"Mrs. Lawing, who was a gifted musician herself, brought out the best in her students," she said in a 1980s interview. "Her programs were never disappointing."

Minnie's interests didn't stop at the school or the Club Theater, either. She was a founding member of the Ladies' Literary Club of Ozark in 1910. This organization is still thriving. In 1928, years after the club's establishment, Minnie's contribution was recognized in the form of the minutes. Included is a "thank you" for her service. However, they now use the name she acquired after leaving Ozark, Janet Malbon, the name she made famous.

From all outward appearances, one would expect Dr. and Mrs. Lawing to live "happily ever after" in their small town environment in the rural Ozarks, but Minnie had been gifted with an extraordinary musical talent. The little town of Ozark was too small and rural to contain her. Picnics at Smallins Cave, walks and swimming at Lindenlure, and fishing in the Finley River were not of sufficient interest for one who wanted "color and lights" in life. There came a

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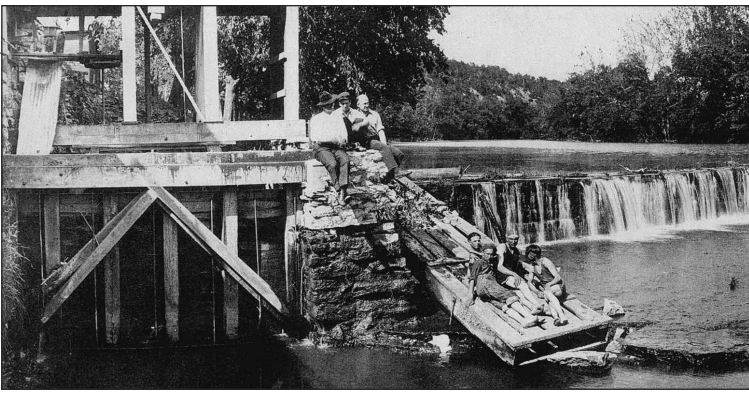
*Members of Ozark School faculty: (L to R) Laura Swift, Bessie Williams, Minnie Maxwell Lawing, Laura Acuff, Eva Dewitt, and Mable Sayler. This picture of Minnie, third from the left, with the dark hair and blouse with the most ruffles, was taken during the unfulfilled time in Ozark before launching her operatic career. (photo courtesy of Wayne Glenn)*

time when her frustration caused her to reach her limit. She decided to reinvent herself, something she seemed to have learned to do at will. The first step was to leave small-town Ozark and Dr. Lawing behind and move to Chicago. There she studied with a group of outstanding instructors, and she eventually established herself as the well-known opera singer, Janet Malbon.

After graduating from the Chicago Musical College, Minnie/Janet began her professional career by traveling with the Hinshaw Light Opera Singers on the Chautauqua Circuit. This traveling venue gave her a considerable amount of exposure and essentially introduced her to the general public.

Later, she branched out from the Chautauqua Circuit to other venues. Her performances increased and her name became even more widely known. The 1920 edition of *Who's Who in Music in California* contains the following information:

"**Malbon, Janet**, soprano soloist and teacher. American born of French parentage, began teaching at seventeen, holding State position as teacher of piano, soloist at various times of foremost Chicago churches. Graduated from Chicago Musical College in piano and voice in 1911, receiving Bachelor of Music and Gold Medal in 1912. Has studied with



*The rustic pleasures of Lindenlure on the Finley River and life in Ozark were not enough for Minnie Lawing. Pictured here in 1910, a group of women in blower bathing suits and bathing caps and men basking in the sun at Lindenlure. (photo: from The Early Ozarks: A Family's Journey)*

Anton Forester, Glen Dillard Gunn, piano; Adolf Muhlmann, Herman Devries, voice; Felix Borowski, composition; Adolf Bruner, harmony and languages. Appeared in 300 concerts in the seasons 1912-1913 and 1913-1914. Over 100 operatic performances in 1914-1915. Soloist at Fifth Church of Christ Scientist, San Francisco. Is teaching singing at studio, Kohler and Chase Building.”

While the entry above, no doubt, lists her educational and performance accomplishments correctly, we know that her parents, the Maxwells, weren't French. Nor were they Spanish, as she claimed on other occasions. Her father, Henry, was born in Ohio, and her mother, Mandora, was born in Kentucky. It appears that she constructed what she believed to be a more exotic parentage in order to bring some mystique and color to her new persona of Janet Malbon. It's clear that Minnie Lawing actually lived out her fantasies. Perhaps she even took delight in the “French” name she assumed: *Mal* (bad) and *bon* (good), a name that just might give some indications of her mixed character and ambition.

According to the records, she grew younger with the passing years. This retrograde aging process was yet another device used to enhance her image and mystique. It's recorded that she was twenty-three years old in 1910. Ten years later she was twenty-six. When she went through the Panama Canal Zone in 1929, she stated she was 27. When the 1930 census was taken, Minnie/ Janet claimed she'd been born in 1902, which would have made her twelve at the time she was directing musicals at the Club Theater in Ozark. She also stated that she'd been born to parents who'd been born in Spain. At the age of forty-four, she was claiming to be twenty-eight.

Meanwhile, the jilted husband, Dr. Lawing, was making changes of his own. At some point, he left his dental practice in Missouri and moved to Long Beach, California. While not a lot of details are known about him, it is known that he stayed for a time with his parents, John and Jennie Lawing. In

1920 he was still working at his chosen profession and he was listed in the census as being single. At that time “single” probably meant he was divorced. By the time 1930 rolled around, Dr. Lawing was still in Long Beach, but he now had a wife named Ella.

In spite of the demands on her time, Janet never lost contact with her Missouri kinfolks and friends. In 1915, near the beginning of her career, she returned to Missouri to perform. She sang to audiences at the Opera House at El Dorado Springs, which was managed by Frank Churchill and his wife, Stella Peden Churchill. The experience was positive and energizing for her.

After returning to Illinois, where she was living at the time, she wrote a letter to Stella Churchill. It was postmarked October 9, 1915. In this letter she mentions that she is going to return to Missouri to sing for the Federation of Women's Clubs at Nevada in November. She is also scheduled to make an appearance at the music department of Springfield Normal, now Missouri State University. A third engagement had been set up for the University of Missouri at Columbia, and a fourth for a large church in Kansas City. The Churchills had the foresight to save Janet's photos and letters.

It appears that Janet was popular back home, especially now that she'd achieved fame. Even a relative who wasn't much impressed with her type of singing was pleased to be related to her. Though never in the front line of opera stars of the day, she had her share of fame.

As the years pass, information about Janet Malbon dwindles. In March 1932 her name shows up in an advertisement for the Arcadia Playhouse in Arcadia, California. She was performing there and apparently was in partnership with the Tindle Brothers, who managed the playhouse. Her voice was not the only attraction at this theater, however. The playhouse advertised pictures for those who enjoyed the new “talkies.” Coming attractions for that week included: *Passionate Plumber* with Buster Keaton, *Madelon Claudet* with Helen Hayes, and *The Champ* with Wallace Berry and Jackie Cooper.

Janet Malbon retired and lived out her life in the Golden State. Her life was quiet and little is known about those later years. She died in Nevada County on July 18, 1970. Throughout her performing years, her talent was widely acclaimed. She had a lovely voice that was much in demand, and then she faded from the scene.

Minnie Lawing was a woman of the restrictive early twentieth century who drummed up the courage to break away from small-town Ozark and follow a dream that led Janet Malbon to a large measure of success and fulfillment. ☼

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*Minnie Lawing, re-invented as Janet Malbon, in costume and makeup, role unknown. (photo courtesy of Mark DiVecchio)*