

IOWA HISTORY



(Courtesy Library of Congress)

President Franklin Roosevelt awarded George M. Cohan the Gold Medal for creating popular war songs during World War II. Mary Jane Walsh starred with Cohan in “I’d Rather Be Right” where he portrayed the President in 1937.

Iowa Girl Goes From Funeral Parlor to Broadway

Davenport native Mary Jane Walsh was 18 years old in 1934 and knew what she wanted. She was born to perform, and she wasn’t content to finish college as her family wanted her to do. So when she returned to the family home for summer break, she stopped at the local radio station WAC and said she’d like to audition for a guest spot as a singer.

Staff at the station said Mary Jane had a voice that was “suited to ballads with an organ accompaniment.” The station didn’t happen to have an organ, but they knew Runge’s Funeral Parlor did. So they “rigged a line” to the establishment and had Mary Jane do her audition there. She debuted at the station with two songs “Lover Come Back to Me” and “Handle With Care.”

In the fall Mary Jane headed to Chicago to study voice. There she had a stint as a guest artist at radio station WMAC and this led to engagements with a couple of Big Bands of the era—Ted Weem’s Orchestra and the Ben Bernie orchestra. She had a three month engagement with Shep Fields and His Rippling Rhythm Orchestra playing at the Pierre, a luxurious hotel on Fifth Avenue facing Central Park in New York City. But surprisingly Mary Jane didn’t enjoy the Big Apple as much as she thought she would. She said she “felt buried in swank” while performing for the super rich.

By now the Iowa girl decided it was time to go out on her own. She played night clubs in Boston, Philadelphia, and Detroit. She said it was a “grand” experience and wonderful training. In the spring of 1937 Mary Jane was singing at the historic Palmer House in Chicago and famous band leader Rudy Vallee’s scout happened to be in the crowd. Soon after, Mary Jane received a telegram from Rudy himself inviting her to appear with him in London at the Mayfair Hotel. She didn’t have to think twice before hopping a ship across the Atlantic.

By fall 1937 Mary Jane’s interests had turned back home to New York and Broadway. She wanted to perform on Broadway and living in London wasn’t getting her roles in New York. Her sister, Kathryn, acted as her agent in New York and got her the lead in “I’d Rather Be Right,” a spoof about President Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal administration. (It included tunes such as “A Little Bit of Constitutional Fun,” “Labor is the Thing,” and “We’re Going to Balance the Budget.”)

Mary Jane secured a spot on the next ship back to America and had a good time on the way—telling everybody on board about her good fortune in getting a role on Broadway. In fact, she spent every penny she had earned in London celebrating with the other passengers.

However, when Mary Jane arrived in New York and showed up at the Alvin Theater on West 52nd Street (now called the Neil Simon Theater) she learned that someone else had been given the lead role. So Mary Jane took a part in the chorus but eventually landed a role playing the “Judge’s Girl.” Critics said the Iowa girl “practically stopped the show” on opening night.

By 1938 Mary Jane was singing in another Broadway play “Sing Out the News” at the Music Box Theater in New York. Critics said her songs were “delightful” and she was “personality plus.” One described her as “Irish with a keen sense of humor.”

Mary Jane relaxed on her days off by riding in Central Park with her “skinny black-eyed dog” named after British politician, Anthony Eden, and by knitting. (Although she admitted she never progressed past the armholes when knitting sweaters—and her sister usually finished the projects.) She also loved to bowl—with a 145 average. (She put together a team with her “I’d Rather Be Right” fellow actors.)

The Iowa girl who had her start in a funeral parlor in the end convinced her reluctant family that she could indeed make a living as a singer. Her dad came to New York to watch her a total of ten times in a two-week visit!

Sources

“Chief Justice Has New Girlfriend,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, Jan 7, 1938.

“From Funeral Parlor to Broadway—Mary Jane Walsh of Davenport Comes East to ‘Sing Out the News,’” by Robert Francis. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Oct 30, 1938.

“Right Out of the Air,” *Carroll Daily Herald*, Jan 6, 1938.

©Cheryl Mullenbach