



Louise Brooks
1938



Louise Brooks —and the Road to Oz

By Charles Cagle

Introduction

Film buffs around the world have long known the name of Louise Brooks—the little girl from Cherryvale, Kansas. They know that in late 1925 she went from the Ziegfeld Follies into a five-year contract with Paramount Pictures, subsequently making twenty-four films—one of which, under the great German director George Pabst (*Pandora's Box*, 1929), has established her as a cult-figure of silent films and an extraordinary and naturally-gifted actress. These same buffs know that because of Louise's independent nature and complex personality, her career was over when she was still a dazzling beauty of thirty-two, and that for over thirty years she was a forgotten recluse who came back into prominence only after the British critic, Kenneth Tynan, wrote a long profile on her for the *New Yorker* magazine in August 1979 ("The Girl in the Black Helmet"). Now her own astute essays on Hollywood and the film world have been collected in *Lulu in Hollywood* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1982) and Walter Clemons has called her a "brilliant historian" (*Newsweek*, May 24, 1982). Louise lives now in seclusion in Rochester, New York, the victim at seventy-six of degenerative osteoarthritis of the hip and emphysema. It is only by watching the handful of old reels in the archives of the Eastman Museum in Rochester that we today can know the beauty, youthful energy, and superb acting ability of the girl who, like little Dorothy, set out for remarkable adventures in a place called Oz.

For Louise, the Land of Oz was filled with lights, cameras, and action. And it was a very long way from Kansas.



LOUISE BROOKS' PATERNAL RELATIVES OF BURDEN. Row 1 [L-R]: Uncle O.L., Grandfather Martin Luther, Father Leonard Porter, Uncle W.A.; Row 2: Uncle George Washington, Grandmother Elizabeth, Uncle Eseley.

Burden: "A Pretty Wedding"

The Brooks brothers—and there were five of them—came over to Kansas from Tennessee in the early 1870s to settle in Cowley County under a generous land grant which provided (for \$1.25 per acre for 160 acres) former Osage Indian land. All the new settlers had to do was "occupy and make substantial improvements" on the property. Thus, Louise's paternal great-grandfather, John Brooks, came with his family into the area, where he, along with his brothers, bought adjoining land adjacent to Grouse Creek and near what would become in 1879 Burdenville, later simply Burden—a hamlet then as now—sixteen miles east of Winfield.

The land was rich, and they prospered, enjoying among other crops huge peach and apple orchards. Although John remained on the farm, two of his brothers—Nathan and Andy—became bankers in 1883 with "a capitol of \$20,000 paid-up stock." In other words, the Brooks name was a respected and powerful one in early Burden. One of John's sons was named Martin Luther (b. 1842), and when he accompanied his father to Kansas, he brought his own family, including his wife, Elizabeth, and their two-year-old boy named Leonard Porter—who would become Louise's father.

If the Brooks brothers were successful and noticeably conservative, the other side of Louise's genealogical history more than made up for a lack of color. Her maternal great-grandfather was named Havilas B. Rude, a country doctor who settled in the Burden area in 1874. Born in Highland County, Ohio, in 1826, he married Elizabeth Miller (b. 1830 in Ohio) in 1850 and

moved to Iowa to study, then to practice medicine there and in Indiana. He finally moved to Kansas and settled in Greenwood County for two years before moving to Cowley County.

Dr. H.B. was typical of the country doctors of his time: hard-working and overworked, performing small daily miracles with primitive medicine and equipment, and going out at all hours and in all kinds of weather in a two-wheeler buggy and horse. It is little wonder that H.B. fell victim to one of the chronic dangers associated with the profession as practiced in those early days—morphine addiction. One eyewitness to this—a man in his nineties today and still a Burdenite—recalls seeing H.B. as an old fellow coming into the drugstore in Burden, slumped and exhausted, to buy fifty-cents worth of powdered morphine. "He could barely drag in," the witness told me. "He'd fall down in a chair, take a cork out of the bottle, and lick the whole quarter-ounce of morphine off his palm. He'd settle back and presently begin to jerk, twist, and squirm. Then, in a matter of minutes, he would rise, straighten his back and shoulders, and walk out of the place like a twenty-year-old!"

On the other hand, Havilas was a fine doctor—and a successful one—who had one ingredient all good doctors need: a sense of humor. Once he rode out on his horse to a farm family with a very ill father and noticed the capsules he had left days before had not been touched. One family member asked when they should give Pa the medicine, and Havilas snapped good-naturedly, "When you get damned good and ready."

H.B. died in Burden in 1911, at the advanced age of eighty-six.

If H.B. was a somewhat colorful character in early Burden, his son—Thomas Jefferson Rude—outdistanced him by far. While his main claim to fame, as far as this article is concerned, is that he fathered Louise's mother, the beautiful Myra Rude, he is, in his own right, a man well worth considering.

Born in 1856 in Iowa (where H.B. was practicing medicine) Thomas was married in 1877 to Ella Rice, who died three years later. He then followed his father to Kansas where, in 1882, he married Mary J. Gentry, a quiet and refined girl from a prominent Winfield family. Having "commenced his classical education in Indiana and finished it in Hartford, Kansas," he taught his first school in Cowley County, at Dexter, then moved at age twenty-six to Burden to become the principal of the public school, supervising "a fine edifice valued at \$1,500."

Being a schoolteacher was hardly the path fate had in mind for Thomas. In a day when formal schooling wasn't as important as the urgent needs of a community, he quickly took on the trappings of his father's profession by "learning the trade" of doctoring secondhand. To meet the minimum state requirement, he did spend one semester at Rush College, Chicago, to get a certificate—then hurried back to Burden to set up practice. His house on Oak Street was something of an attraction. One resident remembers it looking a "mess," with his office a wood-frame shack set a few feet back of the main

house, where also were stables and pens for horses, hogs, and cattle. In addition, there was "an open cave" in the front, unkept yard.

Tall and slender, bearded and wearing glasses, Thomas cut quite a figure on any one of the several fine horses he owned. A Burden citizen remembers him fondly but honestly: "Old Doc Tom was a great man, a bright man. He could sing in a good tenor voice and make a good speech. He liked to read books and study a lot, and had a knack for training horses. He could do anything but make money—and stay away from a bottle of whiskey."

If there was one theme I heard over and over from the residents of Burden—and later, Cambridge, a town eight miles away to which Thomas moved near the end of his life—it was Doc Tom and his whiskey. As one elderly Cambridge lady put it, "He was a good doctor, but you sure had to catch him when he wasn't drinking." And that wasn't easy, since it was rumored he took his first drink of the day before breakfast.

One Burdenite told me he thought the reason for the good doctor's alcoholism was a financial disaster incurred when he "bought a bunch of hogs" only to see them all die of cholera less than a year later—an event that "ruined him financially." Others speculated he had little money because many of his patients never paid him for his services. Whatever the reason—worry, boredom, or the pure pleasure of it—Thomas definitely enjoyed the bottles he, and others, could procure in the land of Prohibition by simply having four quarts of bourbon sent express-shipment by rail to "John Doe, c/o Burden."

And when deep in his cups, Thomas apparently became the ringleader for jollity among comrades. One such episode nearly killed him. It happened late one night at Ben Franklin's restaurant in Burden. Ben was asleep in the building, with a sharp hatchet used for opening crates by his side, when a gang of rowdy, happy—and very drunk—revelers began to bang on his door, demanding he open up and feed them. Ben was an uncharitable soul at three in the morning, and refused. Whereupon, Doc Rude forced his way into the place. His reward for such audacity was to have Ben throw the hatchet at him. Thomas was struck in the side of the face—it was a very serious and bloody wound—and when the scars healed, some say, he grew a beard to cover up his miscalculations of Ben.

Thomas's wife, Mary (she was "neither beautiful nor ugly," I was told), lived somewhat in the shadow of her flamboyant husband, contenting herself at being a good cook and seamstress, and a devoted mother to the six (of ten) surviving children: Richard, Eva, Robert, Pattie, Paul—and Myra. Like her mother, Myra grew up loving music and books, and one Cambridge resident remembers their home there being filled with singing, where "everybody was always welcome." Although Thomas wasn't a churchgoer, Mary was. She played the organ in the Presbyterian church and encouraged her daughters to play the piano in their home. Unlike the shaky financial existence in Burden, the last days of Thomas and Mary in Cambridge (he moved there because they needed a doctor, and his practice had fallen off in

Burden) were peaceful and happy. Thomas and Mary are buried side-by-side in the beautiful little country cemetery southwest of Burden, Thomas having died in 1914 and Mary two years later.



Myra Rude.

From this union as noted, came the mother of Louise Brooks. The early photographs of Myra make it obvious where Louise derived her own beauty. With soft hazel eyes and black curly hair and a bewitching smile, nineteen-year-old Myra was one of the prettiest young ladies in Burden or Cambridge—and if you added to that her other qualities, her sharp intelligence and musical talent, you had just the kind of girl to attract a shy but successful thirty-five-year-old lawyer named Leonard Porter Brooks.

One of the seven sons born to Martin Luther Brooks and his wife, Elizabeth Manley, Leonard had grown up on his father's farm near Burden into a quiet, serious young man who liked to play baseball with the sons of other farmers,

but who had little desire himself to farm. Before coming to Kansas, his father (who would be the last of the original Brooks brothers to die—in 1926 at the age of eighty-four) had enlisted “at the call of Lincoln” in the Union Army in Company H, First Tennessee Cavalry, fighting at the battles of Shiloh and Missionary Ridge and entering Atlanta with General Sherman. He was, as his obituary put it in the *Burden Times*, “a brave soldier, a successful farmer and a believer in the church, the school and the home.” His wife would survive him by four years.



Leonard Porter Brooks

Leonard yearned for something beyond Burden and its small-town ways, and believed the answer lay in higher education. I have held in my hands a dusty ledger from the vault of the registrar's office in Winfield's Methodist college, Southwestern, with an entry indicating Leonard Brooks was a special student for one term there in 1890, taking an algebra course. There is also a photograph of “the Collegians and Faculty” (they numbered only seventy-seven) which shows a stern-jawed, rather Lincoln-esque, and deadly serious Leonard staring into the future. That future included entering the law school of the University of Kansas as a special student—where he was graduated on January 5, 1897.

Leonard returned briefly to Burden to practice law, but soon moved on east to the thriving town of Cherryvale, where he was employed as an attorney with the Prairie Oil and Gas Company (later Sinclair Oil). It was from this

good position in a growing town that he wooed and won the hand of Myra. They were married at eight o'clock, Wednesday morning, May 4, 1904, at the Burden home of Thomas and Mary Rude, with a Rev. G. W. Baker presiding. The *Burden Times* called it “a pretty wedding” and Myra an “accomplished daughter” who was “one of Burden's most popular young ladies both in social and church circles.”

Directly below the newspaper account of the wedding (but not a *part* of the account) was a poem titled “What Happens.” It read:

That pity is akin to love
Is very quickly proved,
For when engagements are announced
We're by that feeling moved.

“Poor boy! What could he see in her?”
His friends will mutter grim,
While hers will groan: “A shame to throw
Herself away on him!”

Little did the friends and relatives attending the wedding on the beautiful and happy day in May dream how ironic—and how prophetic—that little poem would be for Leonard Porter Brooks and Myra Rude.

Cherryvale: “A Blind Horse in a Clover Patch”

Cherryvale, situated in the northeastern part of Montgomery County, was a busy and growing town of nearly seven thousand people the year Leonard brought his beautiful young bride there to live in a white frame house at 531 East Seventh. Steadily growing since the day Ab Eaton and Thomas Whelan settled it in the late 1860s, Cherryvale leaped into real growth with the coming of the railroads in the 1870s and the discovery of gas and oil in the late 1880s. The Edgar Zinc Company, with its rows of smelter houses, company cottages, broad streets, and lawns provided Cherryvale with a second name, “Smelter Town.” It had two banks, two daily newspapers, five churches, a telephone company, a park and an auditorium, several good hotels and restaurants, and an Opera House.

A history of Cherryvale, written only a year before Leonard and Myra set up housekeeping, described the location of the town as “a happy one...in a broad valley of wonderful fertility stretching miles to the north and south.” Even the town's name (a tribute to nearby Cherry Creek) was a nice omen for the new couple, promising a blossoming of both prosperity and happiness. Leonard and Myra could buy their groceries at Homer Brooks' Cash Store (no relation), enjoy ice cream at the Owl Drug or its competitor, Squier & Frank, pick up some nice Bulgarian cloth or embroidery silk at the Magnet, shop for

a spanking New Mars Range stove at G.H. Sinnets', browse for books, sheet music, "Talking machines," and musical instruments at the Cherryvale Book Store on the south side of Main Street, bargain for some wood at Glen's Lumber Company, and arrange to have their lace curtains washed and stretched at the Cherryvale Laundry by simply calling number 198!

In the beginning, as a bachelor, Leonard had practiced law from his home on East Seventh, but with a wife—and the possibility of a family he so desperately wanted—he found an office on the second floor of the Central Block building at 106½ West Main. Myra, yearning for the relatively vast opportunities for culture which Cherryvale offered, joined a ladies club.



There is a photograph of Myra and a gaggle of Edwardian ladies on the front porch of the house on East Seventh, and below it in a scrapbook many years later, Myra wrote: "Cherryvale Group of Grand Dames." She probably attended many of the offerings of the Opera House—which included on one spectacular evening a lecture on "Jerusalem" by one Madame Lydia Von Finklestein Mountford, "supplemented with living picture tableau."

How happy and active Myra really was is mere conjecture, but it is a fact that one year after her marriage to Leonard she gave birth to her first child, a son named Martin. And then, a year after that—on November 14, 1906—she brought into the world a baby girl with the same dark hair and beauty as her mother. They named her Louise.

The two newspapers in Cherryvale noted the arrival of Louise Brooks with the sly journalistic humor characteristic of the day. The *Daily Republican* put it like this in a squib on its very last page:

Assistant Counsellor Is a Girl

A brand new baby girl is the attraction just now at the home of City Attorney L. P. Brooks. The daughter came this morning and Mr. Brooks thinks that he will be able to "revise" more ordinances tonight than at any previous session.

The Cherryvale *Daily News* was, on page one, more poetic:

A Girl

Attorney L. P. Brooks is stepping around today like a blind horse in a clover patch all on account of a young lady who came to his home this morning where she will reside in the future. All concerned are doing nicely.

When Louise was less than a year old, her parents bought a nicer, larger brick home right in the heart of things at 320 West Main. Purchased from W. G. Cook and his wife Anna, the house cost \$2,200 (with a mortgage) and the warranty deed was signed August 13, 1907. Both of the Brooks homes are still standing and occupied today, the first one the residence of Joe Fernandez and the second the residence of Eva Hills. It was in the new brick house that Louise's younger brother and sister were born—Theodore (1912) and June (1914).

The school Louise attended was only three blocks west of her home, the McKinley School, built in 1885 on the site of an even older school. Demolished in 1927 to make way for yet another schoolhouse, the old McKinley was an imposing stone and brick structure which housed all the grades for Cherryvale. Those who remember Louise best as a little girl spoke of both her beauty and vitality. One resident, who was a bit older than Louise at the time, vividly recalls how Louise "bounced around, spinning on her toes," and that she looked "like a little Madonna with black hair." In those long-ago and still-innocent days, Louise and her girlfriends would walk from school in the afternoons to the McGinley Drug (where Tru-Value is, presently) and have a soda or a piece of five-cent pie.

In the introductory chapter of *Lulu in Hollywood*, Louise writes: "From the time I was ten, when a Mrs. Buckpitt came eight miles by train from the town of Independence to the village of Cherryvale to give me dancing lessons, I was what amounted to a professional dancer." This teacher was Mae Argue Buckpitt, who will enter our story again later. Louise danced at civic clubs, such as the Elks and Eagles, and quite possibly for the Library Club, the New Idea Club, the Thursday Musical Club, and the Cherryvale's Violet Club. It is known she danced at a week-long gala held in March of 1917 at the Opera House, and one former resident remembers her "dancing across the stage of the Liberty Theater holding an American flag."

As for the parents of this budding, dancing beauty, those who remember their fifteen-year stay in Cherryvale, speak kindly and warmly of them. "They dressed a little nicer than most people, I think," one lady told me, "and they both looked like Italians. Like Italian movie stars, in fact." The high-school girl who was Leonard's secretary remembers him now as "a marvelous man with a happy family." Leonard was, she says, a very quiet gentleman who dressed immaculately, always wore a hat, and chewed gum but never smoked. "Louise was delicate and shy," she insists, "and Myra was very quiet."



Martin and Louise Brooks, Cherryvale

It was during the years Louise was growing up in Cherryvale that the industry most important in her life was also growing up: Hollywood. By 1915 (when Louise was eleven) there was no less than five movie houses in Cherryvale—named Star, Zim, Liberty, Snark, and Gem.

It is not too difficult to imagine Louise and her girlfriends sitting in one of those darkened theaters, listening to the melodramatic chording from a stage piano while such films as the Lubin five-reelers, *The House Next Door*, *The Enemies*, *Fate's Alibi*, and one which Louise probably insisted her parents let her see, *The Dancer*, starring Cleo Madison, flickered silently before their eyes.

Although Louise has written that both she and her mother hoped she would one day be a great dancer, it is largely because of her role in *Pandora's Box*, in which she played the non-dancing role of Lulu, that Louise's fame as a cult-figure of silent films is assured. And there is a curious coincidence in this. At the same time Louise was growing up in Cherryvale, there was another girl growing up there—a girl by the name of Lulu Brooks. In the 1913-14 *City Directory*, this Lulu is listed as a student; by the 1920-21 directory she is listed as being an assistant cashier at the E-Z Store. Then she disappears from the 1925 directory—the same year Louise signed her contract with Paramount. I was unable to gain any further information about this young Cherryvale girl with the singular name.

By 1919 Cherryvale had declined by almost four thousand inhabitants from its peak days, and it was either in the summer or spring of that year that the Brooks family left and moved the few miles west to the larger and growing

Independence—so that Leonard could continue working for the Prairie Oil and Gas Company, whose headquarters were located at Ninth and Myrtle. The family settled into a two-story home in a very good neighborhood at 707 North Penn Avenue. The best evidence suggests that they lived in Independence only a short time, perhaps only three or four months.

Independence: "You Never Saw Such a Girl"

When they arrived, Independence was a thriving city with a host of industries—including cement, brick, tile and pottery plants, an asphalt and rubber company, oil refineries, a window glass factory, flour and planing mills, and other works. It was also a busy juncture for the Santa Fe and Missouri Pacific railways and boasted an interurban line into Coffeyville to the south.

All of this, of course, was probably unimportant to the thirteen-year-old Louise, who enrolled that September in the Montgomery County High School. She already had her Dutch-bob bangs (her mother's idea), a hairstyle that was to help make her famous in films, and to provoke Kenneth Tynan to give reference to them in the title of his *New Yorker* profile some fifty years later. One woman in Independence remembers seeing Louise in the auditorium at school, surrounded by other girls because of her beauty and popularity, and thinking, perhaps with an understandable tinge of envy: "How lovely she is!" The woman also told me that Louise was a favorite, even then, of the boys, saying, "They were all crazy about her." Another former resident wrote to me about her clearest memory of Louise: "She taught me to roller-skate by wrapping and tying towels around my knees and a large bed pillow at both my front and back. What sight I must have looked!" This same woman says that she can remember "an antique, square spinet in one of the downstairs rooms" of the Brooks' home. Still another person who knew Louise at that time remembers her as "vivid and attractive."

It was during this brief time in Independence that Louise renewed—or continued—her study with Mae Argue Buckpitt in her dance studio on the top floor of the YMCA building on East Myrtle. Ms. Buckpitt ordered the very latest dance routines from Chicago, and one contemporary dancing student of Louise's time recalls that Ms. Buckpitt would often compliment Louise on the original costumes she wore to class. It was Myra who had designed and sewn them. Apparently, Louise was quite taken with her teacher, because even after the family had moved from Independence, Louise returned—in May of 1921—to perform under Buckpitt's direction a Spanish Dance in something called "Pageant of Childhood," presented at the Beldorf Theater and the Elks Country Club. One girl who was in the same program now remembers how "outstanding" Louise was with her dark bangs and ivory-white skin—but that she was also oddly "reserved."

By another small irony, the very date Louise enrolled for school—Monday, September 8, 1919—there appeared in the Independence *Daily Reporter* an

article titled "Movies Make Beauty"—and, again, one can only wonder if Louise (or perhaps Myra?) read it. The article quotes a Chicago sculptor, Lorado Taft, as saying: "Girls will be psychologically affected by moving pictures...They see beautiful women on the screen; then they go home and practice for hours before the mirror. The outcome? Graceful walking, pleasant faces, fine complexions and vivacity. It is the movies that are molding ever fresh types of native beauty—new American types."

Whether or not the youthful Louise contemplated—or even dreamed about—a movie career at this time is not known, but the movies were there, hovering in the background of her Independence sojourn like beckoning spirits from afar. That fall of 1919, between classes and dance lessons, she could have enjoyed the National Paramount Art Craft Week (ten cents a ticket) which included Dorothy Gish in *Boots* and Vivian Martin in *You Never Saw Such A Girl*.

Obviously, the boys at Montgomery High had never seen such a girl, either. But they had to look fast—because by January of 1920, Louise Brooks had vanished completely from their fascinated and flirtatious glances.

Wichita: "In My Dreams I Dance"

The final move in Kansas for the Brooks family was from Independence to Wichita—where Leonard had accepted a position as corporation lawyer for the Sterling Oil & Refining Company. The family now occupied a spacious home (fourteen rooms) at 924 North Topeka Avenue. Louise enrolled in the Horace Mann Intermediate School, then a new building at 428 South Broadway. She would attend the eighth and ninth grades—from Spring 1920 to Summer 1921—and take the normal course loads for such levels. She was a "good, average student" in English, math, Latin, and social studies.

Her heart however, was in her dancing.

She studied dance at the Wichita College of Music, under the direction of Alice Campbell. It was by now that Louise's personality—her artistic temperament—was beginning to unveil itself in sometimes unpleasant ways. Myra worried about it enough to tell Louise: "Now, dear, try to be more popular—try not to make people so mad!" Despite this, Ms. Campbell dismissed her from the dancing class, saying she was "spoiled, bad-tempered, and insulting." Predictably, Myra came to her daughter's defense with alacrity: "Yes, Louise is hard on everyone, but she is *much* harder on herself." Yet Myra was quite upset about Louise's dismissal, although Louise herself was not. The event "left me with a curiously relieved feeling," Louise wrote in her schoolgirl diary. "I must study, and that means away to broader fields. I've had enough of teaching my teacher what to teach me."

Those "broader fields" opened up in November 1921, when the famous dancer (and Independence, Missouri-born) Ted Shawn and his company came to Wichita to appear at the Crawford Theater. Following the



Louise Brooks at fifteen.

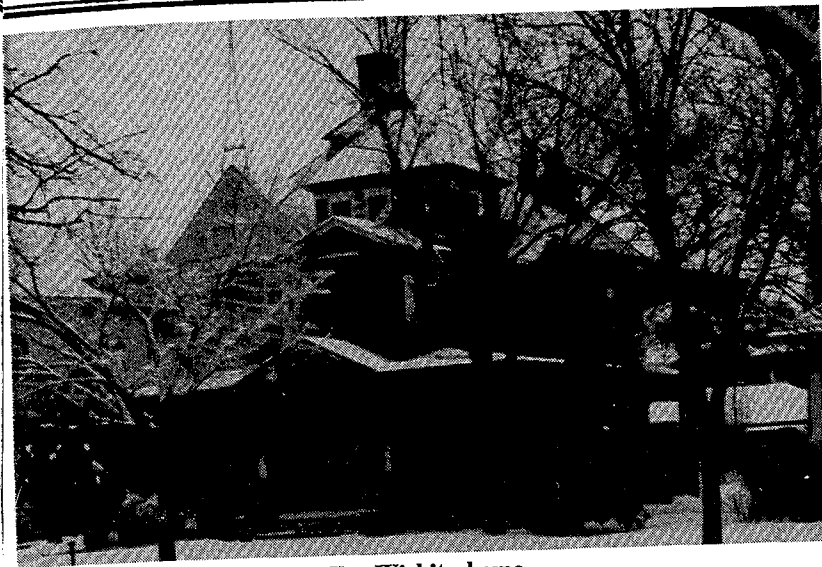
performance, Myra steered Louise backstage to meet Shawn, who cheerfully confided to them that he was opening a new studio in New York and that he would welcome Louise to enroll in the summer course of 1922. The tuition fee was a hefty \$300. Louise wanted to go—and Myra confidently promised to “wheedle” Leonard out of the money.

For his part, Leonard had never been very enthusiastic about a dancing career for his older daughter, calling the idea “silly.” Oddly enough, Leonard had his own aesthetic streak, manifested in his reading the classics and in his making and playing of violins (he was self-taught). It took all of the winter of 1921 and the spring of 1922 to talk him into the idea of “sending a little fifteen-year-old girl way from home” to gigantic New York City. But Myra finally persuaded him, and Leonard surrendered with only one firm stipulation: that Louise be accompanied by a mature chaperon. One was found in Alice Mills, “a stocky, bespectacled housewife of thirty-six.” What Leonard probably didn’t know was that Alice *wanted* to go because she had “fallen idiotically in love with the beautiful Ted Shawn at first sight,” and wanted to study dancing with him herself!

Thus it was that on a nice summer’s day in 1922, Louise and her new “roommate” left the Union Station in Wichita to start an adventure that would, in sixteen fleeting years, see the beginning and the end of Louise’s glorious—and to Myra, bitterly disappointing—stage and screen career.

She left Wichita an innocent girl (Myra had allowed Louise to subscribe to *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vanity Fair*, but had told her nothing about sex), but when she returned to Wichita in 1938—broke and her movie career in shambles—she was no longer sexually innocent. Not only had she had affairs with a number of men—including a pleasant one with Charlie Chaplin—she had been married (and divorced) twice. She told Kenneth Tynan, without a trace of self-pity, that she had “fled” back to Wichita from Hollywood, and that her decision to do so had “turned out to be another kind of hell,” since the “citizens of Wichita either resented me for having been a success or despised me for being a failure.” Added to the problems was the curious new relationship between Myra and Leonard. At the beginning of their marriage, so Louise claims, Myra informed her husband that she was using him to “escape to freedom and the arts.” She did so by leaving Leonard in the mid-1920s to make her own career as a Chautauqua lecturer and author. She also boldly capitalized on the fact that her daughter was the beautiful and successful movie star, Louise Brooks, “admired and acclaimed by thousands of movie fans.” Myra penned a book titled *Health, Beauty, and Psychology* (I was unable to find a copy) and was the associate editor of *The Golden Rule*, published in Chicago. But now, in 1938, Myra was back living under the same roof with charitable, patient, meticulous Leonard—and beginning to suffer from the emphysema which, a few years later, would kill her.

Those who remember the six years during which Louise lived for a final time in Wichita have disparate views of her, ranging from “mean” and “obnoxious” to “wonderful” and “not at all conceited.” Others remember



The Wichita home.

her fighting with Myra and her brother, Theo; being drunk and standing on her head in public; cursing and drinking heavily, and being savagely sarcastic to old school chums. Yet one woman who knew Louise well during this time, told me she was “a charming and delightful woman” with “all the charisma in the world.”

What nobody could deny was Louise’s beauty and her dancing ability. One friend remembers seeing her walking down Topeka Avenue at high noon in a black pants-suit and high heels (daring for the time) and looking “like the most elegant thing I’d ever seen.” As for her dancing, Louise and a promising young Wichita male dancer named Hal McCoy opened a studio (financed by Theo, Louise’s brother) in the Dockum Building at 110 North Hillside Avenue, where they taught rhumba, tango, and foxtrot lessons to adults. The venture ultimately failed, due in part to a personality clash between the partners and the fact that, as Louise told Tynan, “it didn’t make any money.” The Dockum building is still there—and the room which was once Louise and Hal’s studio is now filled with hardware supplies.

A year after the studio closed (1943), Louise left Wichita for New York. She never returned—even for Myra’s funeral in April of 1944. As for Leonard, he continued to write Louise letters filled with “fatherly advice,” and in the meantime achieved long-sought political eminence as an Assistant Attorney General under two Kansas governors. He died, age 92, on October 15, 1960. Again, Louise did not come home for the funeral. Myra and Leonard lie together now in the Brooks family plot in the cemetery northeast of Burden.

Louise’s love-hate relationship with Wichita—and Kansas—is probably explained by the youthful culture-shock she received by going to New York at such a tender age. It was there she became aware of her “hated Kansas

accent" and her "Kansas corn." In one absurdly inaccurate interview in a 1978 edition of the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle*, Louise is quoted as saying she was born in Wichita, "a place she says she detests almost as much as her 'dull' name." In this same article, Louise—disabled, old, and alone—told the reporters in a poignant moment: "In my dreams I am never crippled. I dance. . . ."

It is also possible that Louise occasionally dreams of her youth in Kansas—of the buggy races in 1919; and her grandfather, old Doc Tom with his horse, Tony; and her fifth birthday party in Cherryvale when Myra delighted her little friends by cooking toy rings and whistles into the iced cupcakes; and of helping wash the dishes with Venus Jones, the sister of Vivian Vance of *I Love Lucy* fame; and the warm applause from the audience of Wichita's Miller Theater where she danced—before she had ever heard of Ted Shawn. But more importantly, perhaps Louise at times wonders if her Kansas background did not, after all, provide her with the single quality the film critics have admired most in her, aside from sheer beauty: that sunflower-simple honesty in her voice and manner that placed her apart from so many other film actresses of her time who were false and affected on the screen.

There is a last small irony to frame the life of this remarkable personality, Louise Brooks. It is a poem which can be found today in a crumbling copy of the Burden *Eagle* at the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka, and it was printed the week Louise was born. It could have been composed as both a tribute and a warning to the baby girl Myra was holding in her arms that very day over in Cherryvale:

A Prophecy

A dream of happiness

Sweet dream!

Those eyes:

A thought of blessedness!

Is this

That dies?

Yet tho ne'er again

Those eyes

Are seen

Life's star till its end

Will be

That dream.



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