

# EDWARD MEAD, AMONG THE LAST OF THE NORTHWEST BARNSTORMERS

By

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"I remained at the smelter as a copper weigher, mingling with Senator Paris Gibson, Charles M. Russell, the cowboy artist, and spent my salary among the boys trying to drown my sorrows until January 1, 1900.

"Then I joined Andy McPhee's bloodhound-Uncle-Tom's-Cabin-troupe. I slept in a two-foot bunk with a real double-in-brass-bloodhound-actor for two weeks. Then I received my two weeks notice because I could not do Eva and a bloodhound at the same time. I quit the Private Palace Car at Spokane with \$5 in my pocket and the thermometer at 20 below zero.

"I stepped lively and called all the theaters. While talking to the manager of the last one on the list (the toughest free and easy joint in the city), the telephone rang and the manager answered the same, then turned and asked me if my name was Meade. I answered 'yes' and he told me someone wanted to talk to me at Davenport. I did not know that there was a town by the name, and thought he meant Davenport's famous restaurant. However, I took the receiver and said 'Hello'.

"When I had received my notice to quit the McPhee outfit, I immediately sat down and wrote to my old friend, Robert Buchanan, who recently organized a dramatic show in Spokane and was on the road. I had taken a chance and my letter had been forwarded. He now wanted an actor and had been chasing me by telephone all over Spokane. I was glad to hear him say, 'Is that you, Meade? This

is Buchanan. When can you join? Fifteen and cakes. Will send ticket. Call at railroad office. Come on first train to Davenport, Washington.' I said, 'Good-bye', hung up the receiver, and double-quickened it to the railroad office, got my ticket, and the next morning I was on Buchanan's private car. When I shook hands with old 'Bob', I remarked, 'Once more you have proven to be the Good Samaritan.'"

Such experiences were commonplace to Ed Meade, who was about the last of the old barnstormers. A "barnstormer" is an actor who tours through rural districts staging theatrical performances in barns and makeshift theaters. In the second decade of this century the term also applied to aviators who gave flying exhibitions.

Practically all of Edward Meade's adult life was spent as an actor in small communities in the Pacific Northwest. He was born in Sandwich, De Kalb County, Illinois, August 1, 1863. He came to the Oregon country as a professional actor about 1900.

Ed Meade could play any part, double in brass, and take a part in the olio. He could also load a wagon with trunks and properties, and then drive two teams of horses hitched tandem over the roughest roads to the next town.

The old actor never played the big towns. Probably Medford, in southern Oregon, was the most sizeable place in which Ed's company appeared. Ed played little places.

As he said, "I left Vale one morning on the stage - and after riding over rocks, ruts and corduroys for 15 miles, I arrived at Westfall, population 50, consisting of cowpunchers, stockmen, etc., with about 75 more within a radius of 12 miles. I billed the town,

arranged hotel accommodations, rented the town hall (no scenery), ate a square meal, and talked like an auctioneer while the stage driver was changing the horses and the other passengers were eating. We rode 15 miles more to a stage station at the foot of a lofty mountain, arriving there after dark. It was April, and somewhat chilly. We waited for the stage from another direction, hooked on four horses and proceeded to climb the mountain.

"I rode nearly 48 hours and billed Drewsey and Harney while the driver and passengers ate and changed horses. They were small places, like Westfall. I arrived in Burns the next night at 12 o'clock and realized that I had been experiencing something. I went into the bar-room of the hotel, put dates on some half-sheet posters to send back by the stage-driver to Harney, then asked the bartender for a drink of brandy. His name was Baldy and he asked me if I was a preacher. I said 'Put me to bed.'

"We did a wonderful business. Each one of us doubled many parts with all kinds of whiskers and wigs. Bob Buchanan said that we did not need more actors, but we needed more whiskers. We went north from Burns by stage to Canyon City, Oregon, then to Sumpter, Idaho, and by rails back to Weiser and the private car, which had been left there in care of the cook.

"The trip proved a financial and healthful success, so much that Buchanan took the car and troupe to Boise, sold the car, purchased wagons and horses, and we covered 2,000 miles of mountain roads, through Idaho, Utah, Nevada and California that summer."

As Meade related, other things happened too. "We got stuck in the Strawberry Mountain mud. The sheriff, four horses, two deputies, one murderer, and five horse thieves en route from Burns to the state prison at Salem pulled us out."

What were the names of some of the plays? "The Fatal Wedding," and "Old Kentucky" were favorites in southern Oregon. "East Lynne" did good business in Ashland. "Beyond the Rockies" was another. "Edgewood Folks" was a rustic melodrama with plenty of slapstick. And you may be sure that Meade worked at one time or another in "Uncle Tom's Cabin".

Then there was "Thelma, a Tale of the Northland." Among the musical plays were "Two Merry Tramps", the "Sultan of Sulu", the "Rajah of Bhong", changed into the "Sultan of Bhong", and vice-versa.

Those early barnstormers would play in almost any kind of hall. Ed tells us in his book, "Doubling Back", that the accommodations were often miserable.

"In one town we played in a large butcher shop for a week, with quarters of beef hanging all over the room. At another place it was in a granary, with the audience sitting upon great piles of wheat. And still at another freight division point we actually gave a performance in a roundhouse, and half the audience were Blookfoot Indians.

"The troupe went out to their camp, smoked the pipe of peace with the seven big chiefs while big chief Black Feather and his bride escorted us back to town where we gave them reserved seats on a board across the ash-pit for a wedding present.

"At the end of the week everybody had Indian trinkets galore, which the Indians had traded for tickets at the door. They could not understand the plays, but enjoyed the knife fights and the music.

We opened in Colfax, California, to light business, then railroaded to Nevada City and did not see a railroad or a train of cars for nearly 2,000 miles, except when we crossed the Souther Pacific

in Ashland, Oregon. We visited Surprise Valley with its four little towns snuggling up to the east slope of the mountains; then to Lakeview, Oregon, for a five-day celebration of the Fourth. The celebration consisted of horse-racing, bronco-busting, Indian war dances, and sheep-shearing contests.

"The opera House was over a livery stable where the people purchased four square feet of floor space for a reserved seat to our show and furnished their own chairs. We did a rollicking business at Lakeview. The next year we rented Charlie Snyder's furniture store, built a plank stage, hung our own scenery, and the citizens packed to the doors every night.

"From Lakeview it was a long ride, 100 miles west, to Linkville (Klamath Falls) then a small town of 600 inhabitants. Here we found a real opera house. The manager, John V. Houston, was in San Francisco, but we showed under the management of his brother.

"We soon went over the mountains to Ashland, Medford and Jacksonville. We played at Jacksonville and Grants Pass and from there went to Crescent City, 100 miles distant over some of the most beautiful summer roads in existence. We opened on Monday night in Crescent City with Endert's Opera House.

"We traveled up the Oregon coast to Gold Beach, Port Orford and Bandon, then to Marshfield on Coos Bay. We went through Curry and Coos Counties, but did not do very well. Hal the Healer had just been through Coos County and picked upaall the easy money.

"We crossed the Klamath Reservation to Crater Lake, played in an agricultural implement house to well-educated and behaved Indians

then continued to Klamath Falls."

Ed Meade spent his later years in Marshfield, now Coos Bay. For a time, he ran a little store, then bad health interfered. It was at this time that he also wrote his book, "Doubling Back". He died in Bedford, Va., April 2, 1926, a few years after publication of his book.