MISS PHRADIE WELLS

as she appeared in the role of Brunnhilde in Wagner's "Die Valkyrie" at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.
Phradie Wells

"I've never known anybody to accomplish what she did who was as humble about it as she was. She had a beautiful humility," said Mrs. Edgar (Kathryn) Myers, a close friend of Miss Phradie Wells, a former resident of Kirksville and a soprano in the Metropolitan Grand Opera from 1923 to 1936.

"I think that people around here didn't know about her very much, until she passed away.

"There are many things I could tell you about her that I found interesting, things that I might tell you or show you so that you could see her, the kind of person that she was. I've never had a friend like her, ever."

Phradie Wells was born April 27, 1893, in Economy, Mo., in Macon County, which is located east of Atlanta, Mo. She was the daughter of William R. and Laura Wells. She came to Kirksville at the age of 15 or 16 with her parents, who left the farm to educate their children. She received her high school education in Kirkville.

Phradie thought it was "pretty silly" when Oscar Saenger said she was good enough for the Metropolitan.

Mrs. Myers first met Phradie in 1915 while she was involved in the music department at the Normal School. At this time Phradie was the director of the First Baptist Church Choir and she asked Mrs. Myers to participate in the choir, thus beginning a long and rewarding friendship for both. Phradie directed the choir for many years.

During her education at the Normal School, Phradie quit for a while and taught to earn enough money to further her education. She taught at a country school east of Kirkville called Radical Ridge. The school house stood where Dr. Harry Still now lives.

After graduating from the Normal School, her first good position was as supervisor of music in the Chillicothe, Mo., schools. She also served as director of dramatic music in the Chillicothe High School from 1918 to 1921.

Once Phradie was asked to give a concert in Chillicothe. Her accompanist in Kirkville at the time was Eva Englehart, who taught music and gave piano lessons. Eva had accompanied her several times previously when she was home.

Phradie, Mrs. Myers and Eva were on their way to Chillicothe for the concert, and they had traveled almost 100 miles when Eva said, "Phradie, I forgot the music, I forgot to bring it. I just don't have it."

"Forgot the music?" Phradie asked.

"Yes," she said, "but I think I can play it."

Phradie had enough confidence in her that they went through that concert without one mistake.

After she had taught in Chillicothe for a couple of years she decided to go to the city to take voice lessons. Mr. Gebhart, her teacher on the Normal School campus, had told her she had possibilities and she should work with a good teacher, one in the city. He recommended she go to Chicago, Ill., and study with Oscar Saenger. Saenger was a very fine voice teacher who lived in New York, but came to Chicago during the summer to teach voice. Thus she decided she would go to Chicago one summer and study with Saenger.

After he heard her sing, Saenger told her that if she would come to New York, he could get her into the Metropolitan Grand Opera within a year, which she thought was "pretty silly."

During the time she was in Chicago studying with Saenger, Phradie was asked to go to Denver, Colo., to be the supervisor of music in all of the schools in Denver. Arthur Threlkeld had taken the superintendency of the Denver schools and he had recommended her.

At this point she didn't know what to do. She came back from Chicago and went to Mrs. Myers' house one afternoon and said, "What should I do, Kathryn? Should I go to New York? I haven't any money really. Or should I take this wonderful position out in Denver?" Mrs. Myers suggested she go to New York.

Phradie sold the couple she owned, and with what money she had she went to New York, giving up the job in Denver.

While in New York she roomed with a woman who was a family friend. She had a chance to audition for a solo job in a Presbyterian Church in South Orange, N.J. After completing the audition, they hired her to sing a solo each Sunday for which she was paid $25, a vast sum of money to her. This money she earned singing each Sunday took care of her room rent and part of her board. She sang in the church as soloist for 13 years.

She saw in a New York newspaper an advertisement from an Italian boy who wanted to exchange Italian lessons for English lessons, so she answered the ad. After completing a year of Italian lessons she could speak it and sing it well from only the lessons she received from this boy.

Later she started studying again with Saenger in New York and within nine months she was singing in Carnegie Hall.

"She made quite an impression on the music people who heard her," Mrs. Myers said.

Giulio Gatti-Cassazza, the director/conductor of the Metropolitan Grand Opera, heard her and asked her to come for an audition, which she thought was "pretty funny."

Nevertheless she went, saying she wasn't the least bit nervous about it because she thought it wouldn't amount to anything, anyway. So she sang for him and in two or three days he called her back for a second audition. She went back and sang for him the second time and in three or four days he called her and told her he would like to have her on the Metropolitan roster. She had been in New York less than a year when this happened.

She performed with the Metropolitan Grand Opera for 13 years and sang some very important roles, more than she

By Annette Greer
and that was not in her make-up at all. She was a very unusual, wonderful woman, Mrs. Myers said.

One day Mr. Gatti-Cassazza called her into his office and said, "Miss Wells, I called you in to tell you that you are a very high type American lady, one of the finest I've ever known." She told this to Mrs. Myers.

Phradie had been with the Metropolitan for 13 or 14 years when Gatti-Cassazza died suddenly. The man who took over the opera after Gatti-Cassazza was Herbert Witherspoon. Witherspoon fired everyone on the roster for no reason, wiping the slate clean of American singers. He then hired all European singers. Witherspoon lived only a short time after that.

The next person who took over the Metropolitan was Edward Johnson. Phradie was never invited back.

"She was a person who never pushed herself. I think she could have gotten back on the roster if she had tried, but she didn't, Mrs. Myers said.

Once or twice she sang on the program for the President of the United States and was entertained in the White House once, but she would never share accounts of these events with anyone.

In the 1930s she went abroad and studied in Florence, Italy, for one summer. While on board the ship en route to Europe, she wrote letters home which told of wonderful things that happened to her. She gave a ship concert for charity. She had ovations and received many bouquets of flowers, and ate at the captain's table during the voyage.

When she was no longer with the Metropolitan, she stayed in New York for a while and did some radio work and a great deal of church singing. Then she accepted a position as head of music in the Randolph Macon College in Lynchberg, Va., and was there for approximately three years.

During one summer that Phradie was home she went to Mrs. Myers' home for dinner with Mr. and Mrs. John L. Biggerstaff. Biggerstaff was head of the music department at the Normal School.

In the course of the evening he said to her, "Have you ever thought about coming back to the campus to teach?" She said no, but she didn't like Lynchberg. She got upset with the people there over the way they talked about Abraham Lincoln. She didn't like it and she didn't want to be there any longer.

She had also considered coming back to Kirksville because her mother was ill and she felt that she should be with her.

After traveling back to the east Phradie received a letter from Biggerstaff asking her if she would consider coming back. She named a price she thought he perhaps would not meet, but he did. She came back to the Kirksville campus to teach and to take care of her mother and father until they passed away.

During her time at the Normal School she directed many operas.

"I never was able to understand why, when the time came that she could no longer sing her high B's and C's without flattering, that she quit singing," Mrs. Myers said. "Her middle register was beautiful, and it could be called a middle register because she could sing a high G and A beautifully.

"She never did sing any more after she retired from the teachers college. I tried to get her to do solo work. I tried to get her to sing in the choir, but she wouldn't," Mrs. Myers said.

Various photos proved how versatile Phradie could appear in performances.
Phradie never married, but there was a man in New York who had a big estate out on Long Island, and he proposed to her. He was very much in love with her, but it was in the beginning of her opera career. He was a very wealthy man and didn’t want her to continue her singing. She was not in love with him enough to give up her career for him, so she refused to marry him.

There was another man in New York who proposed to her. He was very wealthy, but had no occupation. This man lived only off of his income, and Phradie also refused him.

Phradie told Mrs. Myers that she could never marry anybody who didn’t work, who didn’t have some aim in life, something to do. She just couldn’t do that.

Phradie was a Wagnerian soprano and she sang in the Wagnerian operas.

She had been in the Metropolitan Grand Opera probably just a few months when Tiffany’s, the jewelry store in New York at the time, came out with a new jewel called a floating opal which was to be worn around the neck. They presented Phradie with one of these opals and a New York paper ran a front-page article about two new gems in New York, Phradie being one and the floating opal the other. A picture of her with the opal accompanied the story.

“Phradie let me wear the floating opal for about two years and then I gave it back to her,” Mrs. Myers said.

A couple of years before she passed away Phradie told Mrs. Myers she had lost the floating opal. Several times since that she would tell her she had lost it.

“It was a beautiful gem and of course meant a great deal to her because of Tiffany’s having given it to her and all of the story that was woven around it,” Mrs. Myers said.

“When I dismantled the house I decided that I was going to find that opal if I didn’t find anything else. I went through piece by piece in her dressing table, every little sack, every little box, just anything. And I found that opal, in a little tiny box. She hadn’t looked thoroughly enough for it.” Mrs. Myers said. “I gave it to her nephew, Jimmy Wells.”

While dismantling Phradie’s house, Mrs. Myers found many scrapbooks, articles and many other things that no one had ever known about. She also found one of her costumes that had been locked away in a closet, but it was not in good condition.

“When I dismantled her house after she passed away, in a trunk in the basement I found many New York papers that told of the important roles that she sang that we had never known about in Kirksville. I don’t know why we didn’t know, but we didn’t. The papers lauded her and they said such marvelous things about her,” Mrs. Myers said.

Phradie died Sunday morning, June 1, 1980, in the St. Lukes Hospital in Kansas City where she had been a patient for five days.

“Now these are the the kind of friends we were with each other. We knew that neither one would do anything to the other purposely or deliberately; we were just on that kind of a friendship basis. It was just wonderful. She was quite a little older than I, but she took me under her wing when I came here to school. She was a very wonderful person.

“It hurt me terribly to know that in her last days she was not well and she became a recluse,” Mrs. Myers concluded. “She didn’t want to see people, she didn’t like to go places, and she just stayed at home.”