Missouri’s Tall Daughter

By Bobby Poston

She was born Ella K. Ewing in LaGrange, located in Lewis County, Mo. Later, she moved to the small remote town of Rainbow, Mo., located southeast of Gorin. But as years passed, she became known to everyone world-wide as the “Missouri Giantess,” or “Ella the Giantess.” Her record height was a towering eight feet and four inches and she carried a weight of 256 pounds. Some folks thought of Ella as a “freak exhibition piece,” but there was more to Ella some overlooked. She had feelings and a personality just like everyone else, and to her neighbors in Rainbow, she was “normal” compassionate friend.

Her date of birth was March 9, 1872, and she was the only child of Benjamin F. Ewing and Anna Eliza Herring Ewing. Ella seemed to be an average child, and was for seven years.

During Ella’s school years, she enjoyed playing with the other school children. Soon after her seventh birthday, Ella’s pituitary gland started mass production of the hormone which was to be the cause of her abnormal growth. By the age of nine it was obvious Ella’s growth was extreme. At the age of 12 she was more than five feet and six inches and stood taller than her mother. One of the many problems Ella faced was finding shoes to fit her. It was at this age she would go with her father to Memphis to buy shoes. In later years Ella’s shoe size finally stopped increasing but at size 24. So naturally Ella was always self-conscious of her feet. Only on rare occasions were her feet pictured.

Her parents felt she was just a rapid-growing child, but at the age of 14 she was as tall as Ben, six feet and two inches, and her parents started to pray her growth would stop. At age 16 she stood seven foot and by 18 she had added eight more inches. By then her parents feared her growth would never stop.

The growth Ella experienced was from her waist down and in her arms and hands. She wore several rings on each hand in an attempt to disguise the size of her fingers. Her little fingers were comparable to the size of a man’s thumb.

By then the happy, frolicking school days Ella once knew were gone because she obviously stood out from her friends. She tried to participate in games but try as she would, she always seemed the center of attention. At times she would get so embarrassed, due to the other students stares and snickers she would burst into tears. This was only the start of the sorrow she was to experience from cruel remarks from the entire world.

Ella was a kind, compassionate lady. But this didn’t have any bearing on the attention Ella drew in public. It was a 4th of July celebration in 1885 in Wyconda that Ella made her first public appearance. She was scheduled to read the Declaration of Independence but as she stepped to the stage the crowd was immediately drawn to silence and stares. Ella
struggled to read but the fixed stares overran her confidence. She was led away in tears by her ever-comforting parents.

1889 was to be the blossoming of Ella's career in public tours. Lewis Epstein, who had connections with the manager of a Chicago museum, received information of Ella's abnormal size. It was impossible for Ben and Anna to keep their daughter's size a secret. Epstein presented a business deal to use Ella in the museum. The Ewings refused, but after persistence from Epstein he convinced Ben and Anna to permit Ella to go on tour. The $1,000 offered in the contract was sure to relieve some of the financial burdens of those hard times, and the contract was only for five weeks, but just the thought of Ella being exhibited as a freak seemed to be an insult to the proud Ewings. They didn't know it, but this was to be the beginning of the end of Ella's peaceful homelife.

In January 1897 Ella, accompanied by her mother, prepared to go on tour with the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Her contract was to begin in February and she received $125 a week for 26 weeks of circus traveling. The contract also offered Ella and Anna an all-expense-paid trip as well as allowing Ben to visit six times, and his expenses were also paid.

In the winter of 1897 Ella returned home with the idea of building a home and settling down. She purchased an 80-acre plot and hired John Beck to build her a customized house. To accommodate her extreme height Ella ordered the doors built 10 feet high and the ceilings 15 feet. Her tables were four-and-a-half feet tall from the floor and her bathtub was six feet long. For sleeping comfortably, Ella's bed was nine-and-a-half feet long and she had a hammock 15 feet long.

After the completion of Ella's house in 1898 she was rested and again became eager to go to work. She signed a contract with Buffalo Bill's "Wild West Show" thinking it would bring the same joy and satisfaction she received from performing with Barnum and Bailey. This contract offered $150 a week and lasted from March until mid-October.

The first few weeks seemed like an eternity to Ella; this job was not what she had expected. Finally in June, Ella could stand it no more and decided to break her contract. She returned to Rainbow and stayed with friends and loved ones until her next business deal.

1900 was going to be one of Ella's most shattering years. In February Ella signed a contract with a Chicago museum. After a few weeks her mother became deathly ill with pneumonia. By the middle of March Anna's health had deteriorated so much that Ella telegraphed Ben and told him to come to Chicago. Soon after Ben arrived, Anna died March 23, 1900, at the age of 62. Anna's body was taken by train back to Gorin. Ella and Ben were overcome with grief as they made the long trip home. Anna had always been with Ella to help her through her trying moments, but now Ella was alone.

For some time after Anna's death Ella was in mourning. But April 3, 1900, she was baptized and this seemed to renew her spiritually. This stirred up Ella's desire to go back on tour again.

Of all the prominent cities and elegant countries Ella visited she found time to exhibit in Kirksville, Mo. This
engagement was with the Royal Neighbors Lodge on May 3, 1902. This was one of her more unusual exhibits because it took place in a vacant storeroom. A fee of 10 cents was charged and all proceeds went to the Lodge.

Ella was not all business. She had the same traits and interests as any woman: shopping, cooking and hosting parties. As a devoted church member, Ella put God before anything else. She was an active member of the Harmony Grove Baptist church and a Sunday school teacher.

Ella made few public appearances during 1909-1910. She appeared at a few fairs and at one museum engagement. In May 1911 she signed a contract to exhibit in Chicago. She had to break it due to her health, however, and never exhibited in show business after this.

She had a persistent cough which she could not seem to shed; it was due to tuberculosis. By Oct. 27, 1912, Ella’s condition was so bad that a doctor and her immediate family was sent for. The doctor worked futilely trying to “gain ground” on Ella’s condition but on Friday, Jan. 10, 1913, at 8 a.m., Ella Ewing died of pulmonary tuberculosis at age 40 years, 10 months and one day.

As the years went on Ella’s home fell to shambles. Vandals, as well as sight-seers, came to look for anything of value. Some of the local residents considered purchasing the frame and restoring it, creating an Ella Ewing museum, but fire gutted the house June 17, 1967, and leveled the two-story shell.

After the fire a group was organized to reconstruct her tombstone which was almost obliterated by weather. Donations came from about 7,000 sources and the money received helped to purchase a new rose granite marker. It reads:

In memory
of
Ella K. Ewing
Born March 9, 1872
Lewis County, Mo.
Died Jan. 10, 1912
Scotland County, Mo.
Height 5 ft. 4½ in.
Weight 256 lbs.
Member of the
Harmony Baptist Church
Daughter of
Benjamin and Anna
Herring Ewing
This memorial
made possible
by folks that
knew of Ella
1967

October 1, 1967, the Missouri Soil Conservation Service built and dedicated “The Ella Ewing Lake,” a 15-acre lake created near Gorin in memory of Ella.

She may be gone now, but the memory and impressions she left on the whole world can never be forgotten. In addition to the memory Ella left behind, the landmarks in her name will always be here to refresh the memory of those who knew her or just knew of her.

Ella’s was self-conscious about her large feet, which finally stopped growing at size 24. She rarely allowed them to be photographed. (Photo courtesy of Nancy Platz)