**High-Wire Heroine**

*Pueblo Chieftain*

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The Pueblo Chieftain

CANON CITY - The unparalleled life of Bird Millman - from her feats as the foremost female wire walker to her sensational marriage to a millionaire and premature death as a penniless cancer victim - takes center stage when the Fremont Civic Theatre presents an original musical named for Canon City's most famous resident.

Bird was born Jennadean Engleman on Oct. 20, 1890, to Dyke and Jennie Engleman, who ran a general store in Canon City and performed in small circus venues. The family lived on North Third Street, where, according to an article in”The Post Phone,” Bird”strung first a rope, then a wire between fence posts and to the goggle-eyed amazement of playmates, began to practice the art that brought her fame and fortune in later years.”

Armed with a new last name, the family, billed as the”Millman Trio,” started performing as a threesome when Bird was 6 1/2 years old. Bird initially performed stunts with a pony, but was also known to take to the trapeze and high wire.

Bird gave her first solo wire performance at the age of 10 after her father had fallen 40 feet from a wire and was being treated for his injuries at a hospital with Jennie at his side. After that, there was no looking back as Bird's career took wing.

Her stunts were breathtaking and although they were not unique to the high-wire circuit, Millmans”charming personality” endeared her to circus, vaudeville and the Ziegfeld Follies audiences in the United States and Europe, according to historical information supplied by the Canon City Public Library's local history center.

A Grand Refined Vaudeville flyer billed Bird as”a wanderlust upon the tight wire - dashing, daring, dauntless, dainty.” A 1909 review claimed”Miss Millman is not only pretty, has a charming personality and 'a way with her' that captures everybody, but her skill on the wire is something that causes you to hold your breath with amazement and sometimes alarm, for her daring is quite equal to her skill.”

A 1913 Barnum & Bailey circus flyer for the Greatest Show on Earth said of Bird,”Wire walker is a misnomer - she does not walk, she runs upon it, dances and swings in so fearless a fashion.” She was even known to jump through a hoop while performing her high-wire act.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Bird did her bit for a Liberty Loan drive by dancing on a wire in several cities. Perhaps her most daring performance was on a wire strung between the 25th floors of two buildings over Broadway in New York City.

“The performance, in art and daring, eclipsed any of her long record,” according to one review. In 1919, when the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circuses combined, Bird was a center-ring star.

The high-wire artist who had captured so many hearts gave up her lofty career when her own heart was captured by Boston millionaire Joseph O'Day, whose family ran a dye manufacturing business. The couple married secretly in 1924 - Bird was 34 and Joseph was 28.

Bird confirmed her decision in a letter to a friend, writing,”Yes, I am married and really am retired. At least, I think I have. I hope the old call of the sawdust ring won't be too much for me.”

O'Day lost his riches during the Great Depression and died just 10 years after the couple married. Bird, left virtually penniless, returned to Canon City to live with her mother on a small chicken farm at 2295 Pear.

Bird's parents had split and her father lived in New York. The old farmhouse still remains today, while all that is left of her first Canon City home - destroyed by fire - is a vacant lot.

Old injuries from her high-flying career returned to haunt her and she was diagnosed with spinal cancer. Her good friend Dixie Willson”rushed to Bird's side and rallied for money to get Bird painkillers. It is very touching,” said August Mergelman, who wrote the original music and lyrics for”Bird Millman,” a play based on her life.

Bird died at age 49 on Aug. 5, 1940, and was buried at Lakeside Cemetery in Canon City, where her grave is marked by a simple tombstone. Her mother died a year later and was laid to rest beside her daughter, while her father died in 1943 and was buried in New York.

Some 21 years after her death, Bird was elected to the Circus Hall of Fame in Florida as the foremost female wire walker in showbiz history.

Mergelman’s play on Bird Millman will be presented April 11-14 at Washington Elementary School, Ninth and College in Canon City.

Mergelman chose Dixie to narrate his play and, although much of the musical is based on facts Mergelman unearthed through exhaustive research, he does take some artistic license in telling Bird's story. Mergelman will play O'Day in the play, while Bird will be portrayed by two actors - Kylie Kahnke for the early years and Cheri Hinz the later years.

“Cheri actually went to the history center and did a lot of research and even found Bird's grave,” said director Tom Ledbetter.

Cheri worked to copy Bird's hairstyle while Rita Wilhem of Seasons Past Historic Clothing did a fantastic job of reproducing Bird's most popular costume for the play.

“It is a good musical and it has a lot of laughs,” Ledbetter explained.”I think people will enjoy it because it is all original - no one knows anything about it - the music (written by Sam Stokes) and the plot lines are all new, so it will be a unique opportunity to be the very first to see something.”

Mergelman also hopes to sell the play to a Denver theater company.

Local performances are slated for 7 p.m. April 11, 12 and 13; and 2 p.m. April 13 and 14. Cost is $6 for adults or $5 for seniors, students and Fremont Civic Theatre members.

Advance tickets are on sale at the Book Corral and Safeway in Canon City or the Fox Den of Antiquity in Florence.