

This Week in Saratoga County History

Rhoda Meets Lillian: It Didn't Go Well

Submitted by Paul Perreault August 14, 2024

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Lillian Russell

Rhoda Thompson

On the morning of August 14, 1909, Miss Rhoda Thompson of Rose Hill Farm in Milton instructed her driver, Sylvester, to harness the horses so that she might bring her house guest, a Mr. Wilder, to the Saratoga train station in order to catch the 4 pm train to New York.

Miss Thompson was a well-known society woman from a very prominent Saratoga County family. She was the daughter of Judge James Thompson, a Regent of the University of the State of New York, and Mary Stansbury Thompson and the granddaughter of John Thompson, the first judge of the county and a member of the State Assembly in 1788. Her brother John was surrogate of the county and one of the founders of the Ballston Spa National Bank. He was its president when he died in 1892.

Rhoda was prominent in Saratoga County society and took an active interest in the affairs of her community. She was a charter member of the Saratoga County

Daughters of the American Revolution and the Saratoga County Historical Society. She contributed to many charities and each year helped direct and finance the West Milton District School, repairing and modernizing the schoolhouse and giving funds each year to balance the budget. When she died in 1923, she directed that the remainder of her estate, over \$100,000 (equal to over \$1,800,000 in today's dollars) go to the New York and the Albany County Association of the Blind in the name of her mother who was blind for many years prior to her death.

As Miss Thompson and her party were heading toward their destination, they encountered a "huge car crossing the Mourningkill flats at great speed." The road was very narrow at this point; not wide enough for two vehicles to pass without great care and Rhoda anticipated that the car would exercise such. Instead "it put on more power and shot up the hill like lightening, there was no escape from being crushed, except to take to the ditch". Her carriage was smashed and on its side, while the horses were scattered. Rhoda found herself "lying in a dusty road, a stunned, dazed, tattered, battered dust heap" who could not rise due to a painful ankle. As bad as the physical injuries were, worst was about to come.

As Rhoda recounts "Over the brow of the hill appeared a bold, coarse, painted woman, who filled my soul with disgust. She offered to take me anywhere, to send a doctor, etc. I refrained from saying I prefer to lie here in the dust, until some decent person comes along if only to take me in a wheelbarrow."

Rhoda soon learned that her "undoer" was none other than Lillian Russell, the "Kardashian" of fin-de-siecle society. Although a talented vocalists and actress, by 1909 she was better known as the "friend" of Diamond Jim Brady, the market manipulator who was famous for making money, wearing flashy jewelry and eating enormous amounts of food. Jim owned over 20,000 diamonds and a typical meal could consist of two whole ducks, six or seven lobsters, a sirloin steak, two servings of terrapin and assorted vegetables. Because he did not drink alcohol, the meal would be washed down with gallons of orange juice.

Lillian adopted all three of Jim's habits and by this time her "girlish figure" was being described as "full-bodied". The couple were a fixture in Saratoga each August at the races and the casinos. Lillian's, the popular downtown restaurant which closed in 2015, was named for her.

While recovering, Rhoda wrote to a friend that when she discovered who the driver was “I understood my instinctive feelings of repulsion and disgust, the desire to first clear the air of her presence”. While Miss Russell offered to assist and even provide a ride to a doctor, Rhoda saw her offer as being made “in a perfunctory way with the air of doing a noble gracious act, although entirely irresponsible” and chose to accept a ride from a passerby.

Rhoda’s distaste for Lillian was apparently not only based on this encounter but a deeper-seated feeling about “the sporty class who scatter money and diffuse evil through this region during the summer.” Sounds like “old money” looking down on “new money.”

Sources: Miss Thompson’s correspondence to an unnamed friend was found in an unlabeled file in the collection of the Town of Malta Historian;

“History of Saratoga-Lillian Russell and Diamond Jim Brady.” Saratoga Today, July 25, 2019.