

Living Large

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Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason



JOSEPH P. ECKHARDT

A new book is coming out in June by long-time contributor to the Toonerville Times Joseph P. Eckhardt a long-time contributor of all things related to the Betzwood Motion Picture Company. Betzwood was the company that produced the Toonerville Trolley series of movies (1920-1922) written by Fontaine Fox. For great background information refer back to Joseph P. Eckhardt's "Clatter, Sproing, Clunk Went the Trolley." *Pennsylvania Heritage Magazine*, 18, 3 (Summer 1992), pages 24-31 and printed with permission in the Fall 1993 issue of the Toonerville Times.

Eckhardt's latest book focuses on the life and times of the woman who portrayed Powerful Katrinka in the Toonerville movies, Wilna Hervey and her partner for almost sixty years Nan Mason. He shows how the two women, coming from quite different backgrounds, met through Wilna's co-star who was Nan's father. Fontaine Fox's trolley brought them together.

Living Large: Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason.

Born into an affluent musically talented family and growing up in New York City, she was highly protected by her mother. Realizing that Wilna large size and strength would only lead to problems in regular school, she was home schooled. She grew up in a loving family and had plenty of material and cultural benefits but she had virtually no contact with the outside world. Her mother made sure she had all she wanted but also made all the decisions for her. Wilna developed into a shy and naive adolescent and then adult; always happiest when in the company of others who, like her mother, loved her and took charge.

In her early teens she became captivated with movies and, while not actually approving of movies, her parents did allow her to go to a small theater near her home. It was here when she was fifteen that she met another girl about her own age and made her first friend. It was also during her early teen years that Wilna began to show an interest in art. Not music like the rest of her family but painting. She was given painting lessons and quickly demonstrated the talent that would continue to develop to the end of her life.

Her interest in the movies continued and eventually, in her early 20s, she landed a few small roles. Her size, 6 feet 3 and nearly 300 pounds, was perfect in comic roles in the silent movies. And here she discovered that when acting, people were responding to her size in a positive manner—laughing appropriately at her comic characters rather than laughing at her. She got herself an agent but also continued with her main love—painting.

When a role for a big actress came up, that of Powerful Katrinka, she landed it as soon as Fontaine Fox saw her. She moved to a small room in Norristown PA near the Betzwood Studio where the filming would take place. Here she found herself alone for the first time. But she was not to remain alone for long. Enter the Skipper.

After fifty years as a successful career as a comedian and character actor starting in vaudeville and then musical comedy Dan Mason decided to try the silent movies. He was hired to play the role of the Skipper. Mason was staying in the same hotel as Wilna and when he realized how inexperienced she was—she'd never even heard of greasepaint before—he served as her mentor and helped her perfect her role and well as develop her self-confidence. Cast members in the Toonerville movies had to supply their own costumes and makeup. Dan was an expert and spent hours each day applying individuals hairs to give him the full beard and wispy hair so typical of the Skipper. Wilna bought her costume pieces at the local Goodwill store. Both perfectly matched their character in Fontaine Fox's cartoons.

Dan Mason's wife of 33 years had recently died and he missed his daughter who was living alone in New York. Since her fiancé was living there too, Dan was concerned about gossip developing and in 1920, he bought a house near the studio and encouraged his daughter to move to Pennsylvania and live with him. Wilna, also lonely looked forward to perhaps developing a new friend. However, based on Dan Mason's age and slight build she was concerned that his daughter would be much older than her and rather small. Nan turned out to be nearly as large as Wilna and two years younger.

Nan Mason had grown up moving from place to place as her parents followed the theater. She was cheerful by nature but a little bit rough around the edges. However she was very practical and after high school trained as a stenographer, got a job and became engaged. She was looking forward to a conventional life as housewife, and mother. Her fiancé's untimely death in 1921 from pneumonia put an end to that dream.

As her friendship with Nan developed, Wilna took to improve Nan's English as well her wardrobe. Nan on the other hand took care of Wilna and her father by taking over the household chores, the gardens and the pets. The three settled into a nice routine and Dan Mason would often speak of the two as his daughters. During breaks between films, Wilna would return to NY and her art studies. In 1920 she used some of her movie money to buy property in Bearsville NY near the artist colony of Woodstock. When future Toonerville movies were suddenly cancelled Dan Mason and his daughter left for California where Dan was determined to find funding to continue making films with Wilna; Wilna returned to her Bearsville property and her art. Dan succeeded with what was to become known as the Plum Center Comedies (obviously imitating the Toonerville movies but with the names changed and no trolley). Wilna went to Hollywood! Wilna was in over thirty movies, only half of them Toonerville; she was always remembered as Powerful Katrinka.

While in California Wilna and Nan made contact with the artist colony in Carmel; and with Wilna's encouragement Nan took up drawing and decided to become a professional artist. The two of them continued as very successful and popular artists. Later they bought property in Florida and circulated between the artist communities with the seasons. Known as the "Big Girls" they were very popular and continued to expand their artistic talents into the 1970s.

Dan Mason's last film was released in 1928 and he died a year later at the age of 72. Wilna died in 1979 at the age of 84 and Nan in 1982 at 85. It was the Toonerville Trolley that united these three people.

The above is just a brief sketch of the Toonerville years in this delightful and informative book. There is much more in the 200 pages, over 170 illustrations, Wilna Hervey's Filmography, detailed end notes as well as an index.

Living Large: Wilna Hervey and Nan Mason

by Joseph P. Eckhardt

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by WoodstockArts

Two of the Betzwood Toonerville movies are available on a videotape cassette (VHS) in 1987 by the Toy Train Historical Foundation for the Toy Train Operating Society, Inc. :

The Skipper's Narrow Escape

Boozem Friends.



Fontaine Fox designed the Toonerville Trolley to be used by the Betzwood Film Company, he balanced it precariously on one set of wheels to allow for all the comic motion of the car.



Dan Mason without makeup or costume and the Skipper



Katrinka ends up using a tilting tea table as a serving tray.