Musical Sisters

The MNHS archives are a perilous proposition for a man with severe obsessive-compulsive disorder and a proclivity for disappearing down rabbit holes. I tend to click through thousands of photos at a sitting, looking for something that stops me in my tracks. Several years ago I stumbled across this 1957 photo of the Metropolitan Trio (Adeline, Arma, and Margaret Milch) performing at a Goodwill Industries Christmas party. At the time, I wrote a short story told from the point of view of a cynical young man (inspired by Holden Caulfield) who was trapped at that party with his parents. And then, I moved along to something else.

On my most recent excavations, I discovered that the musical Milchs of St. Paul make regular appearances—stretching over 67 years—in the state’s photo archive (and the MNHS library holds the family’s papers). Louis Milch, the patriarch, was a violin maker and a member of the Beethoven String Quartette, with whom he is pictured in 1890. There is a portrait of Mathilda (Mrs. Louis) Milch from 1920, as well as photos of the family home and violin shop. Various musical configurations of the sisters pop up as well and, based on these photos, Arma is of particular interest. Over a couple dozen photos we see her grow up: in her first appearance, 1890, she is clutching a doll; in all subsequent photos she is pictured with her violin. After 1937 none of the Milchs will be heard from—at least, in the archive—until that holiday gig 20 years later.

Two other pictures add a tantalizing angle to what already seemed like a colorful family saga. These photos capture Arma’s Queens of Syncopation, which billed itself as “The only female jazz band in the world.” Elsewhere in the vast closet of the Internet you can find a newspaper clipping from 1923, date-lined Chicago, which indicates that the Queens of Syncopation made at least one tour of midwestern theaters and ballrooms.

I stared at and into those photos for a long, long time, dazzled but also frustrated by their silence. Finally, as is so often the case with the lost, mysterious world of photographs, I turned away and then, because I still wanted more, I started to imagine.

—Brad Zellar

BRAD ZELLAR, formerly a senior editor at City Pages, The Rake, and Utne Reader, is the author of Suburban World: The Norling Photos, Conductors of the Moving World, and House of Coates, reissued in 2014 by Coffee House Press. He most recently collaborated with photographer Alec Soth on The LBM Dispatch, a traveling newspaper project that chronicled American community life in the twenty-first century.
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