In 1962, a house near Cedar Lake in Minneapolis changed owners. Perhaps the new residents of 2838 St. Louis Avenue knew something about why the house had gone on the market less than 10 years after it was built or perhaps not, but they soon found, stashed in the attic of their new home, hundreds of photographs and other papers belonging to a woman named Lou.

The new owners gave the items to a family friend soon thereafter. Decades later, in 2015, that friend decided the materials would have a better home in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. The photos and papers tell the story of Lou Murray, a young woman involved in the Twin Cities vaudeville and burlesque scene. A little research revealed that, unfortunately, the presence—and thus, the later discovery—of the papers in the attic was related to her tragic end.

Lucille “Lou” Murray was born in St. Cloud on December 29, 1898, and appeared to have an interest in show business at an early age. Although she married an assistant pharmacist, Lester “Les” L. Safro, in Winona in 1917 when she was 19 years old, she continued dancing and performing professionally in burlesque and vaudeville shows under her maiden name. Lou made frequent appearances throughout the 1920s and early ’30s at entertainment venues well known to those seeking the sensual and comedic productions of the burlesque variety in the Twin Cities. She appears to have been a regular on the stages of the Empress, later known as the Lyceum Theater, located at 479 Wabasha Street in St. Paul, and the Gayety Theater at 101 Washington Avenue North in Minneapolis (next door to the present-day Runyon’s).

Burlesque, and its more sedate sister, vaudeville, gained popularity in the late nineteenth century. Both forms of variety entertainment featured multiple acts

Shelby Randall Edwards

A Gal Named Lou

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lasting from seven to twenty minutes. A vaudeville show had a larger assortment of acts than burlesque. In addition to comedy, music, and dancing, vaudeville audiences might see jugglers, magicians, animal acts—anything or anyone who would attract customers. With its coarse comic sketches and skimpily costumed chorus girls, burlesque was aimed at the lower middle and middle class, while vaudeville prided itself on clean, family-friendly entertainment. Entrepreneurs built chains, or “circuits,” of theatres where they presented continuous, multiple daily performances. Many circuit names are familiar to this day, such as Orpheum, Palace, and Gayety. This arrangement explains how Lou performed at the Gayety in Minneapolis and the Gayety in Milwaukee in the same year.2

In 1924 Lou was billed as a “Tip Top Girl” in the Tip Top Revue’s production of “Oh You Wild Cat,” at the Empress (right).

Lou traveled the country with the Carrie Finnell Show revue during its 1926–27 inaugural season, where she was one of 16 “Red-Headed Blonds” that accompanied Finnell onstage for large acts. Finnell was well known nationally as a burlesque performer from the 1920s up until her death in 1963. That year she performed at the Gayety on Washington Avenue in Minneapolis, where she was billed as “the girl with $100,000 legs” and “Minneapolis’ sweetheart.”4
June 11, 1929

To Lou -

What can I say of our short acquaintance? Hope I'll work with you again and get to know you better. Best wishes to you, for everything nice.

Kitty M. Boy
Sagely - Milwaukwe
Burlesque and vaudeville performer Lucille ("Lou") Murray saved hundreds of photographs and other papers that chronicled her life as a performer from 1915 to 1931. CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Lou in flapper costume; nationally known burlesque performer Carrie Finnell. Lou travelled the country with the Carrie Finnell Show revue during its 1926–27 inaugural season. Finnell’s photo is inscribed to Lou and her husband Lester, then a pharmacist; a routine from the Finnell revue (Lou appears to be the dancer at the 9 o’clock position); Lou’s autograph book. Note the inscription on the right refers to her as “the drug store keepers wife.”
Lou worked in several show biz capacities over the next decade. The 1928 Minneapolis city directory lists her occupation as manager for the Ted Brown Producing and Booking Agency, which was located in the Loeb Arcade, at the southeast corner of Fifth Street and Hennepin Avenue. Two years later, a Lyceum Theater playbill featuring “The Big Revue,” a musical burlesque presentation with “pretty girls in 24 scenes and 14 comedy episodes,” credits Lou as “ballet mistress.” A 1931 program for the Gayety in Minneapolis lists her as a performer in a show called “Footlight Flashes: A Red Hot Burlesque with Plenty of Paprika.”

Starting in 1932, however, there are no additions to Lou’s cache of theater programs and autographed fan photos from other burlesque performers. By 1934 she appears to have settled down into married life. “Lou Murray” disappears from the city directory, replaced by Lucille, wife of Lester Safro. The couple did not have children. Lester by then was in the business of “beverages”—the alcoholic kind, apparently. He appears in city directories from 1934 to 1954 as owner and operator of two liquor stores in downtown Minneapolis, the latest located at 236 Third Avenue South, on the edge of the Gateway District, Minneapolis’s oldest quarter. As it happens, the location of Safro’s liquor store played a role in the beginning of the end for the couple.

Between 1959 and 1963, after years of lawsuits and battles with local preservation advocates, the Gateway District—also known as Skid Row—was transformed. Two
hundred buildings, representing 40 percent of downtown Minneapolis, were leveled in a large-scale urban renewal project to make way for new construction (and, as it turned out, parking lots). In addition to decrepit bars, flophouses, and liquor stories, the project also brought down beloved landmarks, notably the Metropolitan Building on the corner of Third Street and Second Avenue, a few blocks from Les’s liquor store.7

After the store was torn down, Les reportedly became a recluse. On the morning of September 26, 1962, he apparently reached a breaking point. Lester Safro shot his sleeping wife of 45 years in the head, killing the “gal” affectionately known as Lou before turning the gun on himself.8

The next day, trying to make sense of what happened, the Minneapolis Morning Tribune reported neighbors saying that after losing the liquor store, Lester had withdrawn from the world and “hid from guests and had not been out of the house since June.” The afternoon Minneapolis Star reported that the former liquor store owner had been “despondent.”9

The Lyceum Theater and the burlesque circuit, Skid Row and the Metropolitan Building, and the house on St. Louis Avenue are all gone. But Lou Murray’s life is preserved in her collection of photos and papers at the Minnesota Historical Society.

Notes


4. Irene Robb, “Late stripper may be recalled,” Evening Times (Cumberland, MD), Nov. 21, 1963; McKenzie, “What’s old is new.”

5. Lyceum Theater playbill, Jan. 12, 1930; Gayety program, 1931, Lou Murray Theater Papers, MNHS.


All photos, playbills, and autograph books are in the Lou Murray Theater Papers, 1915–1931, Minnesota Historical Society, photographed by Jason Onerheim/MNHS.
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