

MARIE DRESSLER

Inducted 2013 September 14

Marie Dressler, famous early film actress, was born as Leila Marie Koerber on November 8th, 1868 in Cobourg, Ontario to Alexander Rudolph Koerber and Anna Henderson. Through her mother, she was a direct descendant of two well-known Quinte area Loyalists: Col. William Marsh and Ruliff Ostrom.

Her father was a musician who was originally from Austria or Germany, and settled in the Cobourg area where he served as a local music teacher and organist at St. Peter's Anglican Church. The family frequently moved, and by 1871 they were living in Belleville, then by 1881 in Chatham. Dressler commented on her itinerant life as follows: *I was always going somewhere. When I was a child, it was with the family, moving all over Canada and the State of Michigan - from Cobourg to Toronto, to Lindsay, to Saginaw to Bay City. And then, when I started touring with the show companies, wherever I hung my hat became home.*



As a young girl she became very interested in acting and entertaining others while they lived in Saginaw, Michigan. Her father disapproved of this as a career path for her. Despite that, she applied for an acting job with the Nevada Travelling Stock Company, stating she was eighteen years of age, but in reality was only fourteen at the time. She was hired, sight unseen, and changed her name to Marie Dressler, after an aunt. Around the same time, her older sister Bonita also left home to work in an opera company. Marie then moved on to several opera companies, originally in the chorus line, but later receiving major roles. While in Chicago, she was influenced by the comedy of Eddie Foy and gradually became known for her comedic roles and lavish costumes she designed herself.

In 1892 she had her first Broadway role and due to her ability to ad lib and get laughs gradually shifted to vaudeville. She was married soon after that to a theatre employee, George Hoppert but they were divorced after a few years. By 1900 she became a major vaudeville star and then toured London from 1907 to 1909. On her return to America, she made Edison Recordings and performed on stage. During WW1 she promoted sales of Liberty Bonds and entertained troops overseas in France. She had married James Henry Dalton in 1908 but after her return following the war, had to care for him, since he was an invalid. At the same time her theatrical roles dried up, having reached almost the age of 50.

Her first role in motion pictures took place in 1914 in Mack Sennett's silent film "Tillie's Punctured Romance", based on her Broadway play "Tillie's Nightmare" and was followed by some other short films, but from 1918 to 1927 she had no more films. She then left New York to look for roles in Hollywood. Her first film was MGM's "The Callahans and the Murphys" in 1927. Within a few years she starred in other films, especially some early talkies. In 1931 she was awarded best actress academy award for her role in the movie "Min and Bill". That made her the third Canadian born actress to win an academy award as best actress, after Mary Pickford and Norma Shearer. Following the success of the film "Dinner for Eight" in 1933 she became the first woman on the cover of Time Magazine. Another film that year, "Tugboat Annie" cemented her position as a major film star.

She died of cancer on July 28, 1934 at age 65, and was buried in Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Glendale, California. The bulk of her estate went to her sister Bonita.

Her family homestead in Cobourg was built in 1833 and the Koerbers rented it from the Field Family when she was a young girl. It remained in the Field family into the 1930s and then became a restaurant from that time until the 1980s. Today the Marie Dressler House is a museum dedicated to her memory and serves as the Chamber of Commerce for Cobourg.