

Isabel Randolph: Six decades as a Working Actress  
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Isabel Randolph was born December 4, 1889, in Illinois. Several sources claim Chicago as her birth city. One publicity note published in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1931 claims she took the name Randolph from a Chicago street. No other mention of Isabel by any other last name was uncovered by this writer so the validity of that later claim is questionable. Details of her early life are scarce but the few that have been uncovered indicate that Randolph's parents (her mother's name is referred to at least once as Mary) were both in show business and legend has it that she was on stage with her mother by the age of six months.

Randolph's earliest known stage part was that of Elsie Brewster, the second billing in Clyde Fitch's *The Woman in the Case*. Fitch was a prolific playwright and this particular play had originally debuted in New York in 1905. The version in which Randolph appeared was staged in 1907 at Chicago's College Theater located at the corner of Webster and Sheffield avenues.

Randolph was a member of the theater's new acting troupe, the Patron's Stock Company, which also featured James Durkin and Louise Ripley. Sedley Brown worked as the company's stage director. *The Woman in the Case* premiered August 26, 1907 to positive audience reaction but less than enthusiastic critical reviews. One critic declared it "pretty poor stuff." The cast must have worked a hectic schedule as the Patron's Stock Company offered a fresh play to the public each week. Other plays performed by the group through the fall of 1907 included *The Crisis*, *A Gentleman of France*, and *The Dairy Farm*. Complete cast lists do not exist for each production but by the beginning of 1908 Isabel was no longer listed in the company.

When the 1908-09 season opened in August, 1908 Randolph was with Chicago's People's Theater which was now owned by Charles B. Marvin, who also owned the Marlowe Theater and Randolph's last place of employment, the College Theater. Frank Beal served as the theater's stage director and Rodney Ronus was cast as the leading hero for the schedule of productions. The troupe's first production was *The Invader* and Isabel was described as "a pleasing ingenue." *House of a Thousand Candles*, *York State Folks* and *Caught in the Rain* were other shows on the season's schedule.

The next season, 1909-10, found Randolph employed with the George Klimt Players based out of the Academy of Music. Their repertoire included *Secret Service*, *Only a Shop Girl*, and *Nellie the Beautiful Cook*. She disappears from the record for the 1910-11 season but in September, 1911 Randolph is discovered to have been the headliner in *Salvation Nell*, presented by Vaughan Glaser at the Haymarket Theater during the third week of September. Written by Edward Sheldon, *Salvation Nell* also starred Edmond Roberts. That fall the production of *Salvation Nell* went on the road with multiple productions through Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin.

Isabel is not known to have returned to the Chicago stage until the third week of December, 1912 when she had a week-long engagement at the city's Imperial Theater in an unknown production. She was also engaged in social activities such as the Cook County Bailiffs' Benevolent Association for which she served as a member of the reception committee, along with one Marie Malone.

During the fall of 1913 Randolph joined Mr. B. Iden Payne's repertory company for its two month stay in Chicago. Their opening set which debuted in November, 1913 consisted of *Press Cuttings*, *Phipps*, *Master of the House*, and a poem, "A Florentine Tragedy." Other troupe members included Walter Hampden, Whitford Kane, Dallas Anderson, Frances Waring, and Haviland Burke. Randolph was described by one reviewer as "handsome and intelligent."

Early the next fall in September, 1914 Randolph was back in Chicago after a stretch of touring. At the end of September she was booked in the Crown Theater in "Maggie Pepper." Work was tough with near daily shows and matinees on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. The next months were spent working short-run shows, which made the rounds of the city's theaters playing in each for a week before moving on. As early as March, 1915 she was engaged in *Tess of the Storm Country* which was booked into these so-called "one week theaters." The play appeared at the Victoria in mid-March and the Crown in early April, 1915

From 1915 to 1924 Isabel Randolph becomes harder to track. Scattered newspaper articles suggest she toured a lot with small stock companies around the United States but primarily in the Midwest. This period overlaps with much of World War I and also includes the early years of her marriage to one J. C. Ryan, reportedly a Chicago newspaperman, a union which dates to 1917 according to Charles Stumpf and Tom Price as well as a *Chicago Tribune* spotlight article. During these years Randolph continued to appear on stage as noted by historian Raymond Hill in a 1951 history of Des Moines' Princess Theater. During the 1917-1918 season she was a member of the theater's stock company, from which Conrad Nagel also honed his chops three years earlier. Three decades later in 1948 Nagel said of the theater and its cast, "it was recognized as one of the outstanding stock companies of the entire country, and is still referred to by some of the old timers as the best of them all." Ralph Bellamy, too, also with numerous radio credits to his name, spent time working at the Princess. Randolph's work with the Princess' company ended around December, 1918.

Randolph was widowed at some point in the years following and left to care for two daughters, Leonore and Isabel. When this upheaval occurred in her life has not been identified exactly. There are few clues to Randolph's personal life

between 1919 and 1921. Around October, 1921 Randolph reappears in the printed record with the Broadway Players in various Chicago-area productions. While fame may have eluded Isabel, work seems to have been steady.

On June 19, 1924 it was announced that Randolph, "known well in Chicago, having acted in stock and some of the outlying and suburban theaters," was cast in a new production, *The Amber Fluid* at the Princess Theater in New York. Penned by Arthur Lamb it also featured Elaine Gholson, George MacQuarrie, and John Stokes.

The next year, 1927, found Randolph playing in the three act play *The Noose* by Willard Mack at the Selwyn Theater, a Times Square theater which was finally closed (then refurbished and reopened as the American Airlines Theater) in the 1990s. The production of April 17 of that year featured Randolph in the role of Stella, wife of Governor Bancroft played by Charles Waldron. A young Barbara Stanwyck was also among the cast members.

An article on the Woman's World Fair held in Chicago in May, 1927 relates that Isabel was still working in New York's *The Noose* but would be one of several "name" actresses volunteering for the Fair. Her next known play was *The Green Hat*, staged at Chicago's Ambassador in early 1928. It was the piece's first appearance in Chicago in three years. It had earlier played the Selwyn and Adelphi theaters. By May, 1928 she had moved on to *The Vagabond* which succeeded *The Green Hat* at the Ambassador. Her co-star in the show was James Blaine.

Randolph's next effort was as a member of the Minturn Players, headed by Harry Minturn, in *The Constant Wife*. It played at Chicago's Chateau in September, 1928. The Minturn Players continued to be engaged by the Chateau until the end of October with their production of *Little Miss Bluebeard*. In November the troupe moved its play to the Ambassador. The Minturn Player's tenure at the Ambassador was profitable into the New Year with a fresh production of *Alias the Deacon* commencing in January, 1929 and then, in February, 7<sup>th</sup> *Guest*. During the next two years Isabel spent time both in Chicago and on the road touring.

By February, 1930 Isabel had made her first forays into the world of motion pictures in California after touring in Milwaukee and other Midwest and Eastern cities in between stints in Chicago and New York. Metro-Goldwyn Mayer's *Our Blushing Brides* was reported at the time as her first film appearance. The Internet Movie Database does not list her in the film credits but Randolph's may have been an uncredited role. Or it's possible the job fell through and she did not, in the end, appear in the motion picture.

Whatever the outcome, this initial film experience proved a flop and by 1931 she was back in Chicago working in the comedy *Stepping Sisters* with Blanche Ring and Helen Raymond at the Blackstone Theater. She replaced the departed Grace Huff. The show ran for several months, earning Randolph a steady paycheck during that time.

In May, 1932 Randolph landed a role in *A Character Intrudes*, a play by Charles Costello and produced by the Loyola Community Theater. The debut was May 3, 1932 and featured Isabel in the lead.

A year later in July, 1933, Randolph took a part in *Tomorrow Turns Back*, a play written by novice playwright Marcelite Englander. An insurance salesperson by trade, Englander felt her play was so good that she self-financed the production. A *Tribune* reviewer was not impressed, tersely stating "I find nothing to admire in it except the fact that it gives jobs to actors." The dialog was "pretentious" and the story "meager and uneventful." The cast, however, was described as "fairly good" and "carefully rehearsed." Randolph gave a performance that "can be respected." Despite the mediocre reviews, *Tomorrow Turns Back* ran for a few weeks though Isabel left after two weeks to be replaced by Charlotte Walker.

The first confirmed performance of Randolph before the radio microphone was on March 13, 1933 when she is credited with a role on the Don Ameche series *Milligan and Mulligan* (profiled in the April, 2011 issue of *Air Check*) which originated from Chicago's WGN. Others in the cast that night were Kurt Kepfer, Bob White, and Jeanne Juvelier. A year and a half later on October 10, 1934 she appeared on *The Old Opera House* over WLS. The program was scheduled to return to the air Saturday nights at 9:30. Starring Patricia O'Hearn, Jack Doty, and Les(ter) Tremayne, *The Old Opera House* had been a regular feature over WIBO before leaving the airwaves for a year.

Stumpf and Price also wrote about her participation on *Kaltenmeyer's Kindergarten*, a WMAQ program with Jim and Marion Jordan and created by Bruce Kamman in 1930. The series debuted in 1932 and Johnny Wolf was added to the cast. The series was successful enough to be picked up by the NBC Red network in 1933 on a sustaining basis until January 5, 1935. At that point Quaker Oats became the sponsor. Randolph played the mother of Mickey Donovan, who was in turn played by Jim Jordan. The authors' seminal work on Fibber McGee and Molly, *Heavenly Days*, does not provide a date for Isabel's debut on *Kaltenmeyer's Kindergarten* so it's unknown whether it preceded or followed *Milligan and Mulligan* and *The Old Opera House*. One source suggests she returned to the show on May 8, 1937 as Mrs. Van Schuyler, the mother of "model pupil" Percy.

Similarly, Dunning credits her with the role of Harriet Brooks on *The Princess Pat Players* (1933-36) which was later renamed *A Tale of Today* (1936-39). The series was a serial with "each episode complete in itself." Dunning's information comes from a 1936 source so it's not clear when Isabel may have premiered on the series.

Other mid-1930's Chicago radio work included the role of Grace Ferguson (ca. 1935) on *Welcome Valley*, a dramatic sketch which was a part of Edgar Guest's *Musical Memories* which aired from 1932 until 1938. That same year, 1935, found Randolph working regularly on *The Story of Mary Marlin*, the Chicago-originated CBS soap opera. Hers was a supporting part as Margaret Adams alongside Francis X. Bushman behind leads Joan Blaine and Arthur Jacobson. Another little-known show on which she appeared was *Sally of the Talkies*, a June, 1935 NBC broadcast starring Irene Wicker with Basil Loughrane, Henry Saxe, and Murray Forbes.

Exactly when Randolph debuted on *Fibber McGee & Molly*, which would be her most famous radio stopover, is not clarified in *Heavenly Days*. The documentation used by the authors may not have answered that question. She was on the show as early as January 13, 1936 (episode 40) when she played Mrs. Kuppenheim, or “Kuppy,” a character which sounds very much like her most famous part, Mrs. Abigail Uppington, or “Uppy,” a part she played regularly by October, 1938. Other roles on the program included Mrs. Dillinham (Dilly)-Skunkls, Mrs. Jay Mitchell-Twitchell, Mrs. J. Waldemar Loganberry and Mrs. J. Uppingham Upson.

Isabel had a starring role as Rhoda Harding, “a widow who tries to find a new life and her own identity after her husband's death” on the soap *Dan Harding's Wife*. She was also on *Way Down Home* and various episodes of *Lights Out* and *The First Nighter* while in Chicago.

The McGees moved their show to Hollywood after their final Chicago broadcast on January 24, 1939 and Randolph followed them to sunny California, her second sojourn to the West Coast. Her first confirmed notable film came that year in MGM's 1939 *The Women* starring Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, and Rosalind Russell. Thus began a steady string of small film parts, nearly 60 in all.

Her first full year in Hollywood resulted in five films: *On Their Own* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox), Gene Autry's *Ride Tenderfoot Ride* (Republic), *Yesterday's Heroes* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox), *Barnyard Follies* as Mrs. Uppington (Republic), and *Sandy Gets Her Man* (Universal). The next two years, which overlapped her final years on *Fibber McGee & Molly*, were no less busy. Four film roles came her way in 1941: *Small Town Deb* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox), *Mr. Dynamite* (Universal), *Look Who's Laughing*, the second *Fibber McGee & Molly* feature (RKO), and *The Corsican Brothers* (United Artists). Randolph earned five more credits in 1942: Abbott & Costello's *Ride 'Em Cowboy* (Universal), Bob Hope's *My Favorite Blonde* (Paramount), *Take a Letter, Darling* (Paramount), *It Happened in Flatbush* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox), and *Here We Go Again*, the second *Fibber McGee & Molly* film (RKO).

In 1943, after seven years on *Fibber McGee & Molly*, Randolph left the hit show. With multiple films coming her way each year, it's logical to conclude that she found it more profitable to focus on her film career and to say farewell to a weekly radio job. The decision was a sound one; Randolph was cast in six films in 1943, seven films in 1944, and four each in 1945 and 1946. As Isabel approached her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, work remained steady with three pictures in 1947 and seven more in 1948. Six movies kept her busy in 1949 when she reached her sixth decade.

During these latter years Randolph made occasional returns to the legitimate theater, including some musicals. One, *The Firefly*, opened July 22 1946, at Hollywood's Griffith Park Theater. Topping the bill of the Rudolf Friml and Otto Harbach operetta were Roy Atwell and Pamela Caveness. Later that summer she was cast in the musical, *Rosalie*, which premiered at L.A.'s Greek Theater September 16, 1946. Joe Sullivan and Gale Sherwood sang the leads while Randolph, James Westerfield, and Vivien Faye worked as the solid supporting cast. Originally a stage show with music by the Gershwin's, it was turned into a film in 1937 with new songs by Cole Porter. The 1946 version, which played in various venues across the country, combined the music of the Gershwins and Porter.

Isabel's next theater effort was a month-long engagement in Norman Rainey's *Cupid Thumbs His Nose*, presented at the Coronet Theater during July, 1948. She followed this part with a role as the Grand Duchess in *The Student Prince*, staged at the Greek Theater in August and September, 1948.

Despite prodigious motion picture work, Isabel continued to take radio parts on West Coast series such as *A Day in the Life of Dennis Day*, *The Adventures of Maisie*, *Dr. Kildare*, *Duffy's Tavern*, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, *The Great Gildersleeve*, *The Harold Peary Show*, *Lum 'n' Abner*, *One Man's Family*, and *The Whistler*.

Film work slowed down as the 1950s dawned; she was cast in six films in 1950 and 1951. Perhaps sensing her potential on the silver screen was fading, Isabel Randolph successfully transitioned to television where she remained gainfully employed another fifteen years until 1966. Notable television series on which she is credited were *The Abbott and Costello Show*, *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Dennis the Menace*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, *Mr. Ed*, *Our Miss Brooks*, and *The Red Skelton Hour*.

Randolph retired a second and final time from show business in 1966, seven years before she passed away on January 11, 1973. Though well known by old time radio enthusiasts as the haughty Mrs. Uppington on *Fibber McGee & Molly*, this seven year role represents just a small part of an acting career which spanned 60 years, minus a few years in the late nineteen-teens and early 1920s when she settled in as a new bride and mother. From the early days of turn-of-the-century vaudeville to the television era of *Star Trek's* debut, Isabel forged a career of astounding length. She never achieved stardom and was never a headliner but her longevity and resilience in a field infamous for burning out talent should be envied by most who have struggled for any degree of stability in acting. We can only hope that more information will eventually come to light giving modern fans a complete picture of her life and amazing career.