

## **Maria Agnes Mersman Lake Hickok Carson**

The circus came to town in Jacksonville, Texas, in the summer of 1873 and it turned out to be not a very good time for the citizens or the performers. A group of about forty of the local bullies who had been trying all day to break up the show started a brawl inside the tent that succeeded in breaking up the show. The performers were angered by this action and gathered up their rifles, pistols, tent spikes and anything else that might be used as a weapon and followed the stampeding crowd of spectators fleeing the tent. Waiting for the performers between the tent and the railroad tracks, pistols in hand, were the bullies.

The troublemakers charged the tent but lost most of their bravado when the circus defenders opened fire with their first volley bringing the bullies to a halt. The circus folks fired another volley and the tough guys turned tail and ran for safety, leaving about a dozen dead and wounded behind. Angry acrobats, equestrians, clowns and all other circus people chased the thugs and pulled them out of barns and alleys. The performers then posted armed sentries around town until the circus could be packed up and placed on the train. Some of the toughs decided it would be a good idea to saw through the supports of the railroad trestle. They got a late start and the train passed safely; unfortunately, a week later it collapsed under the weight of a freight train.

This was not a particularly unusual occurrence in the world of the circus in the violent years following the Civil War. Performers were often chosen for their abilities with a weapon as well as their talents in the ring. Some circuses would stack their rifles at the tent entries and the performers would pack side arms wherever they went. Those were the days of circus owners like Robinson, Forepaugh, Barnum, Sells and Bailey.

They definitely were not the days of women owners, and Maria Agnes Mersman Lake Hickok Carson did become the first woman to own a circus and the first owner to marry an Old West legend. She was born in Damme, Lower Saxony, in 1826. Her family moved to the United States while she was just a toddler. They settled in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she received a parochial education and became an accomplished equestrienne.

In 1846 she met a young man named William Lake Thatcher who was the circus clown for the Robinson and Eldred Circus. He swept her off her feet and to the horror of her family the couple eloped and was married in New Orleans. William dropped the Thatcher from his name and became Bill Lake. Agnes had never used her first name of Maria and she would be known professionally as Agnes Lake.

Already an accomplished horsewoman, she began to take an active part in the performances. Not satisfied with bareback riding she took up wire-walking and it was for this that she gained most of her fame as a performer.

Lake and a partner, Nick Saunders, joined the Rich Circus for a tour of Mexico, leaving their wives in New Orleans. After a period of time without hearing any word from Lake, Agnes was destitute. Fortunately, she found a position as an actress with the Wallack Company who was staging Hamlet in the city.

Lake finally returned to New Orleans just as the play was winding up its engagement. Agnes found out that the Mexicans had confiscated the circus and Lake and Saunders were lucky to get out of the country alive. The Mexican War was in progress; the timing was terrible. Without any immediate prospects, the Lakes decided to return to Cincinnati despite the bitterness of Agnes' parents. Lake's personality soon won them over and he left Agnes with them to tour as a clown with the Sam Stickney Circus.

Spalding and Rodgers built what they billed as the "Floating Palace" in Cincinnati. Riverboat explosions were fairly common, so for safety they built it as a floating barge to be towed from engagement to engagement. It contained a forty-two foot circus ring, orchestra pit, seating for 2,500, beautiful chandeliers and rich decorations. In March, 1852, Agnes and Lake were the featured performers at the Palace's opening in Pittsburgh. After that the Palace moved up and down the river all year round. It was here that Agnes gained her reputation as a wire-walker. The Palace had a wire attached to the floor and

the top of a forty-five foot vertical pole. Agnes pushed a wheelbarrow up the tight wire. She also developed an animal act and was the first woman to enter a cage of wild animals. In 1853 the Palace entered the Gulf of Mexico and toured Gulf Coast cities. On its return from the tour it ran into a historic gulf storm and was only kept afloat by heroic efforts. It continued its shows along the Mississippi River until the Civil War stopped all traffic.



From 1860 to 1863, Lake was in partnership with the John Robinson Show. Robinson was the premier showman of the time and if there was anything Lake didn't know about the business, he soon learned. In their last season with Robinson, Agnes (**Photo at left**) adapted Lord Byron's "Mazeppa" to the circus ring. The show was so successful she became known as Madame Lake. And in 1863 Agnes and Lake formed their own show, Lake's Hippo-Olympiad and Mammoth Circus, which was one of the best known circuses until his death. In the winter of 1863, the off-season, she toured Europe in her Mazeppa role, appearing before the King of Prussia. She returned in the spring to open with her husband in their new show.

Agnes never gave birth to her own children as some have reported, but they had two adopted daughters—Alice and Emma. Emma who was born about 1858 was possibly the daughter of her brother Frank who died of tuberculosis. Emma became a famous circus performer in her

own right. She married Gilbert Robinson on November 16, 1875, divorced him in 1883 and remarried him in 1893.

Despite the War Between the States, the 1860 decade was good for the Lake family. Their circus was very successful. They were the stars of the show that they owned. They had their daughters. Everything circus performers could want. But tragedy would strike them hard at the end of the decade. Alice died in 1868. In August of 1869, in Granby, Missouri, an ugly, one-eyed boorish fellow was drinking and behaving badly during the show. Lake threw the fellow out and returned to his normal routine. The one-eyed man returned to the tent in a short while and before anyone knew what he was doing, the fellow placed a pistol to Lake's heart and fired. The bystanders were too shocked to apprehend the killer and he escaped. Lake was buried the next day by the local Odd Fellows. The killer, whose name was Killian, was captured and went to trial in 1874. Witnesses for the prosecution were scarce and character witnesses for the shooter were plentiful. A bad element was in charge of the county and his sentence for the cold-blooded murder was three years and ten months. When he was released, someone murdered him.

Agnes was devastated, but determined to hold the circus together. It was written that she called all the performers together and asked that if any thought she was not capable of carrying on, to please give her two weeks' notice so she might find a replacement. No one quit and this display of loyalty caused her to break down and weep. She finished out the 1869 season and the 1870 schedule as planned. She decided to set the 1871 tour in Kansas where her show would be a premier attraction in the mushrooming



frontier towns.

The Lake show moved into Abilene, Kansas, on July 31, 1871, for a one-day show. But the impact would last a lot longer than that one day. The marshal of Abilene, Wild Bill Hickok, (**Photo at left**) just happened to be one of the most famous men in the west. He was also one of the most charismatic individuals and it was inevitable that the two would meet and that a strong attraction was born. The problem was time. She was busy with circus activities and was there for the day only. She had to open in Topeka the next day. Did Wild Bill make an "official" trip to Topeka? Maybe. One writer says that it is clear the relationship went beyond

platonic. Family members say that the couple exchanged letters for a long period of time and that Agnes would not marry him until Emma was married. Another report says that Charles Gross, a friend of Wild



Bill, said that Bill got so many letters from her he finally told her that he was already married. Bill certainly was not a celibate fellow and the women flocked to him.

At the end of the 1872 season, Agnes was forty-four years old and realized that the strenuous performances were no longer as thrilling and exhilarating as they once were. So she gave up the show in order to take life a little easier.

She did continue to guide Emma's career and the two spent the 1874 and 1875 season traveling with the John Robinson Circus. Maybe Agnes was just a bit pleased when Emma and John Robinson's son, Gil, decided to elope.

After Emma's marriage, Agnes decided to travel and see old friends. While returning to the east from San Francisco, she stopped in Cheyenne, Wyoming, to visit with an old friend, Minnie Moyer, who had been a trapeze performer in the Lake Circus. It

was February of 1876, and Cheyenne was blanketed in snow.

In another part of town Wild Bill Hickok just happened to mention his brief romance with Agnes to an old friend. When the friend informed him that she was in town, he decided to go see her. Over the years his eyes had become quite bad and the snow almost blinded him. An army doctor would later inform him that he had glaucoma and would soon be totally blind. He still managed to find the Moyer house.

On March 4, 1876, James Butler Hickok and Agnes Lake took out a marriage license. The next day they were married in the Moyer home with many friends in attendance. The ceremony was conducted by W. F. Warren, a Methodist minister, who, according to some family members noted in his registry that he "did not think that they meant it." The March 8th issue of the Cheyenne Sun reported:

*"'Wild Bill' of western fame has conquered numerous Indians, outlaw, bears and buffaloes, but a charming widow has stolen the magic wand. The scepter has departed, and he is meek and gentle as a lamb. In other words he has shuffled off the coils of bachelorhood."*

The newlyweds caught a train for Cincinnati where they stayed with their son-in-law, Gil Robinson for a two week honeymoon.

Hickok had made plans to go into the new gold strike country in the Black Hills. He said good-bye to Agnes for the last time and headed back to Cheyenne. Hickok and five others left Cheyenne in the last part of June and headed for Deadwood, South Dakota. They arrived on July 12th.

On August 2, 1876, Jack McCall committed what may be the most famous murder in the annals of the Old West. While Hickok was seated at a card game in Deadwood, McCall walked up behind him, put a gun to the back of his head and fired. In his trial McCall claimed that Hickok had killed his brother and his was an act of revenge. A miner's court acquitted him. However, he bragged about the event, was rearrested, convicted, hanged and the court did not consider it double jeopardy because the first court was not recognized as a legitimate court.

McCall was hanged on March 1, 1877, and buried in the Roman Catholic Cemetery. The cemetery was moved in 1881 and when McCall's body was exhumed the noose was still around his neck.

It was the middle of August before Agnes was devastated to learn that once again she was a widow because of a wanton murder of her husband. A year later she went to Deadwood to visit his grave.

While there she announced that she would not have his body returned to the east.

On her trip she was accompanied by a guide named "Texas George" Carson. When they returned to Cheyenne, the two were married. Her friends Minnie and Wes Moyer were again her witnesses. This time the ceremony was performed by a judge. This marriage was also destined to be of short duration. Carson immediately disappeared from history. Agnes went back to the name of Hickok.

By 1907, Agnes (**Photo at left**) was living in Jersey City, New Jersey, and died in her home there on August 21st. After some months in a public vault in New Jersey, her body was moved to Cincinnati. Some years before William Lake's body had been moved from Granby, Missouri, to a large, beautiful vault in the Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati. Agnes was placed in the vault with him. Emma only survived her mother for about four years, dying on May 11, 1911.



**Agnes & Bill Lake's vault in the Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati**  
**Photo courtesy of Kevin Guy of Cincinnati**

**Source: Secret, William B. "Bill Hickok's Girl On the Flying Trapeze." *Old West*, Winter 1967, p. 26.**

Joseph G. Rosa's review of Linda A. Fisher and Carrie Bowers' book: *Agnes Lake Hickok: Queen of the Circus, Wife of a Legend*.