

Appleton Speaks

A Wisconsin Sesquicentennial Play about seven notable people with strong ties to the city of Appleton, Wisconsin.

By: Ken Anderson

Characters: Rocky Bleier, John Bradley, Edna Ferber, Harry Houdini, Samuel Plantz, Mary Stansbury, Gladys Taber.

Rocky: (He can describe his relationship to the Fox Cities, especially Appleton, in his own words, but it will be something like the following).

My name is Rocky Bleier. My home was in Appleton. I was born there; I grew up there, and I will always think of it as home. My parents had a business, a restaurant bar right across the street from where the Appleton Police Station is located. It was called Bleier's. Next door was another restaurant bar called Schreiter's, and one of my best friends growing up was Paul Schreiter.

Growing up in Appleton was just great. A kid and his bike could go anywhere, the pool, the parks, Goodland Field for the Appleton Foxes baseball games. Sports in Appleton now seem to be pretty well organized, but when I was growing up every neighborhood had teams for every sport and we had to organize them ourselves. If we wanted to compete we had to get our own guys together, find the equipment, come up with a name, uniforms (if we could afford something), decide who was going to play what, and how, and go out and challenge other neighborhood teams like ours. This was a great learning experience because the decision-making was up to us; nobody could do the thinking for us; nobody could resolve the conflicts, the fights, but us.

I remember there were games we played other than sports. We would go to Pierce Park and play "army" in the ravines. When I got to a real war, in Vietnam, it reminded me a lot of Pierce Park, except of course, in Vietnam you couldn't go home, safe and sound, after a battle. The sports I played growing up saved my life in Vietnam. Once, if I hadn't reacted like we did in those over and under football drills, I'm sure I would have been killed by a grenade that was rolling towards me.

I loved all sports. At Xavier High School, which had been in existence only two years when I began there, I played football, basketball, and track. I also played trumpet in the school band, and I was a pretty good student; I made the National Honor Society, so, you see, there's no excuse for not studying and getting the job done in the classroom even if you are heavily involved in other activities.

I earned a full four-year scholarship to Notre Dame. In my senior year I was captain of the football team. I was drafted by a professional football team, the Pittsburgh Steelers, but I was drafted and shipped to Vietnam before my first season with the Steelers ended. After my wartime service I came back to the Steelers. That season I played in only one game, but I persevered; I worked hard. You know, one of my favorite verses is the one that goes, "Life's battles won't always go to the stronger or faster man, but sooner or later the one who wins is the one who thinks he can," That attitude kept me going, and I finally got to start. I caught a touchdown pass from Terry Bradshaw in the Super Bowl. We won the Super Bowl; in fact, the Steelers were the first team to win four

Super Bowls! After 11 years, all within the Steelers, I retired from football. (Current occupation? Could refer to Rocky Bleier Enterprises).

The reason I'm here today is because I've been asked to participate in the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial. Wisconsin became a state 150 years ago on May 29, 1848. In those 150 years we have built a culture and established a history to be proud of, and this deserves a special celebration.

Today we have something very, very special for you. We have arranged to bring six outstanding former residents of Appleton here to discuss their contributions to our history as well as suggest things that you might do to commemorate our Sesquicentennial. These are not real people because they haven't been living for some time, but they will look real to you. You see, they are spirits! You might wonder how they got here. I'll tell you; I don't know. However, I am told that the people, uh, spirits, we were able to reach include Harry Houdini, a name recognizable to most of you because he has a museum in Appleton named after him. You might also recognize the name of Edna Ferber because her books and plays continue to be very popular. The other names are Samuel Plantz, Mary Ann Stansbury, Gladys Taber, and John Bradley.

(How achieve dramatic entrance? Try: All enter conversing in their personae, perhaps discussing the trip, greeting the audience as you move through them, commenting on the surroundings; keep it lively, upbeat! Houdini stops in front of audience members, greeting them, shaking hands. Ferber, right behind him, doing the same, even encroaching on his conquests.)

Houdini: Here, young man; take a card, any card. *(Displaying cards)*.

Ferber: Yes, you'll enjoy this. Take a card. Just take a card. Here, let me help you. *(Does so)*.

Houdini: Please Mrs. Ferber.

Ferber: Miss. Call me Edna, Erich. Take a card. Go ahead. *(Person takes card)*. Now, he's going to put it back in the pack and pick it out somehow. It will be the very same card. What was the card, dear? Go ahead Erich.

Houdini: Thanks. *(He proceeds to describe the rules while Ferber chirps at his side. He completes the trick)*.

Ferber: Wasn't that fun! He knows so many tricks. You should see him escape from handcuffs, chains, and locks!

Houdini: Edna...

Ferber: He's very strong, too. Would you like to punch him in the stomach?

Houdini: ...

Ferber: Somebody hit him when he wasn't expecting it and that finished him. Well, go on, tell them Erich.

Houdini: Yes, well, one of the things I'd do was to invite anyone who wished to try to punch me in the stomach.

Ferber: Right in the stomach! Hit as hard as they wanted to, right, Erich?

Houdini: Right.

Ferber: And they could never hurt him.

Houdini: Except that one time when you weren't ready. That man stepped in while you were looking away and punched as hard as he could. Strong fellow!

Houdini: Yes.

Ferber: And he really hit you! Complete surprise!

Houdini: Yes.

Ferber: And, though he pretended it didn't hurt that much, (*Houdini nods head*), it hurt a lot and, you know what, he got an infection. Right, Erich?

Houdini: Peritonitis.

Ferber: And that was it! Curtains! Fini! Very sad at the same time.

Houdini: Yes.

Ferber: Wasn't that a good story? Tell another one, Erich.

Houdini: Another one?!

Ferber: Yes, go ahead.

Rocky: Excuse me, Miss Ferber.

Ferber: Yes?

Rocky: Remember the assignment? We should really get on with the question assigned to us, what we should do to celebrate the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial.

Ferber: Well, of course. Come on, Erich. We don't have time for any more tricks. Sorry. (*She ad libs as they join the other at the conference table.*)

Rocky: Thanks for coming, friends. Did you have any problems getting here? (*All demur.*)

Ferber: It's getting back I'm interested in. You have to realize how exciting it is to be surrounded by so many famous people.

Rocky: Oh, yes?

Ferber: Oh, yes! Of course, I see my old friends, famous old friends; people like Harold Ross, Dorothy Parker, Richard Rogers, Alex Woolcott, my script writing buddy, George F. Kaufman. (*Others, in their personae, respond ad lib.*)

Rocky: Sure.

Ferber: (*Looks at him sharply*) Famous people?

Rocky: (*Nods*)

Ferber: You've never heard of them, have you?

Rocky: Well, yes. I think I recognize those names.

Ferber: Recognize?

Bradley: (*To Rocky*) Come back with some of your famous friends.

Ferber: Such as who?

Bradley: (*Pause.*) Terry Bradshaw! (*All react in their personae.*)

Ferber: Who?

Rocky: Terry Bradshaw.

Ferber: Is he an actor?

Rocky: Sort of.

Houdini: Well, anyway, we've left behind an unlimited number of people I'm sure you would have no trouble recognizing.

Taber: I had the most delightful conversation the other day with A. Conan Doyle. He still regrets that much attention has been devoted to his detective, Sherlock Holmes.

Houdini: I like to kid Doyle about his crusade to make spiritualism a religion of sorts. In fact, we were both confused about this. Although I spent a lot of time debunking the so-called mediums, I tried at the last to find a way to communicate with people on earth after I was gone.

Plantz: Why don't we talk about Wisconsin people?

Ferber: I know many Wisconsin people. Two of my best friends were Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontanne.

Taber: Marvelous actors.

Stansbury: Speaking of performers, who was that fellow with the wild costume we saw as we were beaming down?

Taber: You mean Liberace? He's from Wisconsin.

Taber: A candelabra?

Stansbury: No, a guitar. Elvis? Pelvis?

All: (*In chorus*) Elvis Presley

Stansbury: That's it. He can't keep still seems.

All: (*In chorus*) Yes that's right. He's everywhere.

Stansbury: He could use voice lessons.

All: (*In chorus*) Really? No, he's good. (*Argue*)

Rocky: We'd better get at our assignment. Could we begin by having each of you introduce yourselves?

Ferber: I'll go first. My mother encouraged my reading so that I became a good reader, very early, about five or so. I was allowed the company of adults, especially my grandparents, so that I became acquainted with a great many sophisticated topics. By the time we moved to Appleton, where my parents kept a store, I was swept up in creativity and wrote and acted and declaimed to the extent that I became a star attraction at the Ryan Senior High School, editing the paper and performing leads in the plays. I thought acting was going to be my profession and wished to go to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, but my parents couldn't afford it, so I got a job as the first female reporter of the Appleton Crescent.

One of the interviews I did was of the internationally famous Appleton native Erich Weiss who called himself Harry Houdini. Do you remember that, Erich?

Houdini: I can't forget it, Edna.

Ferber: No. Why would you. The Appleton paper fired me for being too verbose.

Houdini: Verbose! (*As if surprised.*)

Ferber: I was reveling in my talent.

Houdini: Talent?

Ferber: My talent for words. Not only did I know all the words, I could use them in a sentence, paragraph, in a paeon to literature!

Houdini: (*To Rocky*) Right.

Ferber: But I got another job at the Milwaukee Journal. Spent three years there. Their influence – read criticism – forced me to condense and simplify my enthusiasm into tight reporting. Then I had the MS to my first novel, Dawn O'Hara, accepted. I was on the way to what I assumed was my destiny. I won a Pulitzer Prize with my novel, So Big.

I wrote twelve novels, eleven volumes of short stories, and collaborated with George Kaufman on six major plays. It was so much fun writing plays. Not only do you imagine people, but you carry this process a significant step further by having people enact the stories you imagine! One of the most satisfying ventures for me was the musical play made of my novel, Showboat. Showboat became a benchmark in the development of what the world of theater refers to as the "American musical", which ruled the stage for many years. You see, it was the first time that the adaptors attempted to integrate the

music and lyrics with the dialog of the story, and Showboat is justly praised for this innovation. Though I had strong reservations about the way they cut my novel into a theater piece, I also understand the problems involved with adapting a book for the stage. Putting all of my Showboat on stage would have required a 15-hour production. Still, they did some strange things. Two of my lead characters disappeared in the first act; one was never seen again, and the other appeared only briefly in the second act. But, lets not criticize such a good thing.

I had great fun hobnobbing with the literary lights of the age, those people I mentioned earlier. It was a thoroughly satisfying, very good life I led, though I never found a person to share it with in the conjugal sense. As George Elliot, one of my favorite authors, pointed out, no life is entirely happy. (*Pause.*)

Rocky: Thank you, Edna. That was a great story. Hard to follow, I know.

Houdini: I'll follow it.

I too was brought up in Appleton. My father was a rabbi to the Jewish congregation in Appleton, but he was not, I'll admit, an inspiring leader to his disciples. Therefore, we were always on the fringe of success.

Very early I became interested in conjurations of various kinds. Why? Who knows, except that I had a creative urge to be somebody who attracted attention and admiration as well as respect. I accomplished this through assiduous practice and a natural talent related to my physical abilities. I developed a musculature that was extraordinary. I could "shrink" muscles and manipulate bones and joints in a way that allowed unusual, even incredible movements. I perfected escapes from restraints of all kinds that had to be viewed, even by the sophisticated ones, as miraculous! My name became renowned throughout the world, America last, I'm sorry to say. When that young man delivered that sucker punch to my abdomen, I couldn't believe it, but life, I know, can be even stranger than that.

Rocky: Well, Mr. Houdini, your accomplishments continue to resound throughout the world. Death is a common thing and notoriety usually doesn't survive the occasion, but your legacy is substantial. I imagine that there are very few people in this world who do not recognize the name of Harry Houdini.

Taber: You are right, of course.

My name is Gladys Taber and, though my name doesn't have the recognition of Mr. Houdini's, I tried hard and achieved some success, and, for what it's worth I'd like to remind you of these accomplishments. To begin with, I wrote 50 books!

(*All respond in their personae.*)

Ferber: That's twice as many as I wrote!

Taber: Of course, it's not the volume that is, ultimately, significant, yet many were quite well regarded. One of my best was Still Meadows, which is about the farm I lived on in later life after I left Appleton. I wrote a lot. I wrote many columns for periodicals such as The Ladies Home Journal and Women's Home Companion. I wrote a regular column called, "Butternut Wisdom" for The Family Circle. In fact, I wrote for upwards of two hundred periodicals published abroad as well as in the United States.

It all began in Appleton where I went to the same high school as Edna. It was an excellent school. That school and the town of Appleton shaped my life, for which I am eternally grateful. I loved writing about the life I led. I loved teaching, especially. I felt when I stood in a dusty classroom, facing rows of very young faces, much as actresses

must feel when the velvet curtain goes up on the stage. Communicating with students and widening their horizons was the most exciting experience imaginable.

Ferber: Well said, Gladys.

Rocky: Indeed. Thank you, Mrs. Taber.

Stansbury: My name is Mary Ann Stansbury. I never reached the name recognition of my distinguished predecessors on this panel day, but I did live to the utmost of my capacities and I did it in Appleton, Wisconsin.

My family claimed that I had learned to read by the age of three (*glances at Ferber*), and began studying Greek, Latin, and math by the age of five! I entered Lawrence College at the age of eleven, and was the youngest graduate ever at the age of 16. In fact, I was the valedictorian!

After graduation, I had numerous articles printed; I wrote poetry. Once, I wrote a poem about a very unusual courting custom, the “courting stick.” It was a hollow tube into which young lovers could whisper endearments while surrounded by family members who were there to preserve decorum, as the writers put it. (*Plantz whispers in her ear and she reacts with a laugh.*) I was the first woman president of the Lawrence Alumni Association in 1893, a position that I held until 1900. In 1874 I was one of the first women trustees. I wrote many poems published in the local papers, and I specialized in obituaries, which reached the level of literary essays, I am told. I became a member of numerous literary organizations.

My enduring legacy exists in the fact that I established the endowment trust, which made the Stansbury Theater possible at Lawrence.

Rocky: Thank you Mrs. Stansbury.

Plantz: My name is Samuel Plantz. My excellent education included Milton College, Lawrence College, the School of Theology at Boston University, the School of All Sciences in Boston, and Germany’s Berlin University.

I, too, loved books and reading and it all began at a very early age. I enrolled in Milton College when I was only 14.

I apparently made such an impression on the folks at Lawrence while I went to school there that they invited me back to be the President.

It really wasn’t much of a school at the time. Some people even considered selling the property and letting it become part of the state system! But, I threw every ounce of energy I had into preserving and improving my school. I increased the number of doctorate holding teachers from two to 68, the assessed value of the campus up to 35 million dollars; the student body grew from 20 or so to one thousand! I founded the conservatory of Music, taught religion and philosophy in addition to my administrative duties.

My wife, Myra, was an incredible help in this enterprise. It is said that she raised more money for Lawrence than any individual in the college’s history! I caged buildings from friends and associates, buildings that are still part of our campus such as Formby Hall from D.G. Ormsby, Brokaw Hall from the widow of Norman Brokaw, a dormitory from George Peabody, two gymnasiums from L.M. Alexander, and got financing from the Carnegie Foundation to build the school’s first library.

Stansbury: Someone said that if you wanted to see a monument erected to Samuel Plantz, all you had to do was look at the Lawrence Campus.

Plantz: You’re very kind.

(All react with ad lib support for Plantz.)

Stansbury: When he passed on he had amassed eight advanced degrees, both earned and honorary.

Rocky: Thank you, Dr. Plantz.

Bradley: My name is John Bradley. I went to school in Appleton, attended St. Mary Elementary school, and I graduated from Appleton High School. Unlike my friends here, I didn't spend my whole life putting Appleton on the map, so to speak.

However, I was involved in the single most dramatic experience the world has ever endured, referred to as the Second World War. Here's the story. We were fighting the Japanese on the island of Iwo Jima. The fighting was fierce on a piece of land that was five miles long and only three miles wide. We lost 7000 men in capturing the island; 21,000 Japanese were killed. Think about that, a number equaling a third of the population of Appleton today! At a climatic point in the battle, I and a couple of friends found a pipe, attached a small American flag to it, and secured it in a pile of rocks on the promontory known as the Mount Surabachi. Somebody came from one of the landing ships with a larger flag. We replaced the small flag with it and six of us raised it up. A photographer was present and took the picture that became the most widely used photo in the war; this included 370,000 posters and countless reproductions in newspapers and magazines, all contributing to the resolution of our country to defeat our enemies and ensure freedom for the world. The picture remains a symbol of the fighting spirit of the American people. I never claimed any special credit for it. I just happened to be there because my county needed me, and along with five other equally dedicated guys, raised our flag.

Stansbury: You were a hero, Mr. Bradley.

Bradley: I wouldn't say that. I did what many others did, only I was fortunate to come out with only a few shrapnel wounds, had a wonderful wife, and a good life. I was lucky.

Rocky: Thank you, Mr. Bradley. Now, let's get on with the assignment.

Ferber: We haven't heard about you, Mr. Bleier.

Rocky: I already told the group about my growing up in Appleton, the things I liked to do, the things I did.

Ferber: Were you a writer, too?

Rock: Well, sort of. I helped real writers write about my life.

Ferber: And why did they write about you, Mr. Bleier?

Rocky: Football.

Ferber: Really!

Bradley: Let me say that he was one great player.

Ferber: Football. You set some records, perhaps?

Rocky: Well, no.

Bradley: He played on the best team of the 70's, the Pittsburgh Steelers. They won four Super Bowls!

Stansbury: Super Bowls! What on earth is a Super Bowl?

Bradley: That's the game that decides the professional football championship, the best football team in the world.

Stansbury: That's commendable? *(All react in their personae.)*

Bradley: What's more, he did it under extreme circumstances.

Plantz: Explain.

Bradley: He was drafted and fought in Vietnam.

Plantz: Vietnam?

Bradley: It was a war, unlike our war, that was very controversial. We got into World War II because the enemy attacked us at Pearl Harbor. The Vietnam War was political. It had a noble purpose; for all that, it was a mistake, yet Americans died fighting for their country. Rocky here was wounded so badly that doctor's thought he would never walk again, much less play football. Through awesome dedication, he rehabilitated himself and became starting running back on one of the greatest teams ever assembled. By the way, he earned a Purple Heart, and a Bronze Star for Bravery in Vietnam.

(All react)

Rocky: OK, thanks. Now, let's hear your ideas on celebrating the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial.

(The following will be improvisational, filling the time remaining. See the list of possibilities. Think of your own ideas.)

Rocky: *(Close)* Thank you for returning to Appleton to help us decide what we should do to celebrate the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial. But, you know, your presence here today is a sort of Sesquicentennial event by itself! Right folks?

(All react in their personae to the audience. They get up, waving good-bye and talking to the audience as they go. They might solicit greetings to others in the Great Beyond, perhaps say hello to Elvis? What?)

There are unlimited possibilities for sesquicentennial projects that could be introduced in the improvisational portion. The state committee provided a couple of pages of possibilities. However, I think it would be important to engage the audience in this. Offer your own ideas; challenge the audience to suggest others. As is always true in creative thinking, do not be afraid to suggest and encourage far-out ideas. As G.B. Shaw said in "Maxims for Revolutionists," whom you will find as sort of a postscript to his play, Man and Superman, "The rational man adapts himself to the world. The irrational man tries to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the irrational man."

Since many projects celebrating the sesquicentennial have already occurred by the time the adult cast performs the play, it might be important to suggest projects that will persist and even grow beyond the year 1998.

The time limit for the improvisational portion was originally posited as the end of a school period, the scripted part plus whatever it would take to conclude the period, about 45-50 minutes, depending on the logistics of returning students to their classrooms. For the general public it could be shorter or longer, depending on the response. If the audience really got into it, I could imagine committees being formed, collections being taken to finance projects, the audience rising up and carrying you out on their shoulders, forming a parade down College Avenue. (Well, maybe not!)

Performances: 5/6/98, Riverview Lounge, Lawrence University Union.

Cast:

Rocky Bleier: Ken Anderson

Edna Ferber: Barbara Tungate

Erich Weiss (Harry Houdini): Ron Lindberg

Gladys Taber: Lucia Bachman

Mary Ann Stansbury: Eileen Payne

Samuel Plantz: Charles Wegner

John Bradley: K.K. "Tim" DuVall

Performance: 5/23/98, Appleton Arboretum, Memorial Park, Appleton

Cast: (See above)

Performance: 9/28/98, Hearthstone Museum, video taped by Kolb Productions.

(In this performance Nancy DesMarais played Gladys Taber because Lucia Bachman had a family emergency.)

Performance: 9/30/98, Thompson Senior Center for Golden Kiwanis

(Standing Ovation!)