

The Pulaski County Historical Review

VOLUME 61

WINTER 2013

NUMBER 4

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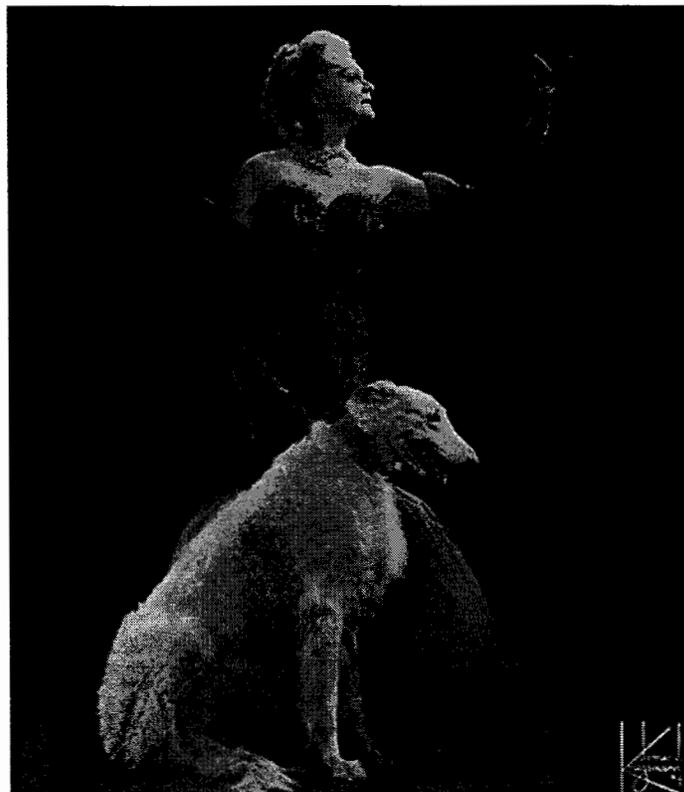
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Harvey Wilson “Lee” Goodwin: The Delineator of the Divine Feminine

by Kaye Lundgren

One of the more unusual manuscript collections owned by the UALR Center for Arkansas History and Culture and located at the Arkansas Studies Institute is the Harvey Goodwin Collection (UALR.MS.0112).¹ Harvey Wilson “Lee” Goodwin (1912-1992) was an intrepid Arkansan who ventured forth into the bright lights and big cities of the United States’ East and West Coasts as well as Europe to pursue his passion and talent for the stage in the guises of singer, comedian, and female impersonator.² Goodwin is best remembered, however, for his performances as a female impersonator under the stage name “Harvey Lee” during the 1930s through the 1960s.

Throughout his performance career, Goodwin also chronicled the life of the female impersonator through the retention of personal correspondence, show bills from world-famous nightclubs, and biographies of 140 impersonators, ranging from “Alexandra the Great” to “Holly White.” In addition, Goodwin collected books, magazines, articles, and photographs pertaining to the show-business world of female impersonation. Intuitively, Goodwin realized the historic value of such material and carefully preserved his papers and materials, resulting in a manuscript collection that documents female impersonation performances as



Goodwin and Nikki. *Photograph courtesy of the UALR Center for Arkansas History and Culture.*

well as other entertainment genres of the twentieth century.

Harvey Wilson Goodwin was the second child born to Ernest Eugene Goodwin, a contractor, and Ella Lorena (Hicks) Goodwin, a homemaker.³ Goodwin’s

¹ The collections of the UALR Center for Arkansas History and Culture and the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, a department of the Central Arkansas Library System, are housed together at the Arkansas Studies Institute the state’s largest facility dedicated to the study of Arkansas history and culture.

² Harvey Goodwin was born in Little Rock on August 14, 1912, and died on July 4, 1992, also in Little Rock.

³ “Arkansas County Marriage Index, 1837-1957,” *Ancestry.com*, (accessed April 15, 2013).

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family also included three siblings: Christine, Elizabeth, and Chester.⁴ The Goodwin family claimed additional artists in the family besides Harvey. His paternal grandfather made violins, and his cousin, Nat Goodwin, was an actor.

As a child, Harvey “had a flair for singing and dancing and acting, performing shows, which [he] usually arranged and directed.”⁵ Harvey’s father, Ernest, supported his young son’s theatrical interests by arranging canvasses and drapes for a makeshift stage in the family’s backyard. Harvey enjoyed playing the parts of little girls in these amateur productions and he invariably received “taunts and torments” from his classmates.⁶

At the age of fourteen, Goodwin witnessed the performance of a professional female impersonator, Mr. Jean Barrios, on a local Little Rock stage. Enthralled by Barrios’ performance, Goodwin wrote to the performer regarding entree into the world of female impersonation. Unfortunately, Goodwin did not receive a reply to his inquiry but this did not deter him. In fact, Goodwin diligently worked during his high school years to pay for dancing lessons which gave him “dexterity of feet and hands.”⁷

After graduation from Little Rock High School

⁴ “1930 Census Record,” *Ancestry.com*, (accessed April 15, 2013).

⁵ *Resume and/or Manuscript on Mr. Harvey Lee (Professional Female Impersonator)*, undated, File 1, Box 1, Series I, Subseries II, Harvey Goodwin Collection UALR.MS.0112, Arkansas Studies Institute, Little Rock (hereafter cited as Goodwin Resume/Manuscript).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

in 1930, Goodwin attended business school and subsequently accepted a clerical position in Washington, D.C. There, he continued his dance lessons at the Hazel Richard Dance Studio. At this studio, he made his debut as a semi-professional female impersonator in 1933 performing a song and dance routine. Goodwin’s youthful talents were noticed. In January 1934, Goodwin was asked to perform in costume “at one of the first of the birthday balls of the late President Franklin D. Roosevelt.”⁸

In 1934, Goodwin received his big break when Club Richman in New York City offered him a position with a salary equal to his government employment. He proved quite the success, as noted in a Walter Winchell column dated December 24, 1934: “[O]ne of the girls at the Richman Club, who is really a feller, left a job with the government to switch his petticoats.”⁹ Harvey’s good luck continued during his time at Club Richman when he secured the part of a female impersonator in Warner Brothers-Vitaphone musical comedy *The City Slicker*. One day, while Harvey was on the movie set on Long Island, the head of the studio made an appearance and commented that Goodwin resembled the movie star Jean Harlow, then at the height of her popularity.¹⁰

Goodwin’s good luck in the performing arts came to a halt in 1936 when he contracted pneumonia. Subsequent x-rays revealed that Goodwin had tuberculosis, a condition that required him to recover in a sanatorium from 1936 to 1941. Doctors advised Goodwin to leave the theatre and return to the less-

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Vincent Astor, “The Incomparable Mr. Harvey Lee,” *The Triangle Journal News* (July 1992), 20.

¹⁰ Goodwin Resume/Manuscript.

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Photograph courtesy of the UALR Center for Arkansas History and Culture.

strenuous life of an office worker.

In May 1941, Goodwin returned to Little Rock and obtained a clerical position at Camp Joseph T. Robinson. Soldiers learned that Goodwin was employed at the camp and knew of his past female impersonation performances. They asked him for assistance in putting on a performance entitled "The Woman," which Goodwin did. He even loaned them his wigs and costumes. The show was a great success and even some of the officers attended.¹¹

While in Little Rock, Goodwin's health deteriorated in 1943, necessitating a second stay in a sanatorium. Goodwin chose California as a recuperation location. He was released New Year's Day, 1944. Shortly thereafter, Goodwin found work in the florist industry. The work, however, did not agree with him and in 1944

¹¹ Ibid.

he decided to re-enter show business by securing a position at Club Finocchio's in San Francisco. People commented on how seamlessly Goodwin returned to his profession and his confidence rebounded. Goodwin soon began to travel to other clubs throughout the country and performed in California, Connecticut, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington, D.C.¹²

In 1947, Goodwin acquired his signature partner, "Nikki," a Borzoi (or Russian Wolfhound). Nikki was a notable addition to the act as Harvey commented that "we create quite a mild sensation wherever we appear both on the stage, on the sidewalks, and in the hotels and trains."¹³ Goodwin formed his own revue of five female impersonators in 1950 and noted that his group was well received during their various club tours on the East Coast.

Goodwin appeared at the Moroccan Village nightclub in Greenwich Village for sixteen weeks in 1951. There he sang in ranges from falsetto to baritone, appeared with his partner "Nikki," and showcased his fabulous wardrobe. His former boss at the Club Richmond, Jack Mason, came to see his performances and commented that Harvey "was even more glamorous than in [his] earlier days and much more a finished artiste."¹⁴

Goodwin noted that though he had "name" gowns in his possession, he had recently purchased a sewing machine and was experimenting with his own clothing

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

ideas. Also in New York during 1952, he competed as a female impersonator at the famous Beaux Arts Ball at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel sponsored by the Art Students League. Once again, the public took note of his talent. Dorothy Kilgallen, a well-known columnist and panelist for the then popular television show *What's My Line*, commented on Harvey's talent by stating, "That can't be a boy with that body and legs!"¹⁵

Sadly, Goodwin's luck again turned against him when in October of 1952 he suffered another bout of debilitating tuberculosis, necessitating a stay at the Will Rogers Memorial Hospital at Saranac Lake, New York. He was released in October 1953 and returned to New York City where he worked in a series of clerical positions.

Goodwin felt sufficiently strong enough by 1957 to return to the stage and turned his sights to France and Germany. After successful European performances, he returned to New York where once again he worked in various clerical positions. In 1964, "Lady Luck" visited once again in the guise of a six-month contract back at Finocchio's in San Francisco.¹⁶ From 1964 to 1967, he worked in various California clubs and thereafter worked sporadically in the entertainment world until 1984 when he gave his official farewell performance to a San Francisco audience in honor of his fifty years in show business.¹⁷

Following the 1989 San Francisco earthquake,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Letter to Goodwin from Potter, File 6, Box 1, Subseries 1, Series 1, Harvey Goodwin Collection UALR.MS.0112, Arkansas Studies Institute, Little Rock.

¹⁷ Astor, 20.

Goodwin returned to Little Rock since his San Francisco apartment had sustained major damage. His decades-long battle with tuberculosis ended in 1992 when he died on July 4. Harvey Goodwin is buried in Greers Chapel Cemetery in Magnolia, Arkansas.

Harvey Goodwin's career spanned the bulk of the twentieth century. During that time he saw many societal reactions to the gay community, ranging from acceptance to outright hostility. Though an artist, not an activist, he followed the gay-rights struggle with interest as his collection of papers attest. Vincent Astor wrote in his article "The Incomparable Mr. Harvey Lee," that Goodwin "never mentioned hardships or prejudice because he was Gay [sic]."¹⁸

Goodwin was a performer above all else and was ever aware of his audience as noted by the following quotation:

A certain amount of decorum and restraint must be practiced and adhered to when one is engaged in the profession of a female impersonator as the great American public is always alert to detect and criticize any slight fault or mannerism that is out of the ordinary.¹⁹

"A Certain Amount of Decorum" is a fitting epitaph for Harvey Goodwin, a man of letters, style, and talent.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Goodwin Resume/Manuscript.