

Obituaries

OBITUARIES DESK: 416-585-5509

FAX: 416-585-5699

OBIT@GLOBEANDMAIL.COM

DEATH NOTICES: 416-585-5111

JEANETTE HELLER, 97 » DANCER

Canada's original Rockette 'did everything but the circus'

Showgirl from Paris, Ont., who longed to dance went to New York in 1930 and ended up in the chorus line at Radio City Music Hall. 'I always worked in the line. I was never a solo artist'



SANDRA MARTIN
smartin@globeandmail.com

The population is aging – that's a fact not a complaint – but Jeanette Heller was somebody who refused to give in to sagging flesh or creaky joints. The oldest living Canadian Rockette, she was as supple as a woman one-third her age, as she did pliés in her kitchen while she was waiting for the bread in her toaster to brown in the mornings. "Time goes very fast," she said in *The Limelighters*, a documentary made by David Hansen and aired on Global TV earlier this year. "When I turned around and I realized I was 95, I didn't believe it myself."

Having danced with the original Rockettes in the thirties in New York, she made her final public performance as a dancer more than 75 years later when she joined a band of current Rockettes and more than 1,500 amateurs outside the Hummingbird Centre (now the Sony Centre for the Performing Arts) on a chilly morning in Toronto in November, 2006. The Toronto line, which linked arms and kicked right and then left for more than five minutes, beat the previous Guinness World Record (established in Germany in 2004 with 1,150 participants) by more than 500 high-stepping and enthusiastic amateurs.

"It was fun," insisted Ms. Heller, who was wearing a sweatshirt and black pants tucked into cowboy boots and showed no signs of breaking a sweat after her five-minute workout. Even her mascara was intact as she gave an interview to local media saying, "Toronto needed this."

A career woman who never married or had children, Ms. Heller lived her life "her way," with grease paint and curtain calls. "I always worked in the line. I was never a solo artist, but I enjoyed what I did and I travelled all over the world. I loved dancing," she told Mr. Hansen for his documentary. "I did everything but the circus."

Jeanette Heller was born in Paris, Ont., a year before the Titanic sank off Newfoundland. She was the only girl in a family of seven children born to Samuel Heller, an immi-



Jeanette Heller, circa 1935, and at about 95. During the Second World War, she returned home for a spell. She worked at the *Globe and Mail* and appeared at the Canadian National Exhibition, below left.



My family never paid any interest in me, I was not a special person in the family. Nobody ever said that they loved us or told us that we were pretty when we were kids.

Jeanette Heller

grant from Lithuania who worked in the scrap metal business, and his Canadian-born wife Lena (Davis) Heller.

By the time Jeanette was 10, her family had moved to Toronto and she was already dreaming of becoming a dancer. Four years later she was earning enough money at part-time jobs to pay for danc-

ing lessons. She left school at 16 and found small parts in pantomime and vaudeville shows at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto. She relished the excitement and attention. "My family never paid any interest in me, I was not a special person in the family," she told her great-nephew Aron Heller for an article he wrote last year in the quarterly *Guilt and Pleasure*. "Nobody ever said that they loved us or told us that we were pretty when we were kids."

When she was 19, she packed her suitcase and moved to New York. She quickly became a "Roxyette," a line of precision and synchronized dancers following the tradition that impresario Flo Ziegfeld had established with his Ziegfeld Follies before the First World War. Under the direction of Samuel Lionel (Roxy) Rothafel, the Roxyettes danced at the Roxy Theatre and then moved to Radio City Music Hall, where they made their debut on Dec.

27, 1932. Two years later, Mr. Rothafel changed their name to the Rockettes.

According to Ms. Heller, the line was arranged from the tallest in the middle to the shortest on the ends. At 5 feet 4 inches, she was three inches shorter than the tallest dancers – today the minimum height is 5 feet 6 inches. For the next eight years, she travelled with the Rockettes across North America, appearing on the same stage as celebrities such as Bob Hope, Louis Armstrong and Gene Autry. Everything changed after the Second World War erupted. Several of her brothers were overseas with the Canadian military and she was needed in Toronto to care for her mother.

From about 1941 until peace came in 1945, she worked in the circulation department and the mailing room at The *Globe and Mail*, restraining her show-business tendencies in those grey and treacherous times to organizing the annual Christmas show for her fellow employees.

She made it into the editorial pages of the newspaper in January, 1944, when she became the source for a column titled "Cruelty to Jews seen in Toronto" by J.V. McAree. "My father served in the last war; my brother is a navigator in the air force overseas. I am a dancer by profession, and am now doing office work because wartime restrictions prevent my continuing my work in the United States," a woman, who is identified only as J.H., says. She goes on to describe how she tried to take lessons at a local skating club, but was rejected when she revealed she was Jewish on her application. "Night after night, I have danced at canteens and entertainments for the boys in the service – without pay, of course – and worked all day at the office. Probably some of those boys are sons and brothers of members of this same skating club," she said in an interview for the article. Justifiably outraged on Ms. Heller's behalf, the editorialist argues that from "disliking the Jews to hating the Jews to murdering the Jews represents two short steps that were taken in Germany to the horror of the whole world. That is one of the reasons we are fighting this war. Are there citizens of Toronto who would betray this cause?"

After her brothers came back from overseas, she relinquished her mother's care and re-

turned to the U.S., where she took out citizenship, according to her youngest brother, Mickey Heller, and resumed her career as a dancer. Working mostly on contracts, she performed around the U.S. and travelled extensively, especially when she went to Japan as part of a United Service Organizations (USO) troupe to entertain the occupation forces, and then to Korea during the Korean War in the early fifties. Later, she danced in Scandinavia, the Middle East, Cuba – before the revolution – and in various European capitals. "What other Yiddish girl met royalty back then?" she asked her nephew Aron rhetorically.

She stopped dancing professionally in the late fifties, but remained in New York and began a second career in wardrobe and show production. She worked for the American Ballet Theatre, fashion shows at the Waldorf-Astoria, and Broadway shows such as *Guys and Dolls* and *The King and I*. She eventually got into TV as well, working on soap operas such as *All My Children* and *One Life To Live*, as well as *The Dick Cavett Show* and *The Ed Sullivan Show*. She was even involved in the production of *Sesame Street*.

She finally moved back to Toronto in 1975, at 64, to be closer to her extended family. Winters were something else, so she spent them in Florida, working as a wardrobe manager on shows that probably catered to many of her fellow Canadians who had also fled the snow for sunshine. Ms. Heller finally retired at 82, after having worked behind the scenes in the Jackie Gleason Theatre in Miami Beach for close to 20 years.

About a decade ago, she moved into the Performing Arts Lodge in downtown Toronto where she enjoyed a lively retirement, socializing with other artists and performers, keeping fit with yoga and aerobics and reliving highlights of a wide-ranging career that included ballet, drama, musical comedy, fashion shows, movies and the early days of live television.

JEANETTE HELLER

Jeanette Heller was born April 14, 1911, in Paris, Ont. She died yesterday, Oct. 16, 2008, of kidney failure in the palliative care unit of St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto. She was 97. Ms. Heller is survived by her youngest brother, Mickey Heller, four nephews, three nieces, and her extended family.

EDIE ADAMS, 81 » ACTRESS AND SINGER

She spoofed sexpot blondes, and sold a zillion Muriel cigars

BY BRUCE WEBER NEW YORK

Edie Adams was an actress, singer and comedian who both embodied and winked at the stereotypes of fetching chanteuse and sexpot blonde – especially in a long-running series of TV commercials for Muriel cigars, in which she poutily encouraged men to "pick one up and smoke it some time."

A classically trained singer who graduated from Juilliard School in New York, she had a remarkably varied career in show business. It began in 1950, when she won the Miss U.S. Television beauty pageant after singing a coloratura version of *Love Is Where You Find It* in the talent competition.

The prize was an appearance in Minneapolis onstage with Milton Berle. That led to an appearance on his television show, which in turn led to her being featured on television with the cigar-smoking comedian Ernie Kovacs, who would later become her husband.

Ms. Adams made her Broadway debut in 1953, playing Rosalind Russell's sister in the Leonard Bernstein musical *Wonderful Town*, directed by George Abbott.

By the time she took her second Broadway role, in the musical version of the comic strip *L'il Abner* in 1956, she was already known for her



Edie Adams in 1964.

comic, vocal and physical gifts. Though not as spectacularly curvy as Marilyn Monroe, Ms. Adams bore some resemblance to her and was known to do a wicked Monroe impersonation. So the part of the voluptuous and loyal Daisy Mae was a perfect fit, and for her performance she won a Tony.

In the sixties, she took her talents to the movies, appearing largely in supporting roles in battle-of-the-sexes films including *The Apartment* (1960), with Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine; *Lover Come Back* (1961), with Doris Day and Rock Hudson; and *Under the Yum Yum Tree* (1963), with Mr. Lemmon and Carol Lynley. She was part of

the enormous ensemble – including Sid Caesar, Jonathan Winters, Spencer Tracy, Phil Silvers, Mickey Rooney and Ethel Merman – in Stanley Kramer's *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963), and she played the wife of a ruthless presidential candidate (Cliff Robertson) in the 1964 screen adaptation of Gore Vidal's political drama, *The Best Man*.

In 1962, she appeared on ABC with Duke Ellington. In 1963, she began a variety show, *Here's Edie*, in which she performed with the likes of Count Basie and Sammy Davis Jr. The show received five Emmy nominations, but was short-lived. In the seventies and eighties, she returned to television, appearing frequently as a guest star on such series as *Fantasy Island*, *Murder, She Wrote* and *Designing Women*.

But of all her incarnations, she will be best remembered as the face (and the legs and the body) of Muriel cigars. In a series of commercials that ran for almost 20 years, Ms. Adams – usually clad in the highest heels and the slinkiest dresses – danced with giant cigars, caressed them and extolled their virtues, often with a come-hither moue and a wink, and the whispered slogan adapted from Mae West's famous invitation to come up and see her. Sales of the brand increased more

than tenfold.

The daughter of a banker and a music teacher, she grew up in Grove City, Pa., and in Tenafly, N.J. After the stock market crash of 1929, her father quit banking and took up sales, while her mother was a homemaker. Her mother, whose maiden name was Adams, came from a Welsh heritage in which young women were expected to sing.

When Ms. Adams auditioned for the Kovacs show, she knew a lot about opera but only three pop songs, she once recalled. "I sang them all during the audition, and if they had asked to hear another, I never would have made it."

With her innocent face and refreshing manner, Ms. Adams became the ideal partner for the far-out humour of Mr. Kovacs. They eloped to Mexico City in 1954.

In 1962, tragedy struck. Mr. Kovacs was killed in a car crash. He had been a carefree gambler and profligate buyer of unneeded things (he once telephoned home to say he had bought the California Racquet Club, complete with a nightclub, shops and mortgage) with the result that Ms. Adams was faced with debts of \$520,000 and trouble with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. And a nasty custody battle over his daughters from a previous marriage. Mr. Berle, Frank Sinatra,

Jack Lemmon, Dean Martin and other stars organized a TV special to raise money for the family. She refused: "I can take care of my own children."

For a solid year, she worked continuously. She did movies, TV musical revues and a Las Vegas act where Groucho Marx introduced her with the comment: "There are some things Edie won't do, but nothing she can't do."

She won custody of her stepdaughters, tearfully telling reporters after the verdict: "This is the way Ernie would have wanted it."

Over the years, she strove to keep the Kovacs comedic legacy alive by buying rights to his TV shows and repackaging them for television and videocassettes.

She later married and divorced twice – first to photographer Martin Mills and then to trumpeter Pete Candoli.

EDIE ADAMS

Edie Adams was born Edith Elizabeth Enke on April 16, 1927, in Kingston, Pa. She died Wednesday in Los Angeles. She was 81 and suffered from pneumonia and cancer. She is survived by her son, Josh Mills. She was predeceased by her daughter Mia Kovacs, who was killed in a car crash in 1982.

» New York Times News Service; Associated Press

TOM TRESH » 71

YANKEES SWITCH-HITTER WAS TOP ROOKIE IN 1962

Venice, Fla. Tom Tresh, who won Rookie of the Year honours and a World Series title with the New York Yankees, died yesterday of a heart attack. He was 71.

Mr. Tresh was the American League's top rookie in 1962, batting .286 with 20 homeruns and 93 runs batted in while helping the Yankees to a World Series championship.

A switch-hitting shortstop and outfielder, he played nine seasons in big-league baseball, most of those with the Yankees. He was a career .245 hitter with 153 homers and 530 RBI, and part of the Yankees' AL championship teams in 1963 and 1964.

"He did everything well as a ballplayer and was an easy guy to manage," said Yogi Berra, who played with and managed Mr. Tresh. "He was a good man and a great friend."

A three-time All Star, Mr. Tresh won the Gold Glove Award as an outfielder in 1965. He was traded to Detroit in 1969, and retired after that season. » Bloomberg

GEORGE KISSELL » 88

COACH BEGAN AT DEFUNCT HAMILTON RED WINGS

Victoria. George Kissell, a long-time baseball coach known as The Professor, has died from injuries suffered in a Florida car crash. He was 88.

Mr. Kissell worked in the St. Louis Cardinals organization for 68 years as a player, scout, coach, and manager. Renowned as a tutor and mentor, he was senior field co-ordinator for player development at the time of his death.

His lengthy career began in Ontario with the Hamilton Red Wings farm team in 1940. The third baseman became a regular the following season, when he recorded an impressive .350 batting average.

He served in the U.S. Navy for three years during the Second World War and afterward returned to Hamilton as a playing manager, guiding the club – by then known as the Cardinals – to a third-place finish in the Pennsylvania-Ontario-New York (PONY) League in both 1948 and 1949. In 1949, he led the league with 15 triples to be named the city's athlete of the year.

Smallish at 5-foot-8, 168 pounds, he was known as a runner adept at stealing bases.

Though he never played in the big-leagues, he became a coach for the parent Cardinals in 1969.

George Marshall Kissell was born on Sept. 9, 1920, at Watertown, N.Y. He earned degrees in history and physical education from Ithaca College of Ithaca, N.Y.

He died in Tampa on Oct. 7, of injuries suffered in a car accident. He leaves his wife, a son, and a daughter. » Tom Hawthorn

I REMEMBER ALOYSIUS O'BRIEN

Michael Boyd of St. John's writes about Aloysius O'Brien, whose obituary appeared Monday.

Each fall, for a number of years, Aly would come along to my high-school geography class, where everyone felt privileged to listen to one of the province's last great storytellers. His greatest role – one that lasted 45 years – was to be a one-man Irish-studies department for Newfoundland. For many years, he taught an Irish class in his cozy sitting room; before class started, his black-and-white dog, Scamp, had to get a biscuit and his cat, Whitey, had to get milk. Then there was night that the class had to comb nearby Pippy Park for one of Aly's cows, which was lost in the woods.

I loved Aly's many digressions. He would tell us always to use the Irish we had already – even if it meant shouting Irish words and phrases into barn barrels to hear their echo. During his illness, Aly kept pleading for his Irish class to meet by his hospital bed. He said he didn't want to be the last Irish speaker in the province.

LAST WORD

Steve McQueen looks good in this movie. He must have made it before he died.

Yogi Berra, 1925–