

Elsie Janis – Vaudeville Star

Elsie Janis was born in Columbus, Ohio on March 16, 1889 as Elsie Janet Bierbower, but became known to the world as Elsie Janis, star of the musical stage and vaudeville.

“Little Elsie,” as she was called in her early career, started life in a small, frame house on 5th Avenue. Her mother, Jennie, was the quintessential stage mother. Her more down-to-earth father, John Bierbower, worked as a railroad clerk at Union Station. Elsie proved to be a precocious child who was a natural mimic and entertainer. Her mother was soon focusing all her energy on Elsie and her stage career. John, however, did not approve of such a life for his daughter, so Jennie divorced him.

In her autobiographies, Elsie refers to her performances at age five at the First Congregational Church at Broad and Third streets in Columbus as her professional debut. And by age ten she was on her way to a real professional career. Her mother wrote to Mike Shea, a vaudeville theater owner in Buffalo, New York, asking him to take a chance on her daughter. She asked him to allow Elsie to perform for a week for free; if she was good he was to pay her \$125.00 per week, a hefty sum in those days. Shea liked what he saw and Elsie’s career took off. She often performed and traveled for four to five weeks at a time, then returned to Columbus to a house at 57 Clark Place for several weeks of rest.

In 1906, Elsie’s appearance on Broadway at age 17 in “The Vanderbilt Cup” made her a star. She toured Ohio performing in the show and “swanked forth in private interurban cars” to engagements in small towns outside of Columbus. During World War I, Elsie earned the name “Sweetheart of the AEF” (American Expeditionary Forces) by performing hundreds of shows for troops overseas. At times she would perform nine shows a day. After the war she put on her own musical revue, “Elsie Janis and Her Gang”.

This dynamic performer was not just a singer, dancer and impersonator, she was also a writer and producer. She wrote several song lyrics, magazine articles and film scripts. After retiring from the stage she wrote an autobiography, *So Far So Good*, and a book called *My Six Months with the American Expeditionary Forces*.

Elsie was very close to her mother and waited until after her death to marry. In 1931 Elsie married Gilbert Wilson a Chicago broker.

Elsie died February 27, 1956 in Beverly Hills, California having been one of the biggest international vaudeville stars of her time. Her obituary in the *New York Times* refers to her as “this lanky and lovely lady from Columbus, Ohio.”

Sources:

Janis, Elsie, *The Big Show: My Six Months with the American Expeditionary Forces*. New York, NY : Cosmopolitan Book Corp. 1919

Janis, Elsie, *So Far, So Good: An Autobiography*. New York, NY: E. P. Dutton, 1932

Ohioana Authors, www.ohioana-authors.org/janis/highlights.php