



Mrs. Minnaleta White, '17mus, '23mus, former MGM voice coach and tutor for many Hollywood hopefuls, sits at keyboard of her piano in Hollywood. Male students in background are all Oklahomans.

Mrs. Minnaleta White has taught many Hollywood stars in her unusual career since leaving O.U., but one of her hardest tasks was to find

## A Note for Kathryn

By ROBERT TALLEY, '56

ONE NIGHT four years ago, the phone rang in an Oklahoma home. "Hollywood calling Mrs. White," the operator said briskly, thinly concealing the awe in her tone.

"This is Mrs. White."

"Go ahead, please."

"This is Kathryn," an excited voice said, "Kathryn Grayson."

"Kathryn, how ARE you?"

"Fine, but Teach, I need you."

"What's wrong, Kathryn?"

"Oh, Teach, I've got a chance for 'Showboat' . . . They're making a motion picture of it . . . and my voice, I need YOU!"

A few days later, Mrs. Minnaleta White, former O.U. music teacher, former O.U. student, former little girl from the East Tennessee mountains, was in Hollywood, where for eleven months she was to eat, sleep, cram singing into one of the loveliest voices and most attractive women in the world.

For many this incident would have been

a lifetime thrill. Even for Mrs. White, who already had spent eight years as a voice coach at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, it was unusual, although hardly the event of her career. Years before Mrs. White had arranged the first audition for a plain little girl who wanted to sing opera, a hearing that was to rocket Miss Grayson to fame the Metropolitan could not have achieved in a century.

To hear this, and Mrs. White's story, I drove from my mother's home in Beverly Hills up to Hollywood.

On Sunset Boulevard, I passed through a sliver of West Los Angeles, and on to the island of County property, the fabulous Sunset Strip, night club row, home of *Ciro's*, the *Mocambo*, the *Hamburger Hamlet* and the \$50 tip, land of the aspiring and the broken who wait on tables side by side, territory of the actor-king and the producer-god whose fishtails scrape in a frantic battle to outdo one another—a mountainside community of disjointed peo-

ple with and without Cadillacs swaying precariously over the swinging pendulum of television . . .

Driving on the four-lane thoroughfare that is Sunset Boulevard, I wondered whether after five years on a Hollywood newspaper I was going to have to write up another character *Gone Hollywood*, a rather broad but easily spotted term meaning that someone has fallen into the pattern of *THE BIG FRONT*, the friend-knifing ambition, and perhaps little to back either except a cousin who's a third assistant director.

Just short of *Ciro's* a mailbox on the downhill slope proclaimed modestly enough, 8426 Sunset. I parked, crossed the street and left the sidewalk for a flight of stairs going down between low-hanging shrubs to a sort of patio two stories below. Off to one side, against the hill, was a comfortable stucco house. Inside were several young people, relatively easily identified as actor breed: clean cut, hopeful, restless.

"You're looking for Teach? She'll be right in."

In a few moments, Mrs. White, or the abbreviation, Teach, as her pupils prefer, strode into the room. She is taller than most, and was striking with blonde hair and one of the most outlandish conglomerations of clothing I had ever seen on anybody. In her hair and almost covering each ear were large pink imitation roses. She wore a pink-silk, Chinese lounging jacket with black lace fringes and black silk slacks, no socks, and a pair of vaguely black moccasins. Considering too that her living room was essentially pink, the effect, as a Hollywoodian would say, was colossal.

Later Mrs. White pointed out her dress with the matter-of-fact comment, "I can't teach in conventional clothing," giving the impression that after years of work she was darned well in a position to wear what she wanted to. Symbols as well of independence and spirit, adding zest to long hours at the piano. I had arrived a little before six, the end of Minnalettha's teaching session and the beginning of the desk work and arranging period. Then the full story of Kathryn Grayson's story-book beginning and success came out.

Mrs. White told it, "I had heard Kathryn—she was a homely little mutt then—and I wanted her to audition at MGM for a man who had fostered a number of young singers. Kathryn craved opera, and he could have given her the chance.

"When we arrived at the man's office, he motioned casually for her to sing. I sat down at the piano, with Kathryn—not yet 20 and never alone on a date—standing beside me. The man, let's call him Blomberg, slumped down in his overstuffed chair, lit a cigar and stared boredly out the window. Blomberg had heard hundreds of singers before, and Kathryn was just another one.

"But when she began to sing, his head whipped around as though he had been slapped. The cigar left his mouth and it hung open. Quickly he motioned for her to stop.

"He rushed into L. B. Mayer's suite of offices and arranged for us to come in. By the time we got there, Mayer, who was directing MGM, and every producer, director, prop man—everybody on the lot—was in there. And Kathryn sang.

"They had never heard anything like it before. And afterwards, for two hours, they talked, convincing her to forget opera and to sign for pictures. It was astounding, the effect she had on them."

Perhaps even more startling though, is the rise of Minnalettha White, who went in one day from broke to a salary thousands of men work for and never reach.

From her beginnings, it seems even more unlikely that she could reach for the stars. Mrs. White has born Minnalettha Jones, daughter of a Newport, Tennessee, judge whose wife taught music to local youngsters. The date she tosses aside as unimportant with the comment, "I have no more idea than anything in the world when I was born. I refuse to be age conscious—I don't have time to get old."

Notwithstanding, Mrs. White related how her family lived in Newport until she was about six and then moved to McAlester for four or five years and on to Oklahoma City, where she completed high school. Her father was appointed district judge there and Minnalettha went to Kidd-Key College, a boarding school in Sherman, Texas, for two years.

Then she transferred to O.U., graduating with a degree in music in 1917 and another in 1923. One of her fondest memories—and it is typical of Mrs. White that she would remember it this way—was appearing in the lead in "Il Trovatore" at the old Norman Opera House, where the Sooner Theater now stands. "That is the place," she said, "where Dean Fredrik Holmberg was presenting a formal concert and the old-fashioned roll curtain caught his tails and rolled them up as it lifted."

She recalls Dean Holmberg as being "wonderful" to her as a student, which is also typically White.

Upon graduation she was offered a position on the music staff, but she took a rain check on it shortly after graduation to marry L. Ansel White, director of the University band and a trombonist. They had two children, Maudette, now the wife of a Los Angeles aircraft engineer, and Dick, '42fa, announcer on Station KDWG, Enid. The Whites have since separated.

In about 1922, the young Mrs. White cashed in her rain check and began a 10-year teaching stay at the University, coaching student vocalists, a stay she enjoyed, except that she itched to "progress," as she called it, mainly for the two children.

Characteristically, one day Mrs. White dug a 50-cent piece from her purse. Heads, New York; tails, Hollywood. She flipped, and found hunger in the gamble.

The early 30's meant depression even in the land of mink and honey and parents were taking the view that their offspring should eat well before singing well. For three years Minnalettha and the children rocked on the edge of real hunger—one Christmas dinner the family sat down to potato soup followed by baked potatoes.

However, teaching jobs with adult education groups came through once in a while and an occasional pupil showed up, just

enough to keep mother and children going. Then came a certain Sunday.

Sipping a glass of watered wine, Mrs. White sat back and told her rags-to-silk story:

"L. B. Mayer used to hold Sunday morning brunches at his place in Malibu Beach. One Sunday he invited two of my pupils to entertain and they asked me to accompany them.

"Of course we went—it was a big chance for them—and later, after it was over, Mayer came to me and declared, 'You must be good. Come around to the studio Monday and we'll talk contract.'"

To say that Mrs. White was nonplused would be calling a hurricane slightly windy. But by the next day she had collected herself enough to turn down an offer of \$400 a week!

"You see," she said quite calmly, "I wanted a hundred dollars more a week than they would give me." This from a woman who was barely scraping up potato money.

But ten days later, Sam Katz, then a studio executive, phoned to say MGM would meet her demand.

Mrs. White was so broke when the acceptance came through she had to borrow from a friend for lunch and car fare to the studio to sign the papers. Why did she turn the original offer down?

Well, if you have internal, if not intestinal, fortitude, it makes sense, if as well you can go along with the Hollywood way of doing things. She explained, "Why, if I had accepted less they would have thought I wasn't any good." Good she must have been, because she remained with MGM for eight years on her own terms. The singers and actors she worked with, to name only a few, read like credits on a \$3,000,000 production: Esther Williams, Jane Powell, Joan Crawford, John Carroll, Elizabeth Taylor, Ann Sothern, Eleanor Powell and Nelson Eddy. But dissatisfaction was to enter again.

At the studios, where anyone without ulcers or heart trouble or a combination of both should be holding down a front booth in a freak show, Mrs. White found she could do nothing well. "You were interrupted all the time as though it were a country club. People dropped in and out; somebody continually was needed or talking to someone in my office . . . you just can't teach well in a madhouse. The hours were murderous, many nights away past midnight. I worked so many Saturdays and Sundays what day it was didn't matter any more."

So, when the war came along, Mrs. White was ready, in fact, as she said, "dy-

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Corps. The Egyptian American Oil Company is a subsidiary of Continental Oil Company, which is handling development for its partners, the Cities Service Oil Company, Ohio Oil Company, and Richfield Oil Company.

Land mines laid during the war present a major problem as Coy H. Squyres, B.A., Geol. '51, field geologist, and others can testify. The first wildcat has been started with a rig which is capable of going 15,000 feet if necessary.

Some of the points of historical interest we saw in Egypt were the Biza Pyramids, Sphinx at Giza, ruins of the old city of Memphis, Tombs of the Sacred Bulls, the Stepped Pyramid, and the Cairo Museum. The Cairo Museum contains, among other things, the marvellous treasure found in the tomb of King Tut-Ankh-Amen.

We left our friends in Egypt, and proceeded to Rome, where I was to attend the Fourth World Petroleum Congress. The Congress was held in Rome's Universal Exhibition area in the auditoriums and rooms of the Congress Building and the Civilization Building. The purpose of the Congress was to discuss any subject of a scientific, technical, or economic nature which would relate directly or indirectly to the oil industry. One of the main purposes of the

Congress was to encourage personal contacts among participants coming from various countries, but who are bound by common interest in work and study.

While in Rome we saw the Roman ruins, and spent a day in Vatican City. While we were in Saint Peter's Cathedral, we met Kenneth B. Barnes, B.S., Pet.E. '30, Min.E. '33, and his wife, Altom Waivia, '30. Kenneth is editor of the *Oil and Gas Journal*, Tulsa; he was in Rome attending the Congress. Also attending the Congress was E. E. (Frank) Barberii, Pet.E. '44, with whom we had a nice visit. Frank is director of the School of Petroleum Engineering, University of Zulia, Maracaibo, Venezuela.

We traveled from Rome to Amsterdam by rail, with stop-overs at Florence, Pisa, Zurich, Heidelberg, Saarbrucken, Paris, and The Hague. Our activities in these cities were too numerous and varied to enumerate here. I do wish to tell about a chance meeting with Clifford C. Hines, '34, in Paris. When we arrived at our hotel room we were greeted by a large bouquet of flowers, an invitation to a luncheon, and two tickets to the Folies Bergere, all of which were the compliments of our friends among the executive group of the Prospection Elictrique, Procedes Schlumberger. We went to the Folies and in the box next to us

was Clifford Hines. Clifford, who is a lieutenant colonel in the Army, had just completed a three-year tour of duty in Germany. From Amsterdam, we flew at about 18,000 feet where the air was perfectly smooth—our destination was New York City.

I almost forgot about the title of this narrative of our trip. When persons of our age go sight-seeing on many successive days, they are quite fatigued by nightfall. The title is translated as, "Our Feet Were Tired From Walking So Much."

### *A Note for Kathryn . . .*

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ing" to get into war work. "I tried out as, of all things, an Air Corps inspector—and this sounds like bragging but these are only statistics; 1,100 of us took the test and 27 got through. I quit the studio and the Air Corps sent me to school at the University of Southern California, and believe me, that *was* rough. From eight in the morning until six at night, straight classes. Every night, 125 math problems to do, and exams every week. If you got below a 95 on any test, you were out automatically. Eleven of us finished it, and I became some kind of an expert in hydraulics and electrical

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PHONE

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*Clark Cleaners*

LAUNDRY

750 Asp, Norman

equipment. Now I'm even afraid to plug in the coffeepot.

"But I held it down for a year and a half and loved it."

After the job ended, Mrs. White returned to MGM and remained until 1949, and really tired this time with the Hollywood rat race, she packed up and returned to Oklahoma for writing (under Prof. Foster Harris of the Journalism School) and for a rest. To hear her tell it, this was one of the most pleasant periods she has known. Minnaletha taught just enough to keep going, and, she declared, "I had a social life for the first time in many, many years." She could even spend an evening at canasta.

But back to the phone call from Miss Grayson and the trip to California to spend eleven months in her home readying the actress for "Showboat." That completed, Mrs. White returned to Oklahoma "just to see what I wanted to do." Whether she flipped a coin again was not said, but Hollywood won out in any event, and now she teaches actors and such singing from 10 in the morning until six at night. And frankly, she's flush.

Private pupils work with her at \$10 an hour, but if a studio is footing the bill, the ante goes up to \$20. If she takes one of her students to record, it is \$75 a day even if the pupil sings only three minutes or one note.

A bit steep? Uh-uh. Mrs. White is riding the upgrade, yet she remains far from "going Hollywood." Not only does she not own a Cadillac, she doesn't even have an automobile. Her house shows care in selecting her furnishings, but certainly isn't in the Brentwood plush style. With little posing she is a success in a cage full of exceptionally artful posers, and the reason is that she has a reputation around town of being able to teach people to sing—and she hasn't had a failure yet. Too, Mrs. White has studio experience behind her, experience that many bosses know pays off in time which may run in filming at many thousands of dollars an hour, or experience that may help doctor a spot in a picture that falls flat.

During the filming of "Rio Rita," to recall an incident some years ago, Mrs. White was called in. There was a point at the end of one of the production numbers that should have drawn a clatter of applause at the sneak preview (in Hollywood, people clap for good performances), but the house could have been dead. It was decided that the note sung at the end of the number, a high "C," should have been held after the orchestra stopped.

A retake was out of the question and high-paid executives sat around scratching their carefully-barbered heads until Mrs.

White suggested that the tape on which the song had been recorded could be used as a master tape to record several others. These, then could be spliced together to draw out the note. It worked. Another time she spent weeks searching Southern California for a singer who sounded like Miss Grayson (down with laryngitis) to dub in a note that had to be changed so a film could be printed and released immediately. She found one finally, but that is one job Mrs. White would not care to tackle again.

Currently Minnaletha has her fingers full of piano keys. "I haven't even been to a movie in three years, and I've hardly been

away from the house four times since Christmas."

"You might tell that to all the women in Oklahoma who may think my job is glamorous. They can have it. I'd be glad to trade. I can't even take time out for a game of canasta."

Mrs. White says this sincerely, but in spite of it all, she looked upon her future brightly: "My plans? Just to teach until I drop dead—and I hope to drop dead at the piano."

She smiles when she says this, so, who knows, there may be another phone call, or she might even flip a coin again . . .

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