

**Elsie Janis
1889-1956**

**Commemorative Essay by
Sara Friedman, Sleepy Hollow**



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May 22, 2013

Elsie Janis

1889-1956

Summary

Elsie Janis was a beloved Broadway singer and performer, Hollywood actress, and prolific writer. During WWI, the patriotic Elsie became known as the “Sweetheart of the A.E.F” because she performed for soldiers on the Western Front. She lived in the Manor House in Philipse Manor and called North Tarrytown her hometown.

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Elsie Janis was a woman with a multiplicity of talents. She had boundless energy as an actress, singer, songwriter, and writer. The “Sweetheart of the A.E.F” and the epitome of American patriotism, she was one of the most prominent celebrities of her time. Elsie Janis was an exceptional woman and is a worthy member of the Tarrytown/Sleepy Hollow Hall of Fame.

Janis was born on March 16, 1889 in Columbus, Ohio, to John Bierbower and Jane Cockrell. She discovered her talents by age four, when she began entertaining friends and family with her imitations. “Little Elsie” was educated primarily by Cockrell, a classic stage mother. As a child, Janis made her professional debut by starring in local plays. She sang for President William McKinley in the White House for Christmas when she was ten. Janis also toured in vaudeville acts and appeared in the road companies of two hit musicals.

Janis’s childhood success was surpassed by her success as an adult. She starred in her first Broadway play when she was sixteen, and later in three more plays that showcased her talents as a singer, dancer, and mimic. She even wrote and starred in a melodrama in 1911. Janis wowed an international audience in London’s *The Passing Show*, first in 1914 and again in 1915. She took a break in between these engagements to write and star in four Hollywood films. She then returned to New York to star in *Miss Information*, followed by a lengthy vaudeville tour.

By 1916, Janis had already acquired a large fortune. She bought the Philipse Manor Upper Mills house in North Tarrytown (now Sleepy Hollow). She and her mother lived well in what they called their Manor House. Janis came to love (North) Tarrytown so much that to her, it replaced Columbus as her hometown.

Janis was called away from Tarrytown when the US declared war on Germany in 1917. The patriotic woman returned to Europe, this time to inspire as well as entertain American soldiers on the Western Front. In just six months, she made over six hundred appearances there, earning her the name “Sweetheart of the A.E.F” and an honorary commanding officer title. Janis was the only American woman allowed on the front lines during WWI. She described her time in the war as the high point of her life because she found tremendous satisfaction in volunteering. She also loved the soldiers, describing them as “Just splendid, that’s all!”

When the war was over, Janis returned to North Tarrytown, to be greeted by the entire town, including welcoming bands and the mayor, Edward Martin, who had all been patiently waiting at the train station for a full hour. Everybody cheered when she stepped off the train, and Martin officially welcomed her back home. Janis was then paraded all around town in a fire apparatus. Sirens were sounding, factory whistles were blowing, and church bells were chiming as Janis was paraded home for what she called a well-deserved rest.

Janis lived in North Tarrytown when she created her next production, *Elsie Janis and Her Gang*. This show was inspired by her wartime experiences and had a cast of ex-servicemen. It became popular in America, London, and even Paris. She then went on to appear in her own revues, write pieces for multiple popular American magazines, write songs, and periodically tour the country.

Unfortunately, Janis’s popularity declined as the memory of WWI faded. She spent some time in Beverly Hills as a writer and production supervisor. After many other admirers, she married the actor Gilbert Wilson, with whom she had no children. During this time, she wrote her autobiography *So Far, So Good*, which she added to her existing works: *Love Letters of an Actress*, *The Big Show*, and

If I Know What I Mean. She lost money in the Great Depression and due to an auto accident, but she also gave away most of her fortune because she enjoyed giving and felt almost obligated to share. Since she could no longer afford her Manor House, she auctioned it off and left her beloved Tarrytown for Hollywood. Her final professional appearance was in the film *Women in War*, and she died two years later, on February 25, 1956.

Elsie Janis was a remarkable and multi-talented woman. She performed on Broadway, acted in Hollywood films, and wrote popular songs and books. The selfless “Sweetheart of the A.E.F.” was a true hero of WWI and loved living in North Tarrytown. The extraordinary Elsie Janis is a standout member of the Tarrytown/Sleepy Hollow Hall of Fame.

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