



*A Life of
Her Own
Choosing*

Anna Gibbons' Fifty Years
as a Tattooed Lady

by Amelia Klem





Left: Anna Gibbons, the girl from Portage County, found fame, fortune and an interesting life as "Artoria," one of the best-known tattooed ladies of her generation.

Next page: A detailed version of the "Last Supper" graces young Artoria's upper back.

Left: Tattoo Archive

Next page: Tattoo Archive



The story told about Wisconsin native Anna Mae Gibbons' entrance into the sideshow world was that, as a youth, she ran away to join the circus. While many early female circus performers were born into performing families, some circus women were runaways who had felt uncomfortable, stifled, or trapped at home and who sought freedom from societal restraints. However, Anna's real path to the sideshow was far different. She may have "wanted to leave home and see the world" in order to find more freedom and independence, but her primary motivation was to earn a decent living for herself and her husband.¹

Anna eventually became one of a select group of women who worked as sideshow tattooed ladies, performing under the stage name "Artoria." When she died in the 1980s, she had performed as a tattooed lady for over fifty years working in everything from carnivals to dime museums to big-name circus sideshows. Anna's unusual choice allowed her to trade her ordinary life as a working-class wife, struggling to make ends meet, for something extraordinary, something for which she is still remembered. She became one of the most well-known tattooed ladies of her generation.

A Life of Her Own Choosing

Anna Mae Burlingston was born on July 16, 1893, in rural Portage County to a Norwegian father named Gunder Huse-land, who at the time went by the name Frank Burlingston, and his wife Amma Mabel Mason.² They lived near Amma's parents in the town of Linwood, near Stevens Point, on what was called "The Island." This was most likely the island in the Wisconsin River now called Treasure Island. In the past it was known by a variety of names, including Burlingston Island, having been named after families who lived and farmed there.³

Her family moved from Wisconsin to Colville, Washington, in late 1907. Shortly after the move, her father died of typhoid fever leaving her mother and siblings without an income.⁴ Anna left home soon after, at age fourteen, not to join the circus, but to work in Spokane. Anna and her sisters, Almina and Mary, helped to support themselves and their



Circus World Museum

These men sell tickets for the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Combined Circus, the Greatest Show on Earth, in 1927, the same year Artoria returned the show. In the summer of 1927, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus performed in the Wisconsin cities of Racine, Milwaukee, Madison, Appleton, and Marshfield.

family by working as domestic servants.⁵ Anna met her future husband Charles "Red" Gibbons in Spokane; Red was working as a tattoo artist in an arcade and had been tattooing professionally for some time. He had gone to a department store café for lunch, and spotted a young woman, Anna, sipping a soda and struck up a conversation (at that time, Anna could not afford lunch at the café, so she was just having a soft drink).⁶ The couple married in Spokane in 1912.⁷

Although the "running away" story she told as a performer was much more romantic than the real story, it was fabricated for naïve audiences like many other circus tales. This story was repeated originally in the book *Carnival*, by Arthur Lewis, and has since become the most commonly told story of Anna's introduction to the world of the sideshow. Her description of the day the carnival came to her town, as told through Lewis' folksy writing style, presents a picture of an unhappy fourteen year old itching for something better.

After I done my chores, me and my sister went to see it. We stood outside the freak show and a nice-lookin' guy started to talk to us. I asked could we come in for free—we didn't have no money—and he said OK . . . Him and me got to talkin.' Tole me the show di'nt [sic] have no tattooed lady, and then asked me if I would I like to be one. Said that he was the tattoo artist, and if I let him tattoo me, I could join the show and see the world. Well, that's what I done.⁸

According to their daughter, Charlene, Anna's transformation into a tattooed lady didn't happen until several years after her parents were married and living in California. "The state of the economy at that time was in shambles, and the future looked bleak for everyone. That is what prompted this extraordinary endeavor on their parts. It was a case of survival!"⁹ By the early 1920s, they had found their niche: Red worked as a traveling tattoo artist while Anna performed on stage.

Lewis' written account recalls Red Gibbons' promise that if he could tattoo Anna, she "could join the show and see the world, and that he started her career with a small angel tattoo on her wrist."¹⁰ However, the reality that Anna and Red made the decision to join the sideshow circuit to earn a better living for themselves speaks volumes about the working class at the beginning of the twentieth century and the choices available to them. At that time, employment options were few and the pay was poor; men could work in industrial or factory settings, farming, or manual labor-type jobs. While some working-class women were able to get secretarial or teaching positions, most were restricted to factory work: piece

work—which meant assembling items such as garments in the home—and other manual labor jobs, all of which paid poorly. Anna's first job was as a domestic servant, which was common for working-class women.

Anna never publicly discussed her family's reaction to her unorthodox choice of careers, but it is likely that they were rather surprised by this radical choice made by their daughter and son-in-law. She had defied cultural norms and covered her entire body with inked designs—not just a little butterfly or flower on her shoulder—and even if Anna's family was open minded, the circus, dime museum, and sideshow trade would probably not have been their first choice for their daughter. While these types of entertainment were billed as cultural and educational, the lasting, popular image of the tattooed lady was that of a strange exhibitionist willing to do just about anything. Albert Parry, in his disapproving book *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art, as Practiced by the Natives of the United States*, expressed a commonly held opinion of tattooed ladies that lasted well into the twentieth century:

There are extroverts as well as introverts among the tattooed women of America. There are, for instance, the tattooed women of the circus and the dime-museum, proud of their ornamented skin and making a profession of their exhibitionism. A feeling not of guilt but of superiority is their distinguishing trait.¹¹

While some, like Parry, voiced disapproval, Anna's reality could not have been further from that stereotype. She used the tattoos to create a new life, along with Red, over which she had control; unlike most women of her day, she chose a career that allowed her to travel, meet unusual people, and express herself differently than what was considered normal. The more adventurous working class women like Anna clearly felt that the circus life was an acceptable career option in an era when many working-class men and women had little chance for an education, highly paid work, or travel. Joining the circus could be seen as a chance for a more dynamic and certainly more stable economic life.

In a 1934 newspaper interview, Anna stated simply: "I got tattooed because I wanted to get tattooed; it's a nice way to make a living."¹² Tattooed ladies were paid very well—typically, a turn-of-the-twentieth-century tattooed performer could expect to make \$100-\$200 a week, depending on her popularity, the crowds, and the success of the show or museum she currently worked in.¹³ That was not only substantially more than the average working-class woman could make in jobs available to her, but was considerably more than the average circus woman made. Tattooed women were paid similarly to the top stars, who made from \$125 to \$250 a week, but were expected to perform dangerous stunts. In a 1909 article about circus women, Hugh Weir reported:



Annie Howard, photographed ca. 1898, and her husband Frank formed Barnum and Bailey's "Tattooed Couple." Frank was also a tattoo artist, and Annie called herself "Barnum and Bailey's original tattooed lady."



Syracuse University Library, Special Collections Research Center

This pamphlet from Bunnell's Museum in New York uses Irene Woodward's exotic appeal to advertise its shows.



Circus World Museum

Irene Woodward, "The Original Tattooed Lady," performed during the 1880s. Her tattoos, laboriously inked by hand, are appreciably less detailed than Artoria's.

The circus woman receives from twenty-five dollars to two hundred and fifty dollars a week, her salary depending upon her ability and the novelty of her act. . . . A woman rider of ordinary ability may earn seventy-five dollars a week. If she can turn a somersault in the air while the horse is in motion she increases this to one hundred and twenty-five dollars. A "backward back" somersault will bring her two hundred dollars, perhaps \$250. The pay of the aerialist fluctuates from thirty-five dollars to one hundred and twenty-five dollars a week. A woman who can turn a double somersault in the air, or can do a "flying act," receives one hundred and twenty-five dollars a week and is always in demand.¹⁴

Lower-level circus women were paid substantially less; even by 1912 ballet girls were paid only \$8 a week. Male circus workers also made much less than tattooed ladies; a man working as a clown during 1910 made only \$20 a week. A male billposter and lithographer during 1906 started at \$35 a month, and then earned \$45 a month after the first four

months of the season.¹⁵

In comparison, an average working-class family made between \$300 and \$500 a year at the turn of the twentieth century, which would be between \$7 and \$10 a week.¹⁶ Teachers were making an average \$7 a week in 1900, which generally included room and board, while clerical workers in 1909 were only earning about \$22 a week.¹⁷ Women employed seasonally in tobacco warehouses during 1893 in Wisconsin made between \$6 and \$12 a week, while the average weekly salary for a man working in a factory or other industrial job in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was only between \$5 and \$11 a week.¹⁸ Tattooed women were not only paid substantially more than many other circus employees, but they were also paid much more than contemporary working-class men could hope to make.

Inked Bodies and the Sideshow

At the time Anna decided to join the circus, tattooed ladies had become a staple of the American sideshow. The first performing tattooed women, Nora Hildebrandt and Irene

Woodward, appeared on sideshow stages beginning in the 1880s, and the phenomenon of the tattooed lady continued until the last tattooed woman's retirement in 1995. Anna's transformation into "Artoria, tattoo girl, a human art gallery" made her part of the long tradition of tattooed performers.¹⁹ The tattooed lady's continuing popularity allowed Anna to continue working until old age forced her to retire in 1981 at the age of 87.

Tattooed performers were fairly common by the 1910s; most traveling sideshows had tattooed performers on their rosters to appeal to American audiences' taste for the exotic and unusual, even if it was manufactured. The first recorded exhibition of a tattooed man in Europe was that of a Polynesian man in 1774. The tradition spread to the United States, beginning with men like Captain Costentenus, who was one of the most popular tattooed men of the nineteenth century.²⁰ He went by a number of names, including "the Greek Alexandrino," "Captain Georgi," "Tsavella," "Tattooed Man of Burma," "The Turk," and "The Living Picture Gallery." The Captain began performing around 1870 and sometimes claimed to be of a race of bold mountain men from the Balkans, and other times, to be a Greek sailor who was captured and forcibly tattooed by Pacific Islanders.²¹ He had 388 symmetrically arranged and interwoven images that covered his entire body, including his face, ears, and eyelids.²² By the early 1890s, when the tattooed woman's popularity had increased, the Captain dropped out of sight.²³

While tattooed men began performing about eighty years before women realized the potential of permanent body decoration, the appearance of tattooed women brought a sexual allure to the sideshow that a tattooed man never could. The most commonly used story by most early male tattooed performers was that of the captivity narrative; a man was captured by South Seas Islanders and forced to submit to tattooing against his will. When tattooed women took the stage, they adapted this narrative to their needs; now women were being captured by "savages" in the American West, not the South Seas, and tattooed against their will. The tattooed men could never hope to compete with these tantalizing stories of women's abduction and forced tattooing especially when combined with seeing an almost nude woman on display. Although tattooed men did continue performing into the twentieth century, the women eventually edged them off the stage.

Many disapproved of the tattooed women; this new exhibition was not really considered "clean" family entertainment. The tattooed woman had to be willing to remove most of her clothing and display herself for others to see. Moral codes and dress traditions for women during the late nineteenth century prescribed strict codes of dress; women never showed their ankles, much less their legs. Even by the early twentieth century, polite society expected women to dress and behave modestly, which certainly did not include appearing



Courtesy of the author

This elegant studio portrait was used to advertise Artoria's show as well as her husband's skill with a tattoo needle.

mostly nude on a stage, regardless of the reason. Tattooed women, however, needed to display as much inked flesh as possible, which required them to show their chests, arms, legs, and, later, their stomachs.

The bad image given to tattooed ladies because of their willingness to appear on stage scantily-clad, rebuking the accepted "moral codes" of the day, at least in Anna's case, was unearned. While she performed onstage as a tattooed lady, offstage Anna was reputed to be a demure and modest woman, conscious of the stigma imposed upon her chosen profession and careful about her image. Even though she was completely tattooed, audiences never saw the tattoos hidden by her costume.²⁴

Ward Hall, who employed her later in her career, said of Anna, "She was a very dear, sweet old lady. She was so reliable; she never missed a show." Hall also said that Anna always looked nice, took care of herself, wore a little makeup, and got her hair fixed, and that she also often talked for herself, mean-

ing that she did her own lectures.²⁵ As with many other performing women of her day, such as circus stars, acrobats, and actresses, the ability to use performance to earn a decent living outweighed the negative stigmas of performing onstage.

The Evolution of Tattooing

In the 1880s, when tattooed ladies began exhibiting themselves, tattooing was done “by hand” with a needle poked into the skin, one dot at a time. A full-body tattoo job would not only have been extremely painful, but would have taken a considerable length of time to complete.

By the time Anna Gibbons began working as a tattooed performer, the actual process of getting tattooed was easier, and both speed and techniques were improved with the invention of the electric tattoo machine. Before tattooist Samuel O’Reilly began his successful experiments with Thomas Edison’s electric pen in the early 1890s, all tattoos were applied by hand.²⁶ The traditional method of tattooing had existed for millennia; the tattooist made tiny pinpricks into the skin with a pointed stick or needle or a “small hammer fitted with a sharp point.”²⁷ The wounded area was then rubbed with a chemically stable pigment and remained there, visible through the upper layers of the skin.

Edison’s 1875 invention of the electric pen facilitated the advancement of the process of tattooing:

[the pen was a] hand-held, motor-driven device with an oscillating needle intended to prick a sheet of paper. “Writing” with an electric pen resulted in words that were drawn as strings of tiny, closely spaced holes. The paper, when placed in a special frame, became a stencil, the master copy in a simple, inexpensive form of printing.²⁸

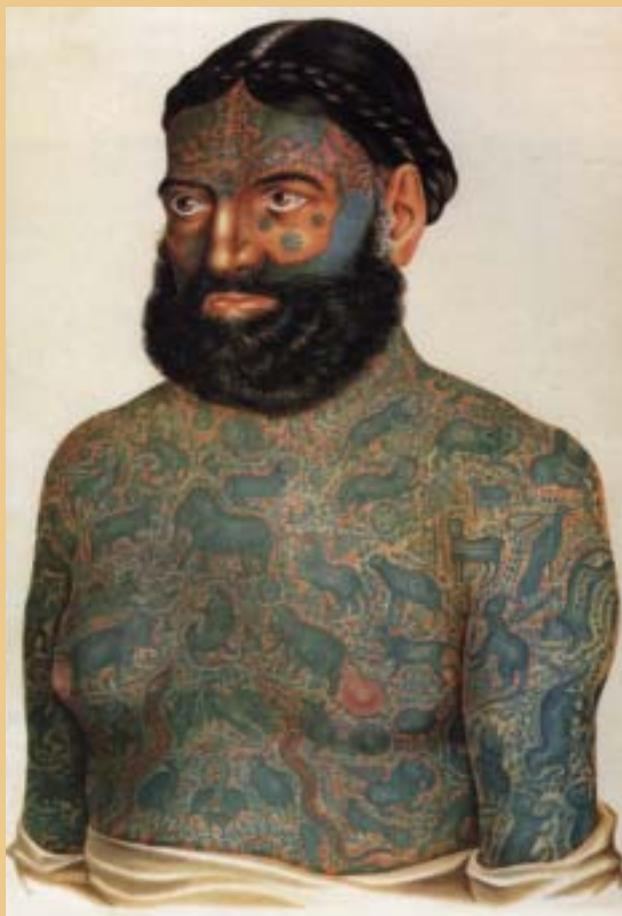
The electric pen never succeeded as an office machine. However, O’Reilly began experimenting with the pen as a tattooing device, modifying it slightly and receiving a patent for his new device in 1891.²⁹ The new machine was a battery operated, hand-held electric motor that controlled a single needle or a row of up to five needles. The tattooist drew the design on the skin using the machine, while the reciprocating needle made shallow wounds and pushed ink into them. The new machine, now commonly referred to as a “tattoo gun,” could produce up to 3,000 skin-pricks per minute, many more than the 150 to 200 per minute possible by hand.³⁰ The process was still painful and time consuming, but had become considerably less so.

Below: Circus posters often advertised their attractions’ exciting, if frequently false, stories, like this (ca. 1884) representation of the forcible tattooing of the famed Captain Constantenus.

Right: Captain Constantenus’ intricate designs covered him from head to toe and even decorated his scalp.



Circus World Museum



Atlas of Portraits of Diseases of the Skin



Tattoo Archive

Anna's husband, Red Gibbons, tattoos a young woman's social security number on her leg—a popular choice of tattoo when the numbers were first assigned.

As Anna's tattoos show, the technique employed by many tattoo artists improved with the invention of the machine. The designs that appeared on this era of tattooed ladies were detailed pictures that employed a wider variety of colors and complex shading. Earlier images of women like Hildebrandt, Woodward, and Annie Howard revealed tattoos that, while numerous, were nothing more than crude line drawings and symbols taken from common tattoo designs popular with sailors. Anna's tattoos, in contrast, were images taken from classical artwork. Her husband, Red Gibbons, who did all of her tattoos, was interested in reproducing beautiful artwork, not just scratching rough outlines of pictures. Her collection included full-color reproductions of a portion of Botticelli's "Annunciation," part of Michelangelo's "Holy Family," and a group of angels influenced by Raphael. Anna had the Madonna on her right thigh and the Child on her left; on her

stomach was a schooner under full sail flying the American flag. George Washington appeared on her chest and "The Last Supper" was reproduced across her upper back.³¹

A Performer's Life on the Road

A tattooed lady's act was simply to stand on a stage, displaying her decorated body for the spectators while giving a short speech about her life, which was more often than not concocted. The tales of "forced tattooing by savages" had gone out of favor by the turn of the twentieth century, but performers were still just as likely to

make up wild tales. When Anna worked during the 1930s, the excitement in seeing a fully tattooed woman was still high; naïve audience members could sometimes not imagine how the performer had come to be tattooed. Artoria commented in a 1934 newspaper article:

*You wouldn't believe, though, how many people come up an' ask me was I born this way. I always say yes, an' the doctors figure it was on account of my mother must have gone to too many movies.*³²

The sideshow tradition had always included false and exaggerated stories about the performer's past, but Artoria had taken her cues from the audience itself, confirming their outlandish beliefs. The "running away" story was false, but far more romantic, exciting, and believable to modern audi-

ences than tales of forced tattooing at the hands of South Seas islanders. It also showed how the circus tale was able to adapt, incorporating modern ideas about freedom and choices.

Anna became "Artoria, tattooed girl" in 1919 with the Pete Kortess Show, and she quickly came to the attention of Ringling Brothers-Barnum and Bailey Circus. Anna signed her first contract with "The Greatest Show on Earth" on December 4, 1920.³³ She worked with Ringling Brothers until the 1924 season when she switched to the Hagenbeck-Wallace Sideshow Annex.³⁴ The show started in Cincinnati, and she was billed as "Miss Artorian, the California tattooed lady."³⁵ Anna used the stage name "Artoria," not "Artorian," but misspellings were common in the names of performers. In 1925 and 1926, she worked for Kortess and McKay's Museum in Los Angeles, and, by the 1927 season, she was back at Ringling Brothers, working for sideshow manager Clyde Ingalls.³⁶ In his written memoir, *My Very Unusual Friends*, her future employer Ward Hall says that Anna told him that during the twenties, Ingalls tried to take "liberties with her" causing her to leave the show.³⁷

During the Great Depression, Anna worked on Ringling Brothers-Barnum and Bailey Sideshow again for the 1931 season; Clyde Ingalls still managed the sideshow, but the earlier problem with Ingalls was solved after Red had a talk with him.³⁸ During 1931, Anna shared the stage with performers such as Eko and Iko, the "peculiar people," Jack Huber, the "armless wonder," Strecho, the "rubber-skin man," and Major Mite, the "smallest man in the world."³⁹ Both she and Red worked for Foley and Burk Shows during 1932 and 1933, and, during the mid-1930s, she worked for the Johnny J. Jones Sideshow.⁴⁰ According to Hall, during the Depression Anna and Red would work on a show in the summer, and in the winter they went to Oklahoma where he would work as a "rough neck" in the oil fields.⁴¹ Their daughter, Charlene Anne Gibbons, was born while they were living in Cushing, Oklahoma in 1934.⁴²

Anna retired during the late 1940s and 1950s to care for Red after he went blind. He was the victim of both a brutal robbery and a construction accident, and then had several surgeries on his injured eyes, which failed, leaving him blind. She met Ward Hall, the Hall and Christ sideshow operator who would employ her in her old age, while she was working at Hubert's Museum on 42nd Street in New York City. Hubert's was a popular dime museum in Times Square, which operated from 1925 until 1965, often remembered for William Heckler's famous flea circus, mice eaters and bearded ladies.⁴³ Anna returned to work during the 1970s

with the Dell and Travis Carnival after sideshow manager Dean Potter ran an ad in *Billboard*. She didn't need the money; she was supported in part by Oklahoma oil royalties from Red's family's land. According to Potter, "she was bored and lonely, had the itch to get back to show biz."⁴⁴ While working for Potter, she fell coming down the steps of her dressing room semi-trailer and broke her arm. Hall says that they wanted to take her to the hospital, but she refused because she had a show to give; she worked all day with a broken arm.⁴⁵ Around 1978, when she was in her 70s, Anna began working for the Hall and Christ Sideshow, where she was employed as Artoria. She would remain there until her retirement in the early 1980s.⁴⁶

When she began working for Hall and Christ, they didn't put her in the sideshow tent right away, but put her, in her costume, on the bally platform outside the sideshow.

Their reasoning was that people could see her and know that the oddities inside the tent were real, rather than gaffed, or fake, freaks. By the 1970s, freak shows had begun to lose their popularity and instead of touring with national circus companies were limited to the carnival circuit.

Modern audiences viewed many sideshows and the performers with suspicion and skepticism.

Anna later worked inside the sideshow tent with Hall and Christ Shows, eventually working as the blow-off attraction. The blow-off was the last act in a multiple act sideshow, or 10-in-1 show, for which an extra fee was charged. Usually the blow-off attraction was racier than other attractions in the

show and was often limited to men only.⁴⁷ At the Texas State Fair in Dallas, one of the performers became ill and couldn't work. Jack Woods, the inside lecturer, told Ward that they had nothing to put in the blow-off that day. Woods wanted to put Artoria back

there, but Ward was of the opinion that a tattooed lady, especially an elderly one, would be unsuccessful in the blow-off. However, as they had no other option, Woods came up with an introduction for Artoria that Ward later recounted:

Ladies and gentlemen, while you have been in this tent, you have seen numerous strange people, if you will, human oddities, freaks of nature, people who were born in strange conditions. But behind this curtain we have probably the strangest of them all—far stranger than anything we have out here on the stage, because, back here, we have this human oddity, who is not a born freak, she wasn't born strange, this woman is a man-made monstrosity. She was as a young woman, very beautiful. She met and married a man 3 times older than herself. He was so jealous of her and afraid that she would be attracted to some other man that he marked her body, thinking that by marking



The Edison Papers, Rutgers University

Invented in 1875, Edison's electric pen was a failure as an office machine. In the hands of tattooist Samuel O'Reilly, however, the pen was modified into a powerful tool for the inking of human skin.



Sideshow World

A beautiful and proud Artoria in her heyday.



Ward Hall

Artoria, still performing more than fifty years into her career. According to Ward Hall, she appeared with his show at the Wisconsin State Fair in the mid-1970s.

her from head to toe, she would no longer be attractive to any other man. And she is here, no longer a young woman, but now a very elderly, widowed lady. But those marks that he put on her body when she was young are still there and they will be there for the remainder of her life. She is waiting on the stage now to welcome you.⁴⁸

Ward remembers that people loved it; the story, while false, was captivating. There was only one flaw: Jack Woods amplified his voice, and for one performance it was too loud. Anna, after hearing his pitch, gave very stern orders that she wanted “to see Mr. Hall and she wanted to see him right now.”⁴⁹ Anna was upset that Jack called her a monstrosity. Ward remembers that she told him, “I am no monster, he is never to call me such a thing as a monstrosity again.”⁵⁰ How-

ever, the pitch was so successful that for later performances Woods turned down the sound system so that Anna, now hard of hearing, couldn’t hear the false story.⁵¹

Anna’s time with the Hall and Christ Shows was happy; she was surrounded by interesting people and was doing something she enjoyed. In 1979, while working on a carnival in Muskegon, Michigan, the ladies working for the show organized a surprise birthday party for her. Marge Porter, the main assistant, set it all up. Everyone gathered in the blow-off, and Ward summoned Anna, saying he needed to talk to her. When he pulled back the curtain, and when everyone said “Happy Birthday, Anna,” Ward observed, “you never saw anyone’s face beam with happiness, as much as that lady did.”⁵²

Finally, Ward Hall had to insist that Anna retire; he remembers that she showed signs of dementia and became

somewhat paranoid. She would go to eat during the break and wouldn't be able to find her way back to the sideshow. As Ward recalls, it was around 1981 when he told her that he didn't have a job for her the next year. Anna cried and wanted to stay, but at the end of the season she moved to Tennessee to live with her daughter's family.⁵³

Clearly, Anna was a remarkable woman from the beginning as shown by her selection of careers. By the time she died on March 18, 1985, at age 91, she had performed as a tattooed lady for well over fifty years, taking time off only to care for her ailing husband. Her obituary mentions that she lived in the Bristol Nursing Home at the time of her death, and that she was a member of the Episcopal Church. Like most other obituaries of tattooed ladies, there was no mention of her lifelong career, simply her church affiliation and the names of those surviving her, including her daughter, granddaughter, two sisters, a brother, and a sister-in-law.⁵⁴ Her long career made her part of American popular culture; she became a recognized name to sideshow and tattoo fans, and her image still appears on postcards and in books. The girl from Portage County had found fame, fortune, and an interesting life with her bravery, remarkable character—and a little help from the tattoo needle. ■

Notes

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About the Author

Amelia Klem received her Masters degrees in History and Library Science from UW-Milwaukee in 2004 and also holds a bachelors degree in Fine Arts. She currently works in the Special Collections Department at the UWM Libraries and is working on a manuscript on the history of tattooed ladies, based on her research for her masters thesis, "'Say, Have You Met Lydia?' A History of American Tattooed Ladies of the Circus, Sideshow and Dime Museum, 1882-1995." In addition to her historical research into tattoo history, she is currently planning her next tattoo. She lives in Milwaukee with her fiancé.

