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Circular

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Noel Qualter: A True Original

THE ART OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ILLUSION THE MIND READERS

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Gene Dennis: The Wonder Girl (1904 – 1947)

For someone who was a media icon throughout her life, who amazed Albert Einstein and predicted the future for President Franklin Roosevelt and countless US governors, senators and mayors, it is surprising that little is remembered of this fantastic mind reader. Alongside Joseph Dunninger, she was America's best-known psychic performer of the 1920s and 1930s and was one of the most-talked-about stars of that era. An incredible story of a beautiful young lady who became a celebrity, Gene Dennis went from small-town Kansas teenage prodigy to an American favourite, with a long career of live appearances, radio shows and international headlines. Newspapers loved her movie-star glamour and published one long-lashed beauty shot after another. She performed on two continents and became England's first radio mind reader before marrying a multimillionaire and retiring from the stage.

Eugenie Dennis was born in Topeka, Kansas in 1904. She later became known as Eugene and finally as simply Gene Dennis. Gene was a well-spoken child raised in a modest home by her parents Nannie and Frank (a pattern maker for a locomotive upholstery company). The family later moved to nearby Atchison.

Nannie recounted that her own mother was psychic and would see pictures and could find lost objects. Her beliefs certainly influenced young Gene who, apparently, could talk at ten months and at two years old started speaking of seeing visions. When Gene was eight, a visit from a local tailor named Ike Gilberg changed her life. Gilberg, fascinated with Jewish metaphysics, was a local philanthropist who helped Dennis's family pay their bills when her father was ill and unable to work around 1914. One day, Gilberg stopped by the Dennis's home and was struck by the young Eugenie's poise and insight. He told Eugenie's mother that the girl was a psychic and should develop her gifts.

Gene took the tailor's assessment seriously and began doing readings for friends. By high school, she had become known for psychically finding belongings her classmates had lost. Around 1918, when Gene was fourteen, a local woman planning a large reception suggested that Gene attend and do readings for the guests. The teenager's statements, unfortunately, were a bit too truthful for the partygoers and the booking ended up with the organiser escorting Gene out in front of some rather embarrassed guests. A few years later, hearing of her skills, a local man asked Gene where to find \$1000 he had lost. When she told him the correct location, he excitedly contacted local newspapers, which printed the story (*Kansas City Star*, May 8, 1921). The article struck a nerve with the public and young Gene was flooded with over a thousand letters (many containing dollar bills) requesting help. Soon the girl was giving readings to visitors at her parents' five-room cottage.

The sudden fame and responsibility were tough for the teenager to handle. The sheer volume of letters and requests being received

overwhelmed Gene and she would often become tearful with a desire to respond to everyone's requests. Her fame spread quickly. A 1921 article in the *Minneapolis Star*, with the headline "Mysterious Exploits of a 16 year old Mind-Reader" recounted how Gene had helped find lost jewellery, money and even oil for a drilling company.

All this publicity brought her to the attention of David Abbott, a renowned investigator of psychics and also a magician of some repute. Abbott invited Gene to Omaha to test her clairvoyant ability. Her parents agreed to allow her to travel and the trip was subsequently funded by a newspaper (*The Kansas City Star*). She travelled on 26 January, 1922. During the first meeting with Abbott and invited guests, Gene asked a woman if she had recently lost a child – the woman confirmed she had and broke down in tears. Abbott later reflected that whilst some of Gene's assessments were miraculous, many responses appeared to be simply guesses and cold reading type of answers. Her ability to find lost objects was also said to be no better than one in five or one in ten.

What is clear is that Abbott and his wife became good friends with Gene, who they did not consider with the disdain of some mediums who they felt simply exploited their followers and clients. Gene's sittings appeared much more supportive of her clients as opposed to the exploitative nature of other mediums. Also, Gene did not claim to consult the spirits or go into a trance to get her readings. Abbott wrote a booklet on Gene entitled *The Wonder Woman* but never published it (a copy is in *House of Mystery*). Some years later Gene asked Abbott if he could help her publish a booklet on psychic matters that she could sell at her shows, splitting the money 50:50. Abbott agreed to do this.

Gene's popularity grew very quickly and it is reported that she could see up to twenty-nine clients in a day! The growing demand for her time led to Abbott arranging for her to appear at the local Rialto Theatre to do readings for audience members. The houses were packed. The punters loved her sweet demeanour and articulate statements and it was here where *The Wonder Woman* began her stage career in earnest. As Max Maven would later point out, Gene had the brilliant idea of doing a Q&A act with just the A and no Q. In other words, where most mind readers complicated matters by 'psychically' divining each spectator's queries before later answering the question, Gene would simply ask her audience members to stand up and ask their questions which she immediately answered from the stage. She thus eliminated the need for carbon paper, billet switches, electric earpieces or other procedures for collecting and opening the questions. To an audience the answer was the fascinating part.

Gene quickly realised how eager newspapers were to publish her predictions, particularly those relating to crimes, and she exploited this to the max. On one occasion, whilst giving readings at Abbott's house, she had a premonition of a murder only to later discover that a policeman had in fact been killed that night, this premonition was widely reported in the press adding to her credibility. She also benefited from the fact that the papers rarely published follow-ups about whether or not her

predictions came true, although she did take more care after unsuccessfully predicting a Californian earthquake would flatten Los Angeles due to the sins of Hollywood!

Newspapers continued to be fascinated with the seventeen-year-old, with one headline stating "Girl with psychic eyes astounds scientist" (*Los Angeles Times*, 5 March, 1922). Throughout 1922 her popularity soared and larger venues were booked in bigger cities. She started adding other promotional tactics to her public relations repertoire and lent her name and face to ads for local merchants and made in-store appearances. All this added to her popularity (and wealth), bringing even more punters to her shows. At the time her mother was acting as her manager but later that year she announced she was under the management of nineteen-year-old George Davidson, who helped dream up her clever publicity schemes including navigating a New York to Washington flight whilst blindfolded. Ironically, despite the apparent ability to find people's lost items, in May that year she placed an advert in the local paper for a watch she had lost. Her explanation was that she found it hard to locate personal items. During this year she was performing up to four shows per day and she continued to make headlines.

Her manager used every opportunity to increase her marketability, including going to the press and announcing a three-year \$52,000-a-year motion picture deal with his newly-set-up production company (although no film ever materialised). Late in 1922 Gene was reported to have met with author and psychic believer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who was to later announce "Gene is one of the Seven Wonders of the World." On the other hand Houdini, in his role as psychic exposé, gave an explanation on her 'murder revelation' on his popular radio show "Ghosts that talk – by Radio." Houdini claimed she had reporters at hospitals, police stations and newspaper offices who would use sensitive headphones concealed in flowers on her shoulders to inform her of important events before they hit the press. Abbott didn't take kindly to these claims and published an article refuting Houdini's claims.

Gene's film star-like qualities and her willingness to speak her mind endeared her to her adoring fans and the press loved her; she was smart, articulate and a good-looking icon for the roaring twenties.

Her ability to offer information continued to amaze and bring huge media attention. She once surprised a reporter by revealing the contents of his will, described his friends and relatives, including giving information on their health. She also amazed police by disclosing unreleased information on unsolved crimes, she correctly predicted the winner of a journalism scholarship prize and often correctly predicted the winners of local sports matches (often predicting the local team's win to endear herself to the locals).

Her positive publicity was briefly halted when she was served with a summons and found guilty of fortune telling, which was illegal in many states. This followed a complaint from a disgruntled client who was given an inaccurate reading when Gene told her that her lost son was in another city when in fact he was still in his hometown. A \$25 fine and some poor press ensued which did little to curb her continual growth. The court leniency was helped incidentally at the hearing by support from the police who had stated that Gene had helped them solve a number of cases in the past.

The New York Times printed an intelligent piece questioning her

credibility as a 'solver of mysteries,' with claims of supernatural or supernormal powers. They suggested she made educated guesses and as for her work with the police they claimed it was a complete waste of time. Despite this her career blossomed and, with the ever-growing movie industry, she was often asked to open premieres, gaining as much publicity as the movie stars themselves. She continued to tour the larger theatres, taking out two-page press adverts, getting formal thanks from the mayor in each city by predicting their re-election and highlighting her lost property skills.

In the next few years Gene took breaks from performing, investing in the stock market. She returned to the stage in 1929 following the crash, although she did claim to have withdrawn her funds when she foresaw the collapse coming! In 1930 Gene began a prestigious two-year contract with Loew's, now represented by the powerful William Morris Agency.

The great appeal of Gene Dennis was her girl-next-door appearance, which set her apart from the usual solemn turbaned soothsayers. She also strenuously objected to being called 'mystic' or a 'mind reader,' and she denied anything supernatural in her strange powers. She would invite sceptical journalists to meet her and astound them with revelations of personal details that were quite remarkable. She never forgot David Abbott's support in her early career and in 1931 gave an interview complimenting his contribution to her career.

"Amazing!" Albert Einstein proclaimed on the front page of *The Chicago Herald Examiner* on 13 January, 1932, following several hours with Gene. "She told me things no one possibly could know, things on which I have been working, and she demonstrated that she has a power to do things you cannot explain. I must tell some of my associates about this. It was miraculous indeed." A year later the Warner Circus announced it had signed Gene for a forty-week tour at a salary of \$2000 a week. She continued to receive good publicity and whilst performing in Washington theatres, worked for President Franklin Roosevelt during a



Albert Einstein with his wife (left) and Gene Dennis

White House dinner.

Gene's fame extended to Europe and, in 1934, she travelled to London for bookings and radio interviews, where she is said to have been the first psychic to appear on British radio. She was loved by her British audiences and even successfully predicted the winner of the Derby horse race.

In Paris in 1935 the thirty-one-year-old Gene secretly married John G Von Herbert, the wealthy Seattle owner of several theatres and the Seattle Farmer's Market. The couple had five children. Whilst Gene restricted her stage work, she still kept her hand in psychic matters, writing an advice column in *The Seattle Star* and editing her own monthly self-help magazine, *Amity*. She also made occasional predictions. In 1947 Von Herberg died. Three months later, on 8 March, 1948, Gene herself passed away at the age of forty-four, leaving five young children. Whilst doctors diagnosed cerebral oedema as the cause, her friends said she passed away grief-stricken. Struggles with alcohol may have contributed to her early demise.

REFERENCE

Teller and Karr, Todd. *House of Mystery. The Magic Science of David P. Abbott*. No place: The Miracle Factory, 2005.