

Rethinking of Old Berleams

C.W.Latin • County Historian



VOL III

MR. CHAUNCEY OLCOTT

No. 19

In 1910 it was written, "there is probably not in America another actor who has so faithful an individual following as Chauncey Olcott." His name was a common household word which brought him fame and fortune. In his time he was considered to be one of the best in a listing of one hundred actors and actresses on the American stage.

Rarely did he appear that the theatre was not filled in every part. He made a specialty of romantic and sentimental Irish comedy and in the course of each play he sang songs of his own composition.

He began his life in the theatre in 1880 as a ballad singer with Emerson and Holley's Minstrels, later singing with Haverly's and Carncross' Minstrels.

It then was only a step into light opera and in 1886 he sang Pablo in 'Pepita' at the Union Square Theatre. Lillian Russell sang the title role. He was with Denman Thompson in "The Old Homestead" from 1888 to 1890, when he became leading tenor with the Duff Opera Company, and sang Nanki Poo in "The Mikado" and Ralph Rackstraw in "H.M.S. Pinafore." The next season he appeared in London at the Criterion Theatre in "Miss Decima" and "Blue-Eyed Susan."

Up to that time W. J. Scanlon had been the idol of the large section of the public who loved sentimental Irish plays with a romantic singing hero. On his death, his manager, Augustus Pitou, engaged Mr. Olcott to star in this type of play and his success was instantaneous. He acted in a new piece each season including: "Mavourneen", "The Irish Artist", "The Minstrel of Clare", "Sweet Inniscarra", "A Romance of Athlone", "Garrett O'Magh", "Old Limerick Town", "Terence", "Edmund Burke", "Eileen Ashore", "O'Neill of Derry", and "Ragged Robin". These accomplishments would be the envy of most actors today.

And now, how it all happened. The name under which he was so widely known was adopted by him for professional purposes. His own name was Chancellor John Olcott. He was born in Buffalo and in 1860 and attended the public schools there. During the late 1870's he came to Albion where he worked for a short while in a restaurant. It was there where Albion's most prominent citizen of the day, Hon. E. Kirke Hart met the aspiring young Olcott and very decidedly encouraged him to adopt the theatre as a profession. From this motivation Chauncey Olcott went on to become one of the greatest American actors.

And now you know how it all happened.