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Marie Dressler's memory to be honored by plaque

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COBOURG'S MARIE DRESSLER

The memory of Cobourg's famous actress, Marie Dressler, will be honored this Friday afternoon when a provincial historical plaque will be unveiled on the grounds of St. Peter's Anglican Church, where her father was organist when she was born and where her birth is recorded.

Marie, born Leila Maria Koerber, was a Broadway star 55 years ago, then entered silent movies, playing with Charlie Chaplin, and later, "talkies", playing with such greats as Greta Garbo and Wallace Beery.

In 1939, the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences named her "best actress of the year". She died in 1934.

The actress was born in Cobourg in 1868 in the King Street West house then rented by her father, and which is now owned by Mrs. Lenah Fisher,

deputy-reeve of Cobourg, and which is known across the country as "Marie Dressler's Birthplace", one of Cobourg's attractions to travellers.

The plaque is one of a series being erected throughout the province by the Department of Public Records and Archives, acting on the advice of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario.

Friday's ceremony is being arranged and sponsored by the town of Cobourg, and Mayor Jack Heenan will be chairman. Among those who have been invited to take part are: Russell D. Rowe, MPP (Northumberland); Russell C. Honey, MP (Northumberland-Durham); Leslie R. Gray, London, representing the province's Historic Sites Board; and Mrs. Fisher.

The plaque will be unveiled by Mrs. Roy S.

Powell of Port Hope, a cousin of Marie Dressler, and will be dedicated by the Rev. S.D. Abraham, Rector of St. Peter's Church.

The baptismal records of St. Peter's show an entry which states that a daughter, born on November 9, 1868, to Alexander Rudolph Koerber and Anna, his wife, was baptized in St. Peter's on June 27, 1869. Since the date of birth given differs from that usually given in accounts of the life of "Marie Dressler", the name under which this child became famous as an actress and also from the date implied in some passages of her autobiography, it is well to point out that baptismal records of this kind are now accepted in applications for old age pension in the absence of regular registration. They have, therefore, almost as much authority as a registration certificate. At that time, and for many years afterwards, the registration of births was optional in Ontario.

The attractive brick cottage believed to have been rented by the Koerbers at the time of Leila's birth, still stands on King Street West in Cobourg, carefully preserved by its owner, Mrs. Lenah Fisher.

The St. Peter's baptismal record may contain a slight error. The child's name is given as "Lalia (or possibly "Laelia") Maria", whereas Miss Dressler herself says her first name was "Leila" and this is confirmed by tradition among relations on her mother's side. In certain passages of her book 'My Own Story' published soon after her death, she speaks of herself as "sixty" in 1931, which would place her

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birth in 1871. Various books of reference and the obituary in the Toronto Globe in 1934 gave her year of birth as 1873. It would seem that Miss Dressler, like other ladies, habitually reduced her age by some three years, and perhaps sometimes took off as many as five. She gives her father's name as

he was unable to return home and came to America, eventually to Canada, where he married Anna Henderson, who may have been born in Port Hope and certainly had relatives there. Marie Dressler does not give the Christian name of her Henderson grandfather or say where he lived. She

Cobourg for a little longer, but their stay there was probably quite short. In fact Miss Dressler says that her childhood was passed in constant moves from one small town in Ontario or the United States to another, until, by her account, when she was 14 and her sister, Bonita, 19, the family found them-

time after the end of the war and when she tried to return to the stage she could get almost no parts. Her difficulties lasted until 1927, when she received an offer of a contract for a silent film, "Ma Callahan". This film was well thought of by the critics, but strongly objected to by some Irish-Americans. In deference

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"Alexander von Koerber", but neither the record at St. Peter's nor the only directory in which is listed under Cobourg, have the "von". The Baptismal Record calls him "professor of music" and the directory for 1869 has "Louis Koerber, music teacher".

According to his daughter Leila, Alexander Koerber was born in Austria, but moved with his parents to Prussia when still very young. He became an officer of cavalry, but on the outbreak of the Crimean War went, apparently without leave, to join the British army. Technically a deserter,

describes him as of Irish extraction, a man of considerable means, the owner of several lake schooners and apparently engaged in the shipping and forwarding business. None of the Hendersons listed in Port Hope or Cobourg in 1864-80 seems to answer this description, and it seems likely that his business headquarters were in Toronto, though his farm, often mentioned by his granddaughter, may have been in Hamilton Township. He did not approve of his daughter's marriage, but did not disown her entirely, merely refusing to help her as long as she stuck to her husband.

According to Miss Dressler, it was her mother's custom to obtain a position as organist for her husband in the Anglican church in some small town and then find him as many music pupils as possible to supplement the meagre salary. These engagements as organist were, for some reason or another, never long.

Alexander Koerber became organist at St. Peter's Church, Cobourg, in June 1868. However, by April, 1869, financial problems forced the wardens to reduce his salary and before the end of the year, forego a paid organist altogether.

The Koerbers may have remained in

selves in Michigan.

There the sisters received offers of employment together, with a travelling theatrical stock company, and insisted on accepting them, in spite of their father's opposition. It was on his insistence that Leila adopted a stage name derived from the name of an aunt, apparently only as to the surname, for "Marie" is, or course, the French from of "Maria". It is not stated whether Bonita also changed her name. It is quite possible that Leila was rather older than 14. She says she looked 18 and gave that as her age, but the year 1883 agrees well enough with what she implies as to the length of her apprenticeship in stock.

During the next 10 years or so Marie Dressler worked hard as an actress and singer, taking a wide variety of parts. She says she had received a thorough grounding in music from her mother, who also tried, with considerable success, to supplement the girls' schooling, constantly interrupted by the family moves from one town to another. After working with different stock companies, Miss Dressler began to get good supporting parts in comedy, musical comedy and comic opera, sometimes in a travelling company of a Broadway success. She had a good part with Lillian Russell in "Princess Nicotine". Real success came with "The Lady Slavey", which opened in 1896 and ran for two years on Broadway and two years on the road, Marie making a hit in the leading part. This was followed by "Higgledy-Piggledy", in which she was at first starred along with Anna Held in New York, then played the lead in one of the companies. An attempt to take this show to England proved unlucky; but in 1911 Marie was starred in "Tillie's Nightmare", a great hit in New York for five years. Soon after this she made a silent film, first, called "Tillie's Punctured Romance", with Charlie Chaplin and Mabel Normand.

The entry of the United States into the First World War in 1917 caused an interruption in Marie Dressler's stage career. For a time she devoted her energies to assisting the sale of Liberty Bonds, then spent most of her time entertaining in camps and hospitals. This continued for some

to these protests it was soon withdrawn. After about 18 months of idleness and difficulty, she made her last silent film "The Swan" -- a fair success.

The advent of talking pictures brought a strong demand for actors who could speak lines and gave a great advantage to those who, like Marie Dressler, had a thorough training for the stage. In 1930 she obtained a strong character part in the film "Anna Christie" with Greta Garbo, and Marie Dressler's great talent was immediately recognized. This part proved, if proof were needed, that she was not simply a "comic" actress but capable of taking any kind of part. Among the successful film parts, which she now easily obtained in quick succession, there was a certain variety of type, although it was for a largely comic part, that of "Min" in "Min and Bill", with Wallace Beery, that Marie Dressler gained the award as "best actress of the year" for 1931 from the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Still more pictures followed in the next three years, including an outstanding performance in "Dinner at Eight" and "Tugboat Annie" -- the latter her best known film.

Some of this latest work was courageously carried out under severe physical handicaps. Marie Dressler died in July, 1934, in a friend's house at Santa Barbara, California.

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