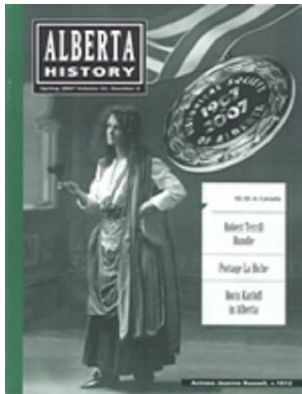


# Boris Karloff in Alberta

## **Author's note:**

95 years ago Boris Karloff and his fellow members of the Jeanne Russell players entered Alberta on their 1911-12 season tour of Western Canada. My article, detailing Karloff's time in the province, was published in the Spring 2007 edition of [Alberta History](#) (Vol. 55, Number. 2).



Aside from the correction of two minor spelling mistakes,<sup>1</sup> and the reintroduction of some text removed before publication due to space constraints, the article that follows is the same as that which originally appeared in the journal.

Please note, however, that this version of my article *does not* include the extensive references and endnotes. These are available in the original magazine, which can be purchased [here](#). Please support *Alberta History* journal by purchasing a copy.

Thank you.

Regards,

Stephen Jacobs



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<sup>1</sup> *Burmester* in place of *Burmaster*, and *Rossland* instead of *Crossland*.

# Boris Karloff in Alberta

by Stephen Jacobs

In November 1931 Universal's horror picture *Frankenstein* went on general release. It was an instant success and helped an ailing studio out of the financial doldrums. It also made a star of the man behind the monster's makeup, a 43-year-old Englishman named Boris Karloff. Far from an overnight success, Karloff's rise to stardom had been a long, hard struggle – one that had begun in the towns and cities of Western Canada twenty years earlier.

Boris Karloff was born on the 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1887 in the family home in Camberwell, South London. His parents, Edward Pratt (then 61 years of age) and Eliza (39), named him William Henry. Young Billy, as he was known, was the youngest of eight boys (ranging in age from twenty-two to five at the time of Billy's birth), one sister (13), and a step-sister (37).

Billy's parent's marriage was never a happy one and within a year of his birth they separated and his father left home. "As I was the youngest, mother rather spoiled me," he recalled. In place of his father's guidance he had that of his siblings. "[M]y brothers were always keeping me in my place," he said, "or what they considered was my place." His 'place' was to follow in his father's, and sibling's, footsteps and enter into government service – but Billy's interests lay elsewhere.

"Billy adored the theatre," recalled his childhood friend Mrs. Noel Horsey (née Hearn). At Christmas 1896, at the age of nine, Billy had made his acting debut in a version of *Cinderella* at St. Magdalene's Church in Enfield, Middlesex. "Instead of playing the handsome prince, I donned black tights and a skullcap and rallied the forces of evil as the Demon King," he recalled. "From then on I resolved to be an actor."

Billy was not the only child to have theatrical leanings. His older brother (by twenty years), George Marlowe Pratt, had forsaken a medical career for a life on the boards. "He worshipped his brother George, who was the only one who was good to him," Mrs. Horsey later recalled. "George was an actor. I expect possibly that's why Billy always wanted to be one." George had acted under the name George Marlowe but when his theatrical career failed to take off, he took a job as a paper merchant.

In October 1901 Billy's father died. It is unclear what effect this news had upon Billy if, indeed, he was told. Later comments suggest he was unaware of it and may have believed his father to have died many years before. "Never knew my father," he later said. "No, never did. Died when I was a baby. I was brought up by my brothers." Then, on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1904, while Billy attended Uppingham public school in Rutland, George died from double lobar pneumonia. He was thirty-six years old. When Billy's mother died on the 15<sup>th</sup> December 1906 he was left without a sympathetic ear. His future was now in the hands of his siblings and, it seemed, a career in the consular service beckoned.

After leaving Uppingham, Billy went to a crammer in London. "I was supposed to be reading for the exams," he later explained, "instead of which I haunted the galleries of all the theatres of that time. I used to haunt His Majesty's Theatre, with Tree and Lyn Harding and Constance Collier, that wonderful trio that held forth there. I saw Tree in *Richard II* and *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Tempest*." His time at King's College, London, in which he specialised

in Chinese customs and languages, also suffered from his absences. "[T]he first-term reports amply reflected the fact that I had attended more plays than classes," he said. "I was, in fact, fast becoming a disgrace to the family name."

A means of escape was provided when Billy turned twenty-one. An indenture provided him with £100 from his mother's estate and by the time he went to the family solicitors to collect the monies he had already determined to leave the country. "The family had been informed that I intended to leave home," he later said. "I felt I had to get away and work things out on my own." Unable to decide between Australia and Canada, Billy trusted to chance. "When I blithely flipped a coin in the family solicitor's office," he said, "the unfortunate losers were the Canadians." A second-class ticket was purchased and, on the 7<sup>th</sup> May 1909, Billy set sail on *The Empress of Britain* bound for Canada.

Billy initially planned to settle in Canada as a farmer. The Canada Company's Toronto office sent him to a farm in Hamilton, Ontario that was run by an Irishman named Terrance O'Reilly. "I arrived all smiles and blushes - but the fellow had never heard of me, wasn't expecting anybody, didn't want anybody. Farmer O'Reilly and I just looked at each other - I had only pennies left, no way to get back to Toronto. Thank God it was spring and work on the farm was beginning. O'Reilly finally said, 'All right, you can stay.' I stayed three months at ten dollars a month - and what a rough ride! O'Reilly would get me out of bed with a pitchfork at four in the morning to catch the horses in the fields and bring them in. I'd never known a horse personally before and knew nothing about them... I soon learned."

After leaving the farm Billy headed westward, through Banff and on to Vancouver. "With exactly a pound to my name, I arrived in this delightfully situated metropolis of the west and began to look for employment," he recalled. He took what work he could. "Men were wanted to dig a race track and a fair ground," he said, "and the pay was one and threepence an hour."

Taking some advice Karloff gained employment as a broker with the firm of 'Ward, Burmester, and von Graevenitz'. It was while employed here Billy met another immigrant, Grace Jessie Harding, the daughter of English parents. They were married on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1910 in Vancouver's Holy Rosary Cathedral. Although Billy was now married he still harboured his desire to be an actor, and took steps to realise his dream. "For months, I had made overtures to three Vancouver stock companies," he said. "There didn't seem a chance, not even a faint hope, of becoming an assistant to the assistant stage manager." Meanwhile the office job proved unsuitable and Billy returned to manual labouring. "I shovelled coal and did some more ditch-digging," he recalled. "It was less of a hardship this time. Youth soon gets used to work, no matter how rigorous it may be."

One day, while browsing through an old copy of *Billboard*, Billy saw the advertisement for a theatrical agent in Seattle. "His name was [Walter] Kelly," he said. "I went to see him and shamelessly told him I'd been in all the plays I'd ever seen, that I was forced to retire to Canada temporarily for my health and was now hale and ready for a comeback. Two months later, while chopping tress, I received a brief note, "Join Jean [*sic*] Russell Stock Company in Kamloops, B. C. - Kelly." I left my ax sticking in a tree. On the train I concocted my stage name. Karloff came from relatives on my mother's side. The Boris I plucked out of the cold Canadian air.

The Jeanne Russell Stock Company had been in existence since around 1908. The leading lady, Jeanne Russell [Alford], was married to the company's leading man, Ray F. Brandon, who also directed the productions. Jeanne's sister, Helene Ripley (who used the stage name Margaret Beaton) was also a member of the troupe and, in 1910, had penned the comedy *Emanuella* for her sister. Others in the company for the 1911/12 season included Irving Cook, Donald Gray, Frank Burton, and G. C. Garretts. Their repertoire since 1909 had included *The Galley Slave*, *Friends*, *Paid in Full*, *The Flag of Truce*, *The Heart of Kentucky*, *The Squaw Man* and *The Young Mrs. Winthrop*. Their 1912 season of plays included *The Man From Home*, *The Little Minister*, *The American Girl*, the Irish comedy *Cousin Kate*, Ouida's *Moths*, Harry D. Cottrell's play *The Halfbreed*, *A Texas Ranger*, *The Devil*, *Jesse James*, *The Moonshiner's Daughter*, and *Emanuella*.

When Karloff arrived in Kamloops he found the troupe in preparation. "They were rehearsing new plays for the new season," he later wrote, "and all I had to do for the few days I was there before we moved on to the next town was to watch the rehearsals. And thank God that WAS all as I was a green amateur and I didn't know right from left so far as the stage was concerned."

Karloff first took the stage in Nelson, playing 'Hoffman' the sixty-year-old banker in Ferenc Molnár's play *The Devil*. It was not a successful performance. "I had finally become an actor, but I mumbled, bumbled, missed cues, rammed into furniture and sent the director's blood pressure soaring. When the curtains went up, I was getting thirty dollars a week. When it descended, I was down to fifteen dollars."

Karloff and the rest of the troupe travelled through western Canada playing in towns and cities such as Grand Forks, Rossland, Nelson, Cranbrook, and Fernie. Occasionally, when funds would allow, they would take accommodation in the towns hotels but, more commonly, sought out a cheaper option. "If you were going to be in a small town for any length of time and needed a boarding house," Karloff later explained, "you enquired around as to where the local schoolteachers stayed and asked for lodging there. You could be sure the place would be very cheap and very clean."

By late February the troupe had arrived in Fort Macleod, Alberta. The town had originally been established in 1874 as the first outpost for the North West Mounted Police in Western Canada, but ten years later, when the location proved unsuitable and prone to flooding, the outpost and all the towns' inhabitants uprooted and moved the two miles upstream to its current location. The arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1897 signalled a further period of growth for the town. Soon new buildings were developed on Main Street. The Post Office building (1897), the Cowdry Bank (1900), Union Bank, and the Court House (both 1902), Queen's Hotel, and Young's Drug Store (both 1903) all appeared within six years of the Railway.

The Jeanne Russell Players were booked to play at the town hall for a single night. On Thursday, 22<sup>nd</sup> February the *Macleod Advertiser* announced:

Back from a series of triumphs in the United States and the larger cities of Western Canada, Miss Jeanne Russell, who is perhaps Canada's greatest favorite, will be seen with an exceptionally strong company at the Town Hall, Macleod, for one night only, Saturday, February 24th, producing a comedy

that other cities claim to be the greatest of the season, "Emanuella" or "Two Married Men."

The play was written especially for Miss Russell, and is the one in which she will appear in the metropolitan centres next season. This is the first visit of Miss Russell and her Company to Macleod for more than two years, but she is already well known here and occupies a commanding position with the theatre patrons.

The subsequent edition of the weekly newspaper recorded that the play "was very spiritedly put on and the laughter provoked by the situations did approach the "screaming" stage on several occasions. Miss Russell is always good and she is supported by a capable company. It was a first-rate evenings entertainment."

Following their performance the troupe packed up the costumes and props and headed north on the Canadian Pacific Railway, possibly stopping along the way for short engagements as they made towards Calgary and, this time, a longer engagement. On the evening of Monday 4<sup>th</sup> March the Jeanne Russell Company took to the stage of the Lyric Theatre, on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, in the play *The Man From Home*.

The four-act satirical comedy by Booth Tarkington and Harry Leon Wilson, was set at the Hotel Regina Margherita in Sorrento, Italy and told the story of Daniel Voorhees Pike (Ray F. Brandon), a lawyer from Kokomo, Indiana. He arrives in Sorrento to meet his ward, Ethel Granger-Simpson (Jeanne Russell) but finds her engaged to the worthless Almeric St. Aubyn, the son of the treacherous Earl of Hawcastle. Pike exposes the pair, frees Ethel's brother, Horace, from an equally unsavoury alliance and, in doing so, wins the hand of Ethel. Pike, Ethel, and Horace agree to return to Kokomo.

Karloff took the role of the Russian Grand Duke Vasili Vasilivitch, described in the play as 'a portly man of forty-five, but rather soldierly than fat. His hair, pompadour, is reddish blond, beginning to turn gray, like his mustache and large full beard; the latter somewhat "Henry IV." and slightly forked at bottom. His dress produces the effect rather of carelessness than of extreme fashion. He wears a travelling-suit of gray, neat enough but not freshly pressed, the trousers showing no crease, the coat cut in "walking-coat style," with big, slanting pockets, in which he carries his gloves, handkerchief, matches, and a silver cigarette-case full of Russian cigarettes. On his head is a tan-colored automobile cap with buttoned flaps.' Unfortunately, the Calgary newspapers failed to review the play but reviewers of the play later in the run commented, "It would be impossible to say how truly Boris Karloff presented the character of a philanthropic Russian grand duke - the species being up to the present unknown. He appeared quite convincing, however, and the character was pleasing if not familiar." Another reviewer commented: "Mr. Boris Karloff, as the Russian grand duke, proved himself a capable artiste..."

On Thursday through to Saturday the company presented the "Merry, Mirthful, Mischievous Farce Comedy," *Emanuella*. "It is something absolutely new as to plot and action and is a decided novelty in the comedy line," wrote the *Calgary News Telegram*. "The second act is certainly a scream from start to finish." An amateur contest followed the final performance.

On Monday 11<sup>th</sup> the company produced J. M. Barrie's Scottish comedy, *The Little Minister*. Barrie's play concerned the twenty-one year old minister, Gavin Dishart, who takes charge of

the little Scottish parish of Thrums where the rise in the price of web weave has caused dis-sension between the local weavers and the King's troops. Lady Barbara Rintoul (known as Lady Babble), the daughter of Lord Rintoul, dresses as a gypsy to warn of the troop's approach. Dishart falls in love with her and, to avoid trouble with the soldiers, claims the gypsy is his wife. He then discovers, due to Scottish custom, he is actually married to her. The *Calgary News Telegram* wrote:

Lady Babble... as Jeanne Russell now plays her, is the most loveable character ever introduced upon the stage. The performance last night was excellent; acting, staging, costumes and production; everything uniform and pleasing. The management has overlooked no detail to make "The Little Minister" an offering worthy of the most lavish praise and sincere commendation.

Miss Russell never appeared to greater advantage than she does in this piece, and Ray F. Brandon shares the stellar honors with his quaint but manly interpretation of the little minister, Gavin Dishart. All the characters in a long cast are well taken.

*The Calgary Daily Herald* agreed: "J. M. Barrie's quaint comedy of Scotch life, "The Little Minister," was produced at the Lyric theatre last night to a well-filled house. Miss Jeanne Russell is an ideal Lady Babble, and it would be difficult to find a more worthy successor to Maude Adams in this role than Miss Russell proved herself to be last night. She was given able support by Ray F. Brandon whose masterful interpretation of the little minister, Gavin Dishart, proved him to be an actor of sterling abilities. The cast was excellent throughout and "The Little Minister" should play to capacity house tonight and tomorrow night.

The play changed again, on Thursday, when the company staged *The American Girl*. The following day the *Calgary Daily Herald* wrote:

"The American Girl," an intensely interesting comedy drama of life on two continents, was given at both performances at the Lyric yesterday and found instant favor with both audiences. It is easily the best production that has been staged by the Jeanne Russell company since the beginning of their stock engagement at the Lyric.

Miss Russell has a strong emotional role which she handles with ease and finish. In the big scene in the third act she rises to great dramatic heights and the tremendous applause which her work brought forth showed that her auditors appreciated her triumph.

Ray Brandon was a laugh forty ways as the tramp theatrical manager who afterwards became a regular Charles Prohman, with theatres in New York and London. The balance of the long cast gave excellent support. The bill will run the remainder of the week with a matinee on Saturday. A big amateur show will be staged immediately after the regular performance on Saturday night.

Several applicants have already placed their names on the list at the box office."

The following week the company presented three plays instead of the usual two. Monday (St. Patrick's Day) began with a revival of the comedy *Cousin Kate* for two nights, including a

Tuesday matinee. Hubert Henry Davies's 1903 play told the story of Kate Curtis, a young novelist from London, who visits a relative in the rural England. On the way there she meets a young Irishman, Heath Desmond, on the train and instantly falls in love with him. When she arrives at her destination she discovers that Amy Spencer the prim, and rather dull, daughter of the household has split from her betrothed. Kate attempts to reconcile the pair but discovers that Amy's fiancé is Heath Desmond and, instead, pledges her love to him. Desmond is able to extricate himself from Amy when she confesses her engagement to him out of a sense of duty, leaving Desmond and Kate free to be together. "The play was enthusiastically received," the *Calgary Daily Herald* reported, "and several individual hits were scored. Miss Jeanne Russell, in the name part, originated by Ethel Barrymore, appeared to great advantage. Miss Russell has had quite a run with comedy roles lately, and in each successive part she seems to excell. [*sic.*] Her "Cousin Kate" is an artistic masterpiece.

*Cousin Kate* was followed by *Moths*, a dramatisation of Ouida's novel of 1880. The play told the story of Vere Herbert (Jeanne Russell) who is induced by her mother, Lady Dolly Vanderdecken, to marry the Prince Zuroff. The Prince, once the lover of Lady Dolly, is a violent man who beats and berates his wife. Vere has two admirers, the Marquis de Couréze (Ray F. Brandon) and Lord Jura (Irving Cook). Vere is in love with the Marquis. At the end of the play Lord Jura kills, and is killed by, the Prince leaving Vere free to marry her love. "The theme deals with the smart set of Russia and is typically Ouidaesque," wrote the *Morning Albertan*. "The story is too well known to need a review. Mis [*sic.*] Russell has the personality described by the author, and her work was artistic. Ray Brandon was a capable Duke of Coureze, and Irving Cook a manly and lovable Lord Jura."

The weeks run concluded, on Friday and Saturday, with Harry D. Cottrell's play *The Half-Breed*, "a sensational play of the modern west." The play, revealed the *Morning Albertan*, "presents the stage Indian in a new light, namely a true light, showing the inborn hate that the redskin bears the pale face. The play calls for a long cast and all the members of the company will appear in congenial roles. This play will mark the last appearance of the Jeanne Russell company at the Lyric for some time."

Following their engagement in Calgary the troupe made their way eastward, into Saskatchewan. On the 1<sup>st</sup> April they opened in Regina for a brief stint before moving onto Saskatoon. When they arrived back in Regina at the end of June the future looked bleak. "Everyone in the company, including myself of course, was absolutely flat broke," Karloff later recalled. "The situation was rotten and the prospects dismal. Maybe the finger of Fate was pointing at me. The day after the manager announced our complete lack of funds and inability to proceed, there was a terrific storm in Regina and I got a job cleaning up the mess" The 'storm' was the famous 'Regina cyclone,' a 500-mph tornado that hit the city on Sunday, the 30<sup>th</sup> June. The tornado passed through Regina in three minutes leaving twenty-eight people dead, 2,500 homeless and \$4,000,000 worth of damaged property.

Karloff then got a job with the Dominion Express Company, a haulage concern owned by Canadian Pacific. While there he saw an advert for another theatrical troupe, the Harry St. Clair Players. Karloff wrote to St. Clair and was asked to join the company in Prince Albert. He stayed with the troupe for over a year. Other theatrical companies followed and, eventually, Karloff arrived in Los Angeles. A friend loaned him the money for food and lodging while the actor looked for work. "I made the rounds of the only possible outlet," Karloff explained, "the film studios. I appeared before the camera for the first time in a crowd scene being directed

by Frank Borzage at Universal City.”

Over the next twelve years Karloff appeared in serials, silents, and then talkies until he was spotted in the commissary at Universal Studios and asked to audition for the part of Frankenstein’s monster. Yet his first love remained the theatre and, prior to his ‘discovery’, he took to the stage when the opportunity arose and put into practice the craft that he had honed in his days in Western Canada.



### **Acknowledgements**

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