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Duncan School Dancers at the Vanderlip Estate, Scarborough

The Isadora Duncan Influence in Westchester

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Isadora Duncan could mesmerize the most sophisticated theater-going audiences in the world. She was the darling of high society, and the leading artists of the early twentieth century had portfolios of sketches and photographs, their efforts to capture the essence of this new dancing genius. Every detail of her private life was made public fodder throughout Europe and America.

Isadora had reached the peak of her career when war began in Europe in 1914, and, with other Americans, she was urged to return to the United States. Before she left Paris the children were brought over. The children were 15 young German girls from the school she and her sister had established in Germany. The people in Westchester who had known and admired Isadora in Europe took in the children and helped to reestablish the school. They were not ordinary children arriving on ordinary doorsteps.

There was never anything ordinary about Isadora. She was born in 1878 (new evidence now says 1877) in San Francisco, fourth in a family of four. Her father soon left the family, and her mother gave music lessons to support her two girls and two boys. They grew closer than most families, held together by their poverty, their love of music and dance and theater, and their ambition. Isadora and her sister, Elizabeth, taught themselves to dance and began teaching others in their dance classes by the time they were teenagers. It became obvious that if there was to be a "star" in the family it would be Isadora. She was a member of a theater troupe for a few years; then, when she was 20, the family opened a dance studio in New York. Unable to find success there, they decided to move to London.

In London they lived by their wits, often deeply in debt but able to talk their way out of any real trouble. Isadora was energetic, opportunistic and always fun to be with, but most of all she had great personal charm, charisma, and a "way" with influential older men. Having had few dancing lessons, she had developed her own style of natural dance. She became known in

London because she was attractive and unusual. In a world of corsets and long gowns, she became a sensation in her gauze tunic and bare feet.

The next move for the Duncan family was to Paris. Success in London had been only with the very wealthy in their salons and at their garden parties. In Paris she was embraced by the artists, writers, musicians and theater people, and here she was recognized as an artist. This is an oversimplification of her life. She had successes and failures, passionate love affairs and terrible tragedies. She was demanding and arrogant and charming and generous. She traveled and danced throughout Europe, from yachts on the Riviera to workmen's halls in Russia. All of this implies that she was a fad--a charming fad with a gimmick. If this were so she would have faded without a trace. She was, instead, a rare genius who brought a new form of dance into the world. It was the beginning of modern dance and the time was right for acceptance. Stanislavsky was introducing the "method" form of acting in Russia. Impressionist painting was beginning to be accepted and Cubism was being explored. In 1905 Isadora and Elizabeth Duncan opened their School of the Arts in Grunewald, a suburb of Berlin, Germany.

The school was a dream and constant aim of both sisters. Elizabeth always remained in the background, helping when she was needed. She seemed to relinquish her own ambition in favor of Isadora's, but they were very close and their needs and ambitions were intertwined.

On opening the first school in the elite section of Berlin, they advertised it as a free school of dance for girls, ages four to eight. Isadora chose 20 from the crowd of parents and children who appeared the first day. The school's motto was "Beauty, Freedom and Health." It was Isadora's belief that if a very young child grows up in an atmosphere of beauty she will become beautiful. In her own words:

Many years ago the idea came to me that it might be possible to bring up young girls in such an atmosphere of beauty that, in setting continually before their eyes an ideal figure, their own bodies would grow to be the personification of this figure; and that through continual emulation of it and by perpetual practice of beautiful movements, they would become perfect in form and gesture. (Excerpt from *The Art of the Dance*)

One of the pupils later described what she remembered of that day. She said the mothers and girls were ushered into a completely blue room. There were several adults with a lady dressed in a blue robe, reclining on a blue couch. The children walked around together in a large circle while they were watched and discussed. Finally they were all dismissed and told that they would be notified.

Isadora had hoped to find strong financial backing for the school but was unable to. This meant that her dance engagements had to support it, she was seldom there, and it gradually became Elizabeth's school. Actually a suburb in Germany didn't work for Isadora. The German housewives of 1905 did not have rouge on their cheeks. Elizabeth was not at all like Isadora. She was small, neat and straight; she was austere and strict and her pupils were in awe of her. On the other hand she was protective of her young pupils and she was reliable, something Isadora was not. Near the end of 1906, as the school was having financial difficulties and Isadora traveled frequently, an Austrian musician named Max Merz arrived to teach music. He became a close friend of Elizabeth's and had a strong influence on how the school was run. He was unpopular with the pupils, but he did take over the financial problems, and convinced the Duke of Hessen-Darmstadt that he should donate some of his land in Darmstadt, Germany, and help build a new school. Within a few years they all moved into the beautiful new school, called *Die Elizabeth Duncan Schule*. This was in 1912.

In 1913 Isadora had found an establishment in Paris and wanted a school there. She asked Elizabeth to send the six oldest girls to her. They were about 16 then and left for Paris and their adored Isadora, all dressed in their elegant blue matching outfits. A year later the war in Europe changed everything.

In August of 1914 the German army arrived to take over the school building in Darmstadt, and Elizabeth and the children were given two hours to pack up and get out. Nine of the German pupils went with Elizabeth to London. They had very little money but were able to find a place in steerage on a ship

leaving for America. By coincidence Clifford B. Harmon, the largest real estate developer in the United States and the developer of Harmon in Croton, was on the upper deck of the same ship. Since Harmon kept a suite at the Ritz in Paris year-round, he probably knew all about Isadora and her pupils. When he heard the Duncan group was in steerage, he insisted that they should be allowed on the top deck during the day. When they arrived at Ellis Island--Elizabeth with nine little enemy aliens without passports--their way was again smoothed for them. Frederick C. Howe, Commissioner of Immigration, was also a Croton resident and had met Isadora. He allowed them to live in his private quarters on Ellis Island during the processing procedure.

So much has been written about Isadora and so little about Elizabeth. Except for Mabel Dodge Luhan's description of her as a mover-shaker and the school in Croton, and Irma Duncan's obvious dislike of her in *Duncan Dancer*, all of my information comes from people who were young children when Elizabeth reestablished her school in Westchester. Because of differences in memory some things do not fall into place historically, but in general I believe the following to be accurate.

The six older girls who had gone with Isadora were established at an estate near Paris. Soon after, Isadora's own two children, born through love affairs with Gordon Craig and Paris Singer, were drowned. Immediately after the tragedy, Isadora's family took her to Corfu. Singer sent the six to his home in London, and in September Augustin, Isadora's brother, brought them to the United States. Mr. Howe, the Commissioner of Immigration, again came to the rescue and the children were eventually guests of the Simeon Fords at their estate in Rye, on Forest Avenue and Long Island Sound. Julia Ellsworth Ford was a patron of the arts, and Isadora was welcomed there when she arrived later in the year.

Elizabeth and her group stopped first at a large Victorian mansion, no longer standing, at 360 North Broadway in Yonkers. This was in August 1914, but within several months the school had begun again in an old farmhouse, at 30 Sunset Drive in Croton, once the home of the caretaker of the Van Cortlandt farm. This is in the Harmon section of Croton-on-Hudson. Two people seem to have eased the way for Elizabeth in the Yonkers-Croton moves--a Mrs. Hansel, a Scandinavian nurse friend of Elizabeth, and the Frank Vanderlips. Frank Vanderlip was president of what is now Citibank in New York. He and his wife were actively committed people who loved art in all its forms. The theater called

Beechwood Theater, built on the grounds of their estate in Scarborough, was modeled after the Little Theater in New York. Some of Arnold Genthe's most exquisite photographs of the Duncan dancers were taken near the pools and Greek columns of the Vanderlip grounds. Frank Vanderlip Jr. says that all of the moves made by the Elizabeth Duncan School from 1914 to 1920 were done with the help of his father and Harry Shanker, his father's business and real estate agent. One particular dancer, Erna, was always sponsored and helped by the Vanderlip family and is still a close friend of the family.

The old farmhouse in Croton apparently was not adequate, because within a few months the school moved to two houses on Mt. Airy. Mt. Airy is a high hill on the north edge of Croton now known as an "estate" area, but then its dilapidated old farms were beginning to attract Greenwich Village artists and writ-

ers. A few attractive houses had been built to try to attract developers to the land. Two of these houses were rented for the school.

Mabel Dodge, who seemed to have a hand in everything concerned with the arts, had become Elizabeth's close friend. In her book, *Movers and Shakers*, she says that she and Samuel Lewisohn together gave \$1500 to help the Elizabeth Duncan School of the Arts get a start. Elizabeth faithfully followed Isadora's beliefs in the way she ran the school. Beautiful objects surrounded the children. They had regular school lessons and simple food and clothing; they were taught music, art, dance, crafts and how to care for and teach children. They were vigilantly protected from anything degrading or unpleasant. One of those early pupils recently wrote me, "It was a happy childhood and gave us grace and good coordination. However, very little preparation for life."



Duncan School dancers at Jean Dexter's house in Croton. Dexter was a pupil of Irma Duncan, the student closest to Isadora. This picture, and all others in the article, are courtesy of Jane Northshield.



Gertrude Dreuck and Virginia Vanderlip at Elizabeth Duncan School, Croton.

The school remained on Mt. Airy until about the end of 1917. With the financial diligence and schemes of Max Merz and the help of supporters such as the Vanderlips, it had grown to three houses. The first two were owned by Ralph Waldo Trine, a famous writer of religious self-help books, and a third was rented to them by Dr. Mussey, a Columbia University professor who was having professional difficulties because of his unpopular pacifist leanings. There were a few more teachers and six boarding pupils, American girls, in addition to the German girls. Although the school was never designed to train performing artists, now and then the school did give recital-concerts in New York, and students danced in the gardens and on the lawns of the friends of the school. Frank Vanderlip Jr. remembers seeing them dance on his family's lawn overlooking the Hudson River, and once when his parents were entertaining the President of Brazil, Isadora came and danced on the top of a tea table. He says that everyone loved Isadora.

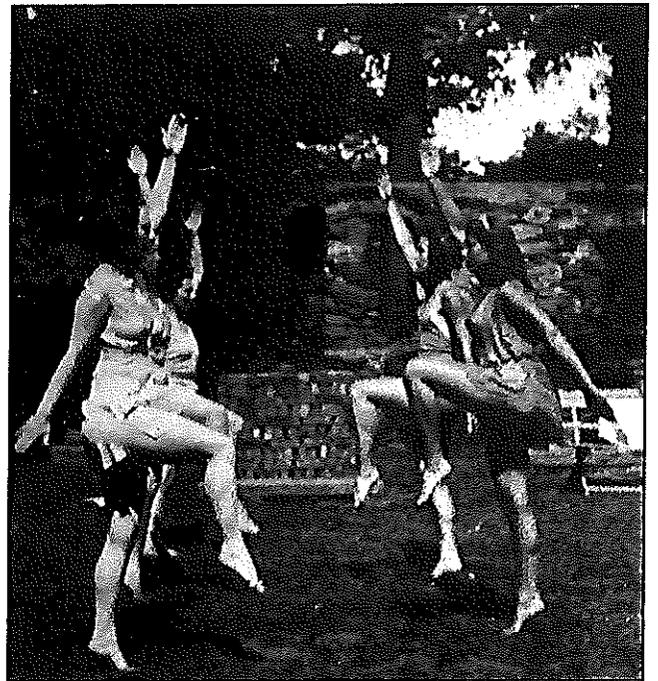
Sometime late in 1917 the school left Croton and moved to the huge Dula estate in south Tarrytown, in an area once known as "Millionaire's Row." Mr. Vanderlip's agent may have bought, but probably rented, this place for the school. It was located on top of a high hill across the road from the Dutchess of Tallyrand's "Lyndhurst." The castle-like mansion and carriage house were built by Robert Dula, president of the American Tobacco Company, and were later sold to

a surgeon, Dr. Joseph Blake. The house burned down in 1920.

When the school moved to this site there was a lot of repair work needed, and they finally had to cover the dancing area with felt. The doors were always drafty so sandbags of felt were piled against places where the wind leaked in. In 1918 Elizabeth Duncan had a large art exhibit at this school called "The Dance in Modern Art." Also in 1918 Isadora left New York on tour and sent the six girls who were with her to Elizabeth's school. They were growing up and were deeply resentful of Elizabeth's strictness. As usual it was Augustin who had to find a compromise solution and try to keep everyone happy. Dumping the girls on Elizabeth or Augustin was typical of Isadora when she wanted to travel.

Apparently the Dula place didn't work out because in 1919 the school moved again, this time to a mansion nearby but on the river, the Archbold estate. Located on South Broadway in Tarrytown, it was built by John D. Archbold, a vice-president of Standard Oil Company, and was later sold to William Dodge of Phelps Dodge. It was noted for its beautiful flower gardens. The estate later became the home of the St. Vincent de Paul School, which lasted until 1980.

In 1920 the entire Elizabeth Duncan School moved to Switzerland. This may have been because Isadora's popularity in New York was down and Elizabeth had been happiest in Germany. The American girls dis-



Irma Duncan summer school, Finney Farm, Croton, 1935.



Elizabeth Duncan's students on the lawn at Madame Nordica's house in Croton, 1915.

persed and the German girls went home to their parents. When Elizabeth was given a wing of the palace in Potsdam, the school regrouped.

An American girl who was Elizabeth's pupil in Europe, *Jean Trayne* (after marriage *Jean Dexter*) came to Croton in the early 1930s and taught Duncan dance at Finney Farm. This is now a residential area, the stables and farm buildings are homes and the beautiful roofless cement barn is still there. Jean Dexter's pupils danced in this open barn until Harvey Stevenson built her a home with an auditorium within the block of stone "Stevenson houses" just below the Finney Farm hall. She continued to give lessons until she left in 1940. She made her life an imitation of Isadora's. She wore flowing robes, her house was filled with classical Greek objects and she even named one of her children *Diedre*, the name of one of Isadora's dead children. She named her house at 132 Old Post Road North "Sun River," and later she wrote a book with this as the title.

Irma Duncan was another matter entirely. She was one of the original students at Grunewald, one of the six older girls who joined Isadora in Paris and the one who stayed longest with Isadora. When the school was started in Russia, it was Irma alone who stayed and ran it, taking on tremendous responsibility at a very young age. She was an excellent teacher, and of the older women who are still dancing today, many of them learned from Irma. The six girls who were with Isadora took the Duncan name because Isadora had started adoption proceedings to ease their entry into the

United States. The actual adoption did not take place.

Irma Duncan was a kind of clearing-house for information about the Duncans and everyone connected with them. She wrote that she had a school in Croton at Finney Farm in 1935 but that her hay fever was so bad she didn't return. Her pupils remember that she had the school there for two years, during the summer, and that they danced outdoors in the roofless barn every day, in spite of rain, mud and bee stings. Irma Duncan moved to California about 1970 to work as a consultant on a Duncan movie which was never produced, and died there in the winter of 1977-78.

Augustin Duncan had a summer theater at Finney Farm at the same time, but he used Jean Dexter's auditorium most of the time. When he used the barn, he used dozens of oil lamps to light the stage area.

After the 1930s most of the Duncan dance teaching was done in New York City, but for many years Bernice Livingston came to Westchester from her New York studio to teach young children. Since Livingston's death Joan Westphal has taught at the Bronxville Women's Club every Friday. One day I watched as Joan Westphal taught her youngest group. With her draped robe and long dark hair she glided among her pupils, soft words and gentle hands. I saw the tiny girls in short pink dresses with pink roses in their hair, running and swaying and swinging their legs, then laughing and running to their watching mothers for the acclaim they deserved. There is enchantment in the Duncan dance.