My Lady Vaudeville and her White Rats
Excerpt from memoir by George Fuller Golden, 1909

[Editor's note: The author recounts a conversation between a young vaudeville performer he nicknamed Dromio, who wanted to start a Vaudeville labor union, and Dromio's skeptical friend, Michael Mantwa.]

[Mantwa] "….Look at the practical side of your wild scheme, or dream, or plan, or whatever you choose to call it. As I said, [Vaudeville performers] are not laborers with the same mentality or social status as each other. How are you ever going to reconcile into one Brotherhood people of such divergencies of tastes and temperament as exist in your profession—especially in America, where I believe it is your aim to first put your plan into execution? They not only come into the show world from as many different walks of life, but as each one makes his success, he at once holds himself as a sort of a superior being to those who have not as yet received the same amount of applause, guffaws, or money. They all receive different salaries, and those who receive less are jealous of those who receive more; those who have not made their hits look upon those who have as flukes." …

[Editor's note: Vaudevillians did form a union, the Society of the White Rats. The author, describes the strategy planned by the White Rats and a strike.]

But if one man can control many Theatres and enlist the backing of millions of dollars of capital in the face of great opposition, why is it that many men cannot control a few Theatres when their independence and, in fact, their artistic salvation, depends on it, and when they are in a position to collectively produce the capital themselves?

But as a matter of fact, the stage people of America stand on much firmer ground than would seem even by the above statement. They have an organization of several thousand members, "The White Rats of America," with experienced theatrical men at the helm, capable of the management of theatrical enterprises… It is now in a position to co-operate with the citizens of any city in the United States in the control and management of Vaudeville Theatres, and it is very well known that in nearly every city in America there are men who would be anxious to invest in such profitable enterprises were they not afraid of the power of Vaudeville monopoly, or if they could be assured of not being handicapped in the securing of talent. And this assurance The White Rats of America are now in a position to give, as well as to prove the practicability of theatrical cooperation. The plan of which is simple in the extreme. The members of the White Rats by paying into their own accounts a certain percentage of their earnings, which they have heretofore paid for booking purposes …would produce a constantly growing fund to be used in the purchase of 51 per cent of the shares of Theatres in different cities. This majority of shares in each enterprise would forever preclude the possibility of Vaudeville monopoly and, by giving the actors control over their own Theatres, prevent the merging of opposite interests which invariably tend to threaten their salaries and advancement; and as the membership of the White Rats comprise or control nearly all the leading acts on the Vaudeville stage in the United States and Europe…, they are in a position to guarantee those managers and citizens with whom they co-operate a supply of talent at least equal to that which any opposition can possibly secure. It is not intended that the organization would run the Theatres, they would

merely control them for the purpose of their own protection….. Nothing can stand against the direct management of owners. We are only pioneers whose duty is to start the movement, leaving our successors its full and free development as human society advances….And until this plan is consummated and in working effect no great progress can be made. And as the suggestion does not come from the managers, it is up to the Actors. It is their move. The situation is in their hands. All they need is the courage of enterprise. . . .

One morning, early in May, 1900, the Vaudeville Artists of the United States awoke and read in the papers that all the principal Managers of Variety Theatres were going to meet and form a gigantic Vaudeville trust, or syndicate, and that the powers of this syndicate were only going to invite one certain favorite Manager of each City outside of Greater New York to join their enterprise: that all others would be tabooed, and that as, therefore, there would be but one Theatre in every town where the Vaudevillian could secure an engagement, the said Vaudevillian's salary would be much reduced. They also read in these papers that there were too many actors on the stage, and that the actor received too much salary anyway; and that the supply of Vaudevillians was greater than the demand, so the unfit would have to be weeded out, and go back to the mines or the woods. Who were the unfit? The Managers did not say. . . .

[following a union meeting the next day, Mr. Albee, manager of Keith's Union Square Theater, confronted Dromio, leader of the White Rats]

…"It is reported," says E.F. Albee, "that your members are going on a strike this afternoon at the Union Square Theatre."

"Not so, Mr. Albee," says Chief Dromio. "Our members [of the White Rats union] are worried so greatly over certain existing conditions that they are liable to fall ill, even this afternoon, and in other cities besides New York, as, for instance, Boston, Providence, and Philadelphia. But as these conditions which worry them so can be easily adjusted to suit them, they will most likely all get well at once, upon being apprised of said alteration. …

And on the following day—Lincoln's Birthday (Oh! Most appropriate hour to strike for freedom!), Febraury [sic] 22, 1901, there were no White Rats appearing on any of the programmes given in any of the principal Vaudeville Theatres in the East or Middle West… The managers published what they thought to be their side, and also the amount of salaries paid to leading stars, hoping to convince the public that they were overpaid. They had no argument, because it was apparent to everyone that ninety-five cents was not one dollar. …. and the next day the New York press was teeming with accounts of the White Rats' Victory, distinctly stating that the managers had promised to abolish the commissions. *The Evening Journal* had one page, with just three words on it: "WHITE RATS WIN."

Dromio…summed up the situation…: "We have won the battle. Victory is ours…The Society [of White Rats] will do all within its power to help you keep what it has won for you; but it can do nothing if you *secretly give back as individuals that which you have strived so hard to win collectively.* You understand how it is; we have won these commissions and that means that you are privileged to insist upon a neutral contract with each manager as an individual, and not book through the offices of his association. You have won as a society, but you have not won as individuals."

Text excerpted by Andrea Ringer, Department of History, Tennessee State University.
From: George Fuller Golden, *My Lady Vaudeville and Her White Rats* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1909): 21-25, 63, 68,134-135, 155, 160-161.

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Historical Era

The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930)

Document Title: **My Lady Vaudeville and her White Rats**

Document Type: **Memoir**

BRIEF DESCRIPTION:

This excerpt is from George Fuller Golden's 1909 memoir about his career as a Vaudeville artist and labor organizer.

Document Selection and Teaching Guide by: Andrea Ringer, Department of History, Tennessee State University.

SOURCING THE SOURCE

George Fuller Golden wrote this memoir after spending more than a decade on vaudeville and music hall stages in the United States and England. Golden began his career as a young teenager in the circus, and later formed a popular vaudeville act with Jim the Gypsy. Known primarily as a monologist, Golden developed a popular act that included dramatic readings on stage. Golden gained more lasting fame in the vaudeville world when he took a leading role in forming the White Rats, a union for stage actors. After receiving financial aid from a benevolent society of Music Hall performers in England known as the Grand Order of the Water Rats, Golden decided to start a vaudeville union with some of the same aims.

Intended Audience: Golden's memoir, which recounts his career and the creation of the White Rats union, was intended for a general audience. Moreover, its publication in 1909, while the White Rats were still active in vaudeville, brought contemporary labor struggles in vaudeville circuits, and other forms of staged entertainment, to light. Vaudeville and circus enthusiasts read it widely.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE

☐ **Historical Context**:

Vaudeville was a theatre-based variety show that gained popularity in the 1880s as one of many forms of mass culture, which also included the circus, minstrel shows, medicine shows, and sideshows. In most vaudeville shows, audience members could expect to see approximately thirteen acts that lasted less than fifteen minutes each. However, patrons in Boston and New York City could also drop in to see a continuous vaudeville performance, which had performers on stage for twelve straight hours. Managers often billed the shows as clean entertainment, and they subsequently attracted a growing middle-class audience of men, women, and children. Racial assumptions and policies dictated the experiences of both entertainers and audience members. In larger theaters that targeted white audiences, Black patrons sat in the back section of the upper level of seating. Black patrons also attended shows in the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA), a vaudeville circuit that exclusively hired Black performers and dominated vaudeville circuits in southern states. Black performers on the TOBA circuit generally pulled in lower paychecks than white vaudevillians on other circuits. The shows themselves often reflected racial assumptions at the turn of the nineteenth century, with popular skits that included blackface minstrelsy and caricatured portrayals of immigrant groups. As a worksite in the larger mass culture industry, vaudeville employed a labor force that

worked in precarious conditions of unstable work, physical danger, and management that was increasingly consolidating its power and offering little protection. These risks and pressures served as the catalyst for union formation in mass culture industries, including the White Rats in vaudeville.

Vaudeville and other popular entertainment at the turn of the nineteenth century operated within the larger trends of mass society. New─business practices emerged with newspapers and other mass-market publications, as well as in popular entertainment. Vaudeville managers negotiated contracts with performers, oversaw performances, and coordinated traveling schedules. Some of the most successful vaudeville managers, like B.F. Keith and Edward F. Albee helped popularize vaudeville by expanding the audience base and consolidating their managerial power into a near monopoly. Keith and other vaudeville managers built elaborate theaters, such as those consolidated under the Keith-Albee-Orpheum circuit, with ornate ceiling paintings, plush carpets, and grand arches. Business innovations, like single-circuit bookings, streamlined behind-the-scenes business practices. Entertainment mainstays like vaudeville often resembled other corporations and managers ran the shows with similar business methods, like employing scientific management. But managers like Keith also revolutionized how vaudeville looked on stage. The continuous vaudeville and clean performances that audiences had come to expect were carefully crafted by managers who sought to give variety theater mass appeal.

Vaudeville performers, called vaudevillians, made careers out of staged performances of their unique talents. Historians estimate that 12,000 people were employed across the various Vaudeville stages during the forty-two-week seasons. The array of workers included men, women, children, and animals. Some acts included partnerships, like George Fuller Golden and Jim the Gypsy, who performed a song-and-dance number together. Other popular partnerships included young sibling pairs. Women vaudevillians had to navigate their careers as performers during a time that included increasingly sexualized performances, such as popular acts like the Salome dance.

Audience members witnessed glamourous acts on stage, but vaudevillians spoke of arduous working conditions. Continuous vaudeville meant that workers had to perform their acts several times a day without enough downtime to rest. Even the vaudevillians who made a career out of acts performed once per day found the business tactics of managers and booking agents predatory and exploitative. Vaudeville performers also worried about their health during the season. Their livelihoods depended on their abilities to perform physically demanding feats. But the unsanitary living conditions on the trains and in the cold and damp dressing rooms created an environment for rampant disease, like tuberculosis.

As Golden claims in his memoir, union organizing had not been successful among vaudeville performers prior to the formation of the White Rats. This first vaudeville union formed in direct response to the creation of the Vaudeville Managers Association, which made a near-monopoly in vaudeville management. In particular, the White Rats organized against the five percent commission that went to the managers. Golden references this in his memoir when he writes that the managers "had no argument, because it was apparent to everyone that ninety-five cents was not one dollar," and again in news reports of the union's success that "managers had promised to abolish the commissions." Vaudevillians in the White Rats attempted to undercut managerial control, which used a single booking circuit, by using their union to book union member's acts. When vaudevillians attempted to sidestep the booking system, they faced potential blacklisting from the managers association. Members paid hefty dues and proudly noted that the name "rats" was simply an inverse of "star," which was indicative of their insistence that highest and lowest-ranked stars on stage had equal statuses in the union.

With a charter from the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the White Rats attempted to expand into other entertainment fields with little success. Despite the array of workers in vaudeville, including women and children, the White Rats catered only to white men. By admitting an exclusive subset of vaudeville workers, the White Rats undercut their ability to represent the majority of vaudeville workers. While still keeping their white male privilege, the White Rats opted for auxiliary organizations to serve women and Black performers.

The White Rats lost significant membership by 1917, but remained in vaudeville for several more years. The limited success of the White Rats demonstrated the difficulties in organizing entertainment industries, even when labor unions in other industries were making gains. The White Rats lost significant power after the Keith circuit instituted a company union and effectively squeezed White Rats members out of vaudeville. The last major victory for the White Rats came as they gave their remaining support to the successful Actors Equity Association strike in 1919.

☐ **Meaning and Significance of the Source**

Although Golden's memoir offers an uncritical perspective on the White Rats, his insider view provides important insight into the inner workings of vaudeville's first union in the United States. Golden's memoir demonstrates that vaudeville performers found themselves in the same position as many other workers in the emergence of modern America. Predatory business practices, which resulted in the loss of job security and inadequate wages, affected workers on stages and in factories in similar ways. Even strategies, such as the sick-out strike, are echoed in other industries. (Dromio threatens a sick-out strike when he tells Albee that the actors "are liable to fall ill"…but "will most likely all get well at once," if working conditions "are adjusted to suit them.") Yet, as the memoir excerpt indicates, labor organizers in vaudeville also had the unique challenge of unionizing transient workers from across various job titles and classes. (Mantwa describes actors with "divergencies of tastes and temperament" each of whom "holds himself as a sort of a superior being … jealous of those who receive more.")

The narrative of vaudeville labor practices that Golden presents indicates that even as entertainment options began to open and expand, entertainers often found themselves in precarious careers (evidenced in this excerpt by the May 1900 announcement of the creation of the Vaudeville Managers' Association). The founding members of the White Rats, as well as those who later joined the union and its auxiliaries, attempted to create a united front against the smaller, yet more powerful, group of vaudeville managers who dictated pay and performance schedules. The vaudevillians' united front is evident in the strike against the 5% commission and the White Rats' plan to pay "a certain percentage of their earnings, which they have heretofore paid for booking purposes" into a union fund "to be used in the purchase of 51 per cent of the shares of Theatres" which "would forever preclude the possibility of Vaudeville monopoly."

Golden's first-hand perspective on vaudeville labor and union organizing speaks to larger stories of big business, corporate development, and transformations in labor and organizing. Worker solidarity through a union could counter the growing power of big business. In the late nineteenth century the Knights of Labor tried to do this by forming workers' cooperatives. A few decades later, farmers in the Alliance (Populist) movement established cooperatives to replace the corporate middlemen they blamed for appropriating the farmers hard-earned profits. Vaudeville performers, like other workers in the early twentieth century, directly felt changes in their working conditions and unionized to protect their rights as workers. As Golden asked of vaudeville, "if one man [the owner] can control many Theatres" why cannot "many men [the vaudeville actors who "collectively produce the capital"] control a few Theatres." Golden hints at the difficulties workers faced when he quotes Dromio's warning that the union "can do nothing if you *secretly give back as individuals that which you have strived so hard to win collectively."*

GLOSSARY

American Federation of Labor (AFL) -- a national association of labor unions first organized in 1886 and operating as the largest union federation during the period that the White Rats existed.

Commission -- a percentage-based fee withheld from each performer's paycheck and paid to vaudeville managers

Company Union -- a workplace union controlled by the employer rather than existing as an independent organization controlled by the workers

Managerial Control -- the practice of management setting work and performance standards, measuring performance, and making changes to working conditions to increase productivity and profit without input from workers and often without regard for workers' well-being.

Memoir -- a nonfiction account from the author's own knowledge and memories

Monologist – a performance artist who gives staged readings of written works

Scientific Management -- a management style that emerged in the late nineteenth century that uses heavy managerial control to create more productive and profitable workforces and workflows

Single-Circuit Bookings -- a dominant practice in Vaudeville, where individually-owned theaters acted as a chain for the purpose of booking acts and shows for tours, rather than theaters in different locations booking shows individually.

Syndicate -- individuals who work together for a common purpose.

Union Square -- a theatre in Manhattan, New York that housed vaudeville shows from the Keith-Albee circuit.

Vaudeville -- a live, staged variety entertainment show that was popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

Vaudeville monopoly -- the syndicate formed by vaudeville theater managers created a near monopoly by the turn of the twentieth century

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Source Specific

- According to the opening dialogue, why is Mantwa apprehensive about the ability to organize vaudeville performers?
- According to Golden, why did vaudeville management want to form a syndicate?
- According to Golden, how would the newly formed managers' syndicate, what he calls the Vaudeville monopoly, be able to reduce the salaries of vaudeville performers?
- Dromio warns that the White Rats must continue to fight for fair labor practices even after their initial victory. What demands were the White Rats making, aside from the issue of pay?

Historical Era

- Aside from changes in vaudeville management, what changes in the labor movements and the growing power of corporations outside of vaudeville could have contributed to the success of the White Rats?
- How does vaudeville add to your understanding of the rise of big business? What business practices did vaudevillians find the most problematic? How did the White Rats respond?

- Describe the tensions that existed between local, regional, and national business models in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Who benefited from each?
- How did the White Rats' and the larger AFL's auxiliary unions reflect the racial and gendered patterns of the period?

Labor & Working Class History

- How could a union have changed the working and living conditions of vaudeville performers?
- How was the single-circuit booking system a form of managerial control? and How did the White Rats respond?
- What working conditions faced by vaudevillians are similar to the conditions of workers in the today's gig economy?

CITATION & FAIR USE

George Fuller Golden, *My Lady Vaudeville and Her White Rats* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1909): 21-25, 63, 68,134-135, 155, 160-161. [excerpt]
Also, accessible @ https://archive.org/details/cu31924077713323/page/n3/mode/2up?q=%22white+rats%22+and+%22vaudeville%22 [accessed 12/27/2020]

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

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CURRICULAR & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONNECTIONS

Curricular Connections:

NCHS ERA 6 Standard 3: **The rise of the American labor movement and how political issues reflected social and economic changes.**

This document reveals how industrial capitalism changed work far beyond the most-studied sector of manufacturing. This offers an opportunity for students to examine commonalities such as centralization of economic and employer power, wage exploitation, sources of division within the working classes, and union solidarity as a response to deteriorating conditions.

NCHS US ERA 7 Standard 1: **How Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization and political corruption.**

This document reveals the ways in which industrial capitalism (in this case, the mass entertainment sector) created the working conditions that motivated Progressives to seek both protective legislation to regulate business and working conditions; and it highlights the ways in which labor unions abroad influenced labor organizing in the United States to address workers' needs in ways not contemplated by Progressive reformers.

Common Core Standards: http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.