

JANE BERRY (1838-1900), *alias* KATE SKIDMORE, AND THE TANGLED WEB SHE WOVE AT SYRACUSE, NEW YORK.

by Warren Skidmore

No one known by the name Skidmore has ever more than Kate exemplified the truth of the old couplet “*Oh what a tangled web we weave, When first we practise to deceive!*”¹ I tried without success for years to fit her into the large Sidmore/Scidmore family who lived in and about the environs of Syracuse.² It has taken an immense amount of work to find that she was the child named Jane Berry, aged 12 and living at home in 1850 with her parents at Lowville in Lewis County, New York. This is Kate Skidmore’s tangled story, arranged chronologically and set down after peeling away an enormous number of untruths which she broadcast for years about herself.

Kate Skidmore, as an adult, was a notorious character in upstate New York. She served the cream of the trade in what is called the “oldest profession” at Syracuse where she was extremely kind-hearted. She always subscribed generously to every charity “whether Protestant and Catholic or Jewish,” never turned a hungry person from her door unfed, and befriended numberless down and outers. Though the local reformers were constantly urging that she and her competitors in Syracuse be run out of town, “there were men and women all over the United States and Canada who were indebted to her for secret benefactions and called her blessed.” When she died in 1900 Hamilton Swift, an associate editor of the *Syracuse Journal* and one of the most brilliant editorial writers in the country wrote an obituary that was a classic. Powell tells us that he heard it said that the *Journal* received orders for more than five thousand copies of the issue in which it appeared.³

Kate’s father was Michael Berry. He, aged 65 in 1850, and his son Cornelius, aged 18, were then both called butchers at Lowville.⁴ The only other child living at home with Michael

¹Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion*, Canton vi, Stanza 17.

²There was, for example, the John S. *Scidmore* (1815-1901), a substantial farmer for many years in Clay Township in Onondaga County who died at Syracuse just a year after Kate Skidmore. He had cousins by the dozen in Jefferson and Lewis Counties but all were known as Scidmores (or *Sidmores* as they pronounced the name) but never as Skidmore.

³These quotations are from the book *Gone are the days* by E[dward] Alexander Powell (1879-1957) which has a fascinating account of the early disorderly houses in Syracuse. (Boston, Little, Brown, 1938), 203-206.

⁴Berry was born on 13 August 1788 and died 17 March 1865 “aged 76” according to his stone in the Lowville Rural Cemetery. In 1830 Michael Berry was the head of a family there with 2 males under 5, 1 5/10, 1 40/50 and 2 females 5/10, 1 20/30. In 1840 his family had grown to 2 males 5/10, 1 20/30, 1 50/60 and 1 female under 5, 1 5/10, 1 10/15, and 1 30/40. The female aged 10 to 15 in 1840 probably was, by elimination, his daughter Jane Berry, and other young

Berry in 1850 was his daughter Jane, aged 12, and then at school.⁵ Jane Berry, presumably about 22 in 1860, has not been found in the census of that year.

However on 2 July 1870 she was enumerated, aged 30, in the Fourth Ward of Syracuse called *Catherine Skittmore*. Kate may have already been, earlier in 1860, “in the life” because by 1870 she had already accumulated real estate worth (for a young woman) a surprising \$7000. Her personal property, doubtless including beds, was listed as worth only \$100. Two young ladies, one called a dressmaker, were living with her.

Both of the sisters of Kate Skidmore are first found earlier in 1850 living away from home at Salina in Onondaga County. Caroline E. Berry, called *Caroline Kitmore* in 1850, was living, aged 18, in the household of William Clark at Salina in Onondaga County.⁶ Her younger sister Eliza, called *Mary Skidmore*, aged 9, was living nearby at Salina in 1850 in the household of David Deer. Both Clark and Deer were salt manufacturers in comfortable circumstances with wives and families at Salina, which was later incorporated into the northern part of Syracuse. It seems likely that Caroline was probably what was then called a “hired girl” to assist Mrs. Clark in managing her household. Although Eliza seems young to be working she might have been an unpaid companion to the Deer children. Salina was then a wealthy community with acres of vats, vats which supplied much of the country with the salt evaporated there.

Caroline Berry married Elisha J. Back (1827-1880) two years later on 22 December 1852 at home in Lowville. The ceremony was performed by the Rev. John Ferdinand Dayan who was born in Ireland, but was an M. E. minister from Syracuse.⁷ The Backs are found in 1860 at Lowville where he was a wheelwright, age 32, and Caroline was listed as age 26.⁸ Their younger

female 10/15 her older sister Caroline.

⁵Michael’s wife was Rachael Berry, age 51. What might have been his mother, *Rachael Satman*, was also there, aged 88. *Satman* is totally unknown in Massachusetts as a surname, and perhaps *Kittman* may have been intended. The slack marshal who took the census in 1850 at Lowville dittoed most of the people on this page as having been born in New York, but Kate’s presumptive father (and *his* mother) were probably born in England (or perhaps Ireland). Kate’s mother (family surname unknown) seems likely to have been born in Massachusetts and not New York.

⁶It would appear that Kate’s elder sister was the first to be known as Skittmore. Linda Moffatt (of the Skidmore Family History Group) says that Skittmore is found as the usual variant of a family of agricultural laborers in Little Ellingham, Norfolk. It was also used occasionally as a variant of Skidmore in Oxfordshire. It is unknown in the United States.

⁷This was set down in her widow’s pension application in 1890 where her attorney, James Dolan of Watertown, stated that she was married in 1852 as Caroline Rice.

⁸In 1870 Caroline Back was said to be aged 37 (born 1833 or 1834) and her husband Elisha, age 32, worked in a wagon shop. He served in Company H, 186th New York Infantry in the Civil War. He had been born on 16 March 1827 at Lowville and died there on the 30 August 1880 and is buried (with several of their children) in the old Lowville Cemetery on Jackson Street. On 10 October 1890 Caroline Back applied for a widow’s pension in his right. Her attorney, James Dolan of Watertown, wrote that she was married as Caroline *Rice* in 1852, still another confusion. She was given a monthly pension of \$12.00 and died at her house at Lowville on 4 January 1913 aged 75. Curiously there is no stone found next to her husband in the cemetery. In 1880 Elisha and Caroline had a son William, age 23, and their daughter Lena, aged

sister [Mary?] Eliza Berry is not found in 1860, but she later became the wife of John Illingworth (1834-1921) of New Bremen (which adjoins Lowville) in Lewis County.⁹

A newspaper story on 11 June 1879 headed “A Disorderly House” reported that

Yesterday afternoon Kate Skidmore was arraigned before Justice Mulholland charged with keeping a disorderly house. She gave her age as 34 and acknowledged that the charges against her were correct. On owning up she was required to enrich the city treasury to the extent of \$75, or take a three months residence on the hill.¹⁰

In 1880 Catherine [E.] Skidmore was living at 34 East Willow (at the corner of Pearl Street) in Syracuse. The census records that she was born in New York, but that her father was born in England and her mother in Massachusetts. There were also two young ladies called “servants” in her household, and a man who is described as a “coachman” living with her. She had shaved a few years off her age, and claimed that she was a widow (presumably of a unknown McCulloch) aged 35.

As Katherine E. Skidmore she brought an action on 15 March 1887 against Frank I. Frayne, a traveling thespian appearing at the Grand Opera House for \$15.00 “which represented a bill for his entertainment at her house on the night of March 10th.” He had given her a promissory note for this sum, but then failed to pay it. When confronted at the theater Frayne “took off his wig and false mustache” and professed that appearance proved his innocence and that he was not the man who visited Kate Skidmore.¹¹

The suit in 1887 was brought in her “professional” name, but she is always mentioned in the newspaper stories about improvements made to her numerous properties in the city by her absolutely legal name Jane McCulloch.¹² However in the Syracuse directories beginning in

9 (the favorite of her aunt Kate Skidmore), was at school. Caroline said in 1880 that she was born in New York, but that both of her parents had been born in Massachusetts.

⁹Eliza, the other known sister of Kate Skidmore, was living in 1880 at New Bremen, the wife of John Illingsworth, age 46, a laborer. She was age 36, [born 1843 or 1844] was a house keeper there with their son John, age 18, living at home. John Illingsworth, Senior, also served in the Civil War. He filed a pension application as an invalid in 1890. The Illingsworths grew old together. In 1920 John Illingsworth, age 81, was living at New Bremen with his wife Eliza, aged 77. His widow also filed a pension application in 1921 as the widow of a soldier in the Civil War. She was still living on 28 April 1928 when the county newspaper reported her health at New Bremen as “not much improved, confined to her bed last three weeks.”

¹⁰Syracuse *Morning Standard*, 11 June 1879. I am indebted to Peg Hogan of East Syracuse, the publisher of the quarterly newsletter *Historic Central New York*, for calling to my attention a website called (most deceptively) “Old Fulton NY Post Cards”. It reproduces in a legible PDF format over 1, 615, 000 newspaper pages from that area. The search engine (provided there) gave 26 mentions of Kate Skidmore, several of them exceedingly useful. Hogan is currently working on a history of Freemont, still another suburb of Syracuse.

¹¹Syracuse *Standard*, 15 March 1887.

¹²The given name of her deceased (or absent?) husband is not stated, but he was perhaps the John McCulloch, a moulder aged 31 who was born England. Their ages match, and if this is so,

1888-9 she is listed as “Katherine E. Skidmore and (*widow Charles*)” at 34 East Willow Street, clearly still another different invention to conceal her real name.

She was booked repeatedly for operating her disorderly house. It goes without saying that she had to pay for protection, and paid generously, but in those regenerate days graft was a recognized perquisite of the constabulary. On 25 February 1896 five keepers of “fashionable sporting houses” in Syracuse were notified by Police Chief Wright to pay their annual fine. Kate Skidmore was usually arraigned under still another pseudonym, *Schemerhorn*, but she could not induce the justice to book her under that name this time on the docket.¹³ However despite this difference in 1896 she still paid \$100 for herself and \$25 each for two young inmates of her house.¹⁴ This fine was, in effect, an annual license for her fashionable house which had been converted earlier by Wright from an occasional payment to an annual one to benefit his office. He was now accused by the newspaper of being the “sole moral guardian of the city” and running harsh “Star Chamber arraignments” in violation of the law.

The Onondaga County Fair gave Kate Skidmore (and Mesdames Bierbrower and Bluett, her chief competitors) an annual opportunity to display their wares very much as modistes display their latest models at fashion shows today. Their talent, decked out in skin tight black satin dresses and enormous ostrich-plumed hats, would make professional entries in open-faced hacks hired from a livery stable. The coachmen in their in green coats and shabby plug hats always looked sheepish when ordered to pilot their cargoes of courtesans around the track between the heats of the trotting races. It must have been an effective form of advertising for, during fair weeks, the houses of ill-fame did a roaring trade with spectators from the rural townships.¹⁵

Kate Skidmore died on Friday, March 30, 1900 of apoplexy at her house at 416 E. Water Street in Syracuse. A local newspaper obituary stated that her real name was *Mary Schermerhorn* who had been born near Watertown and had come to Syracuse as a remarkably pretty young girl. According to this story she was 59 years of age, and that her fortune was reputed to be \$200,000 primarily invested in real estate in Syracuse.¹⁶

The will of *Jane McCulloch* “otherwise known as Kate Skidmore” was made on the 25 March 1900, four days before her death, with her doctor as its primary witness. Her nephew John Illingworth of New Bremen, Lewis County was forgiven a debt to pay an encumbrance of \$2000 or more on his house. There were a few small personal gifts, but the remainder of her estate went to a niece Lena J. Back who was appointed executrix on 10 July 1900. The probate also called her *Mrs. McCulloch*, however the estimate of her estate was down-sized by the Surrogate Court to \$60,000.

We know now (in retrospect) that there was a better and *totally* accurate obituary to be found in the *Watertown Daily Times* for 2 April 1900. It says that her remains were brought to

then he was a prisoner in 1870 in the Onondaga County Penitentiary convicted of a unknown offense.

¹³She once declared on arraignment that she was “aged 80,” but this is likely to have been said in jest to amuse the largely Irish members of the Force.

¹⁴Syracuse *Daily Telegraph*, 26 February 1896. The fine had by this time become an annual license that benefited his office.

¹⁵This is also a part of the recollections of Alexander Powell noticed earlier.

¹⁶Syracuse *Evening Telegraph*, 30 March 1900.

Lowville on Saturday and she was formerly a *Miss Jane Berry* and went from this place (Lowville) to Syracuse to live about 30 years ago. It added that she was the sister of both Mrs. Elisha Back of Lowville, and of Mrs. John Illingsworth of New Bremen in Lewis County. Also according to this newspaper obituary she left a nephew John Illingsworth of New Bremen, and a niece who had been in Syracuse for several weeks caring for her ailing aunt Kate Skidmore.¹⁷

Elsewhere we find that Kate Skidmore was buried as *Jennie McCulloch* in the Lowville Rural Cemetery on the 2 April 1900. This was, beyond doubt, her legal married name.¹⁸

¹⁷Watertown *Daily Times*, 2 April 1900.

¹⁸Copies of the burials at the Rural Cemetery have since been published in the local Lowville newspaper.