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# She Was "Hobo Queen"

by  
Cindi Haring

Many remember Myrtle French as "hobo queen," the town bathroom crusader, or the lady with the answers. But I personally remember Myrtle ("Myrt") as the lady who gave my mother a pickle recipe when she needed it, a good friend to both my parents in many ways.

When I stopped at her place in Burlington, Iowa I was greeted by her secretary-receptionist, Fifi, a rather cool poodle who probably knows more answers than Myrtle. "I've been interviewed by all kinds of people," she said, "but never in a nightgown before."

For nearly thirty years, Ms. French has been the operator of "French's Information Service," a business in which she supplies answers to questions and helps people. The business is run on a sponsorship; every-time she answers the telephone, she advertizes somebody. She originally began with thirty sponsors at one dollar a month, but now has over one hundred sponsors at twenty dollars a month.

She started the service quite by accident when a man, who was new in town, selected her name at random from the phone book. He wanted a wedding cake baked for his daughter who was to be married the next day, and didn't know who to call. Myrtle volunteered to help, called a friend who accepted the job, and the cake was finished in no time. On February 7, 1947, she officially began "the business," which is now known all over the country.

"I found that most of my calls came from newcomers in town, and some of the questions were really tough ones," recalls Myrt. "The more calls I received the more at ease I became. Often I found it difficult to come up with the answer, but I stuck to it and managed to come up with a solution . . . Before I knew it, I was receiving calls not only from the immediate area, but from New York and California as well."

Myrtle at one time got up to 750 calls a day. She still receives about 200.

One problem that needed a solution (early in Myrt's career) was from the Iowa Ordinance Plant who needed a place to store some heavy construction equipment. No one seemed able to solve the problem so they called Myrt. "One hundred bulldozers and



PHOTO: NATIONAL STUDIOS, BURLINGTON, IOWA

caterpillars added up to quite a storage problem," she states. "It took me three weeks to find the answer." Unable to find a *driver* after finally finding the place for the equipment, she obtained a pass into the plant area and drove the equipment herself.

Since this was wartime, Myrtle spent a lot of energy on getting hard-to-come-by articles for those people who needed emergency help. Housing was, and still is, a major demand.

"All housing is freewill," commented Myrt. If you need an apartment in Paris or South America, I'll get you one. I also have an International Employment Bureau. I can get anything you want . . . I just say you must give me a little time. I have never failed, but only once." (Just after the Korean War, a young man came wanting to find a girl he met in Seoul. Myrtle never found her.)

Talking with Myrtle is like talking with a jack-in-the-box. Every few minutes the telephone rings, sometimes two or three at once. The morning I was there she was bombarded with calls. "Where's the dog show . . . thanks for the coffeecake . . . I need a blacksmith." Among some of the other requests and services: babysitter (for snakes, as well as babies), funeral arranger, tatoo remover, real estate woman, dress designer, food expert, walking recipe file, psychologist, candidate for mayor, wedding planner, pig judge, etiquette advisor, fortune teller, painter/plasterer, etc. She's chartered a plane for a cat, rescued a woman from a defiant girdle, recovered a lost wooden leg, and after a four year search found the lost cremated remains of a friend's grandmother.

Myrtle has always been quite an organizer, the "social secretary" of Burlington, where she has lived almost sixty years. She established the Newcomers Club and Friendship International Club.

She has also received many honors, including the

honorary title of City Ambassadors and Hobo Queen. "I had a friend, Sylvia Davis, and she had done a little hoboism by herself and one day she came in and wanted to know if I wanted to go and be a hobo."

Every year in late summer, the National Hobo Convention is held in Britt, Iowa. All of the people attending dress up in typical hobo style and there is outdoor cooking, dancing, parades, and the choosing of King and Queen. "A hobo is a migratory traveller with a trade," explains Myrtle. "You can always go out and earn your living . . . A hobo believes in the Constitution of America; you never find a hobo who talks against the Constitution . . . There is never a hobo who hasn't had a lot of experience . . . Hoboes are very religious . . . and they must be a person who helps people."

Her first Hobo Convention was in 1948. The next year she was elected Hobo Queen of 1949 which began an almost twenty year reign. There was always the hassle of being accepted by her town while continuing her hobo-type experiences. After the Hobo Convention with Myrtle being elected Queen, many people began to regard her as "the joke of the town." Sly remarks, at first hidden when she passed, gradually came out into the open, and eventually there was little attempt to conceal vicious snickers.

Her return to Burlington was like walking into a deep freeze. Dropped from social lists, black balled by clubs, Myrtle was anything but socially acceptable. (Obviously, no one knew what the definition of hobo *really* was.) Whether she'd admit it or not, all of this probably made her a lonely lady. Few of her past acquaintances bothered to speak to her. But the more friends she seemed to lose, the more her business seemed to grow.

Myrtle was once asked by a woman, heartbroken at the death of her goldfish, Teddy, if she could find a taxidermist to stuff the fish. Of course, yes she could. Business was always good for Myrtle. She realizes that she knows the answers and is not modest.

Everyday seems to offer a new and different situation . . . and lots of experiences, which Myrtle cherishes. "You won't ever meet a hobo who hasn't had a lot of experiences," she proclaims.

Myrtle knows Chicago inside and out, and once lost a husband-to-be there when she did a dance routine comedy skit at a fancy restaurant. "You would make one hell of a wife!" he said. Myrtle agreed.

In the meantime Myrtle never missed a Hobo Convention. She was called "Boxcar Myrtle" and probably was one of the first successful airplane hitch-hike. (It is true to hobo tradition that a hobo hitch-hike, usually by car). The Hobo Conventions and hoboism were an important part of Myrtle's life. She made some true friends (Hobo Bensen, Scoop Scottie, Polly Pep, Highway Johnny, Cannonball Baker, and others) and had some great experiences. After a long reign she decided to give up her Queenship in the 1950's. She realized that as long as she remained Hobo Queen, she would be excluded and ignored by people and social organizations that meant something to her.

"I was pleased to be included again . . . over the


years during which I had been Hobo Queen, I had planned dozens of parties and open houses, but never received an invitation myself."

Once Myrtle did receive an invitation to be judge of pigs at a small town fair. "I didn't know one thing about a pig," says Myrtle. She found herself walking up and down the aisle, eyeing pig after pig. She finally chose a silent fat black one as the winner after it had smiled at her. Since judging the smiling pig, Myrtle has judged all kinds of contests.

Even in the entertainment world, word spread about Myrtle. She knows quite a few people in show business, mostly performers from the "Big Band Era." (Eddie Howard, Spike Jones, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, etc.). While in Chicago she met the Beatles. "They wanted a violin string," she said.

"It got around that I would help show people," says Myrtle proudly, "and I always had them for breakfast when they came to town. How they enjoyed my waffles and my orange juice." In fact, she once got a call from Jimmy Dorsey who was looking for an elephant. She found one alright, but the obstacle was getting him into the boxcar, which wasn't really an obstacle at all for Myrtle. (She ordered a mouse.)

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**BOX CAR MYRTLE "HOBO QUEEN"**

When the famous Sammy Kaye Show "Wanna Beat the Band?" came to Burlington in 1948, the auditorium was jammed. "You in the bright red dress, come up here," said Mr. Kaye, pointing at Myrtle. Here's the exciting story as Myrtle tells it:

"I had on a bright red dress, and when I looked up he was pointing his baton directly at me . . . what an honor it would be to win such a contest . . . it certainly would do wonders for my business . . . suddenly I felt ashamed of myself for being so selfish . . . I raised the baton and directed one of the worst versions of 'You Are My Sunshine' you have ever heard. The next day I lost five sponsors because I behaved so badly," she adds, almost proud of minor catastrophies.

Soon after her little performance, Myrtle received more than 3,000 marriage proposals by mail. Mr. Kaye had asked her why it was MISS French. Myrtle had replied sheepishly, "No one ever asked me." The cards and letters poured in.

Myrtle has been widely publicized in newspapers across the country (Chicago, Minneapolis, Des Moines, Seattle . . .) and has appeared on radio, having her own show for years, and television.

Dogs, candlesticks, and of course helping people are among her hobbies. She is very proud of her

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candlesticks, a collection of 315 hand-turned brass candlesticks that she began at the age of seven. Many of her candlesticks date back to the time of Ben Franklin; the youngest is seventy-five years old. "Each has its own history," says Myrt.

She has written a book, *Myrtle Knows the Answers*, which was published by the Exposition Press of New York, and she is now working on a novel titled *The Gadfly*.

On her higher education, she comments, "I have never had the privilege of attending college. My education, as far as higher learning is concerned, consists of my experiences and nothing more."

She's still crusading for a downtown bathroom and travels every year to Britt for the National Hobo Convention. She wouldn't miss it.

Myrtle, born in Aurora, Illinois, was a "million-

aire's daughter" and her family had been very wealthy when she was a child. However, she lost everything (including her inheritance) through a poor business speculation made by her aunt, which had also left her a heavy burden of debt. At the age of 21, a few days before she was to be married, her fiance Tom was killed in a plane crash. This all changed her life tremendously. "Our lives are made by hardships we keep," she explains. But I wonder *who* answers her questions and solves her problems.

Before leaving, Myrtle read my palm and told my fortune. "You have a good thumb and finger . . . you'd make a peach of a hobo," she said. I thanked her and invited her to Cedar Falls for a visit. And I know of at least one dinner engagement waiting for me the next time I'm in Burlington, that I won't miss!

