

# **“LADIES’ NIGHT”**

**AN ESSAY FOR THE INDIANAPOLIS LITERARY CLUB  
BY KENNETH L. TURCHI**

**MARCH 4, 2013**

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Five years ago, I stood before this group and delivered an essay about my great-great-grandfather, Oliver Perry Davis, a farmer and legislator in Western Indiana in the late nineteenth century, and his daughter, Alice D.O. Greenwood, an eccentric and poet of some minor repute around the time of James Whitcomb Riley. That story took place mainly in Vermillion County, north of Terre Haute, but it began in my hometown of Crawfordsville, a town that achieved fame about 100 years ago as a literary and cultural mecca, earning it the title of “The Athens of Indiana.” (I don’t know whether its namesake is called “The Crawfordsville of Greece.”) Crawfordsville is best known as the home of Lew Wallace, who wrote the classic *Ben-Hur* at his Romanesque – Byzantine – Periclean Greek study in the center of town.<sup>1</sup>

My essay tonight, like the last one, begins in my hometown, but (for the most part) stays there. Tonight I would like to present to you three notable citizens of Crawfordsville who came of age about the time of *Ben-Hur* and who went on to varying degrees of fame — local, national, and in one case, international. Our three characters tonight led very different lives, but they share at least one characteristic: They were all women — hence the title of my essay. (Mr. Secretary, if you were expecting a discourse on Kool and the Gang, you have my sincere apology.)

Mary Hannah Krout traveled the world at a time when women stayed home and tended the hearth, but she always returned to her family on West College Street in Crawfordsville. Anna Willson spent almost her entire life in Crawfordsville, shaping the lives of men and women as a schoolteacher, principal, and superintendent. But Eleanor Lambert left town as soon as she finished high school and never looked back.

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<sup>1</sup> “General Lew Wallace Study and Museum,” <http://www.ben-hur.com/aboutus/study.html>, accessed February 10, 2013.

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### I. Mary Hannah Krout: “A Woman of Great Force of Character”

Mary Hannah Krout was born in Crawfordsville in 1851, one of a family of nine children that included a younger sister, Caroline Virginia Krout, who also achieved some degree of fame as a writer. Like many women of her time, Mary Hannah chose teaching as a career and taught in the Crawfordsville schools for about a dozen years. But her real love was writing, an interest she began to pursue when she was only twelve. Specifically, her passion was for journalism, a field almost completely closed to women in the 1800s, except for occasional articles on homemaking and other feminine pursuits.<sup>2</sup>

Krout’s early career path is not fully known; it is said that she worked for newspapers in Peoria, Chicago, and Terre Haute before being named associate editor of the *Crawfordsville Journal* in 1882. She brought to that paper a wealth of writing experience, including poems, articles, and several years of columns contributed to the old *Indianapolis Herald*. For this assignment, Krout chose the *nom de plume* of Ben Offield, after William Offield, the county’s first settler.<sup>3</sup> These were not dainty ladies’ columns. Here is what she said about Crawfordsville and two of its best-known literary lions: Lew Wallace and Maurice Thompson, in her first dispatch for the *Herald* on August 15, 1876:

Crawfordsville as everybody in Indiana knows is literary. That is, it has several lions that it is fond of trotting out for the benefit of less fortunate villages, chief of which is the author of *The Fair God*. One can’t help thinking what a fine bandit he would make for the chorus in an opera. He wears heavy sweeping mustaches and his eyebrows are usually savagely twisted up under the shade of his sombrero. . . .

The author of *Hoosier Mosaics* ranks next to him in celebrity, and whatever genius he may possess, he must have a terrible liver, if one’s complexion is any indication. He is said to be a genial jovial gentleman, much esteemed by his friends, and spends his time writing poetry for *The Atlantic* and shooting rabbits with bows and

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Ritter Russo and Thelma Lois Sullivan, *Seven Authors of Crawfordsville, Indiana* (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1952), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Walter L. Fertig, “Mary Hannah Krout and the Hot Summer of ’76.” Paper delivered to the Wabash College Ouiatenon Club, January 14, 1975. Published in *Papers Delivered to Wabash College Ouiatenon Club, 1973-75*, vol. 19, pp. 136-38.

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arrows. His profession is that of a lawyer. He did hang about the courts a little at one time, until his clients begged him to stay away.<sup>4</sup>

Krout was a lifelong Republican and spared no detail in making her feelings known. She was no fan of General Mahlon Manson, a contemporary of General Lew Wallace and a War Democrat. Again writing as Ben Offield, she noted in a *Herald* column that the *Crawfordsville Star* had accused the *Journal* and Offield of belittling the general, apparently for being overweight.

When the futility of such an attempt is manifest to every thinking mind, it is hardly necessary to state that neither the *Journal* nor your correspondent would think of wasting time and paper with so little hope of accomplishing anything. Even the general’s own friends — and he has a host of them — upon being closely pressed will admit that he *could* spare a good deal of his vastness and be benefited. Whittling down would improve him. . . . Nature hasn’t paid the attention to proportions in his construction that she usually does in the instance of politicians — Democratic politicians — and there ought to be an equalization of the raw material. . . . And the *Star* man goes on to say that . . . [Manson’s weight] has failed to affect the gallant old soldier in any other way than to give him a distaste for sour krout.

Calling the *Star*’s bluff for using a play on words to unmask Ben Offield’s true identity, Krout parried right back:

How under the sun an insignificant newspaper squib or two could make any change in a man’s appetite is something persons of ordinary intellect will fail to perceive. But if such has been the case, it is an achievement that any knight of the quill might congratulate himself upon. For cabbage. . . is the coarsest and least nutritious of all worthless vegetables, and when it has been chopped up and reduced to a reeking, fetid state of putrefaction a Digger Indian couldn’t be induced to touch it. He would very probably say, ‘Waiter, bring on your snakes and lizards, and remove the sour krout.’

Upon reflection, I do remember that there is in this town an unfortunate family who, for no fault of their own, must bear that dreadful name. The father is a mild middle-aged gentleman . . . [who] is capable of giving strict attention to [his] own business, and consequently has not time to look after other people’s affairs. His amiable and estimable daughters, I have been told, have inherited this trait to a very high degree; therefore the little, ill-natured paragraph in the *Star* couldn’t possibly refer to them.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 138-40.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Offield, [Mary Hannah Krout], “The Hoosier Athens,” *The Indianapolis Saturday Herald*, March 3, 1877.

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Mary Hannah Krout was an early and ardent feminist and strong proponent of women’s suffrage. According to the late Walter Fertig, former chair of the English department at Wabash College and enthusiastic student of Montgomery County history, by the mid-1870s Krout “was just finding her eloquent voice as an independent woman. She was not content to be a simple schoolmarm. She liked to see herself in print, to measure herself as a positive social and political force.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the *Crawfordsville Journal* reported on Krout’s delivery of a lecture titled “Progress and Woman” at about this time, finding it intriguing but not persuasive:

The lecture was characterized by an unusual degree of freshness and originality. It was a woman suffrage lecture, out and out. We cannot help remarking, however, that Miss Krout, in common with most lecturers of her sex, is pulling at the wrong end of the rope. Women have not yet been persuaded that they want to vote, and until they are thus persuaded, it will avail little to arraign men for seeking to monopolize the ballot.<sup>7</sup>

Incidentally, Krout’s feminist leanings developed early. In 1868, at the age of seventeen she and twenty-two other young women signed a petition to be admitted to Wabash College.<sup>8</sup> (They were denied . . . as they would be today).<sup>9</sup>

In addition to submitting a column for the *Indianapolis Herald*, Krout wrote for the local paper under the pseudonym of Mynheer Heinrich Karl (note the initials). This item about a now-forgotten domestic chore shows her typical tongue-in-cheek style:

Clouds of smoke are beginning to rise in backyards, a mingled odor of burning rubbish and rancid grease fills the air, and passers-by catch glimpses of female figures clad in faded calico gowns. . . . They are making soap. Heinrich Karl’s landlady has been at it now a week, and in that time she has driven her usually meek husband distracted about ‘pulling up ashes,’ ‘running off lye,’ and the like. . . . In the meantime, every room of the house smells of smoke, and the boarders eat hash three times a day.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Fertig, 136-38.

<sup>7</sup> “Lecture on Progress and Women,” *Crawfordsville Journal*, February 11, 187[6?].

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 137.

<sup>9</sup> Fertig, 136.

<sup>10</sup> Mynheer Heinrich Karl [Mary Hannah Krout], “Topics of the Town,” *Crawfordsville Saturday Evening Journal*, n.d. 1876.

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When not writing columns or poetry, examples of which were published in papers as distant as the *Boston Transcript* and the *New York Tribune*, Krout tried her hand at playwrighting. *A Man in the House*, a comedy in two acts, was presented in Crawfordsville in 1875 and 1879 and at English’s Opera House in Indianapolis in 1885. Her other work, *The Widow Selby*, was performed in Crawfordsville in 1876. Krout herself, who never married, played the role of the widow.<sup>11</sup>

Krout’s career took a great leap forward in 1886 when she began a ten-year affiliation with the Chicago *Inter-Ocean*, presumably as a result of her position as a writer for the Chicago *Interior*. The *Inter-Ocean* was a weekly paper delivered by mail via the transcontinental railroad across the country. For about forty years beginning in 1872, the paper was a definitive source of business news to subscribers throughout the American west.<sup>12</sup>

Krout wrote extensively and frequently for the *Inter-Ocean*. In 1893, she traveled to Hawaii for the paper to cover the United States and European-backed revolution that led to the overthrow of Queen Liliuokalani. Krout returned to Hawaii the following year, when President Cleveland proposed restoring the Queen to her throne if she would grant amnesty to everyone who had opposed her (a proposition that Krout thought wrong-headed). These events led to Hawaii’s becoming a United States territory in 1900.<sup>13</sup>

Krout’s coverage of these events was published as a book in 1898 titled *Hawaii and a Revolution*. According to a review (actually more of a backhanded compliment) in an unidentified newspaper in her scrapbooks, Krout

gives a brief history of the Islands and their rulers. . . . The entire narration is interwoven with vivid descriptions of the country, the people and their customs, the fruit and flowers, so that this new realm, over which the stars and stripes at last do wave, stands out before

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<sup>11</sup> Russo and Sullivan, 16.

<sup>12</sup> “Chicago Inter-Ocean,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago\\_Inter\\_Ocean](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago_Inter_Ocean), accessed February 10, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> “Liliuokalani,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liliuokalani>, accessed February 10, 2013.

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us like a picture far more interesting and attractive than we ever dreamed it could be. . . . Those interested in the live topics of the day will not fail to find this volume most alluring from beginning to end, not the least of its attractions being the bright wit and humor which sparkle forth on every page and would redeem the dulllest theme from the charge of dullness.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after *Hawaii and a Revolution* was published, Krout was abroad again, this time in Europe. In 1899, *A Looker On in London* was released. Other trips included a tour of Europe, including Belgium and Germany. In dispatches home for various newspapers, she noted that “the whole of Western Germany is as level as the prairies around Chicago.”<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, her trip was cut short when she left her handbag in a carriage in Lugano, Switzerland. When she returned to retrieve it, it had disappeared, along with her railway tickets, hotel coupons, and money. Only some “English gold” in an “inside pocket” enabled her to pay her hotel bill in Lugano and fare back to Lucerne. But she noted ruefully, her “Italian tour melted into thin air.”<sup>16</sup>

Following additional trips to China, Australia, and Hawaii, Krout returned to Crawfordsville in 1907 and spent the rest of her life there. When she died in 1927, *The Indianapolis News* said, “She was a woman of fine literary taste, great force of character, and deep religious feeling. Also she was one of the friendliest of souls, with a keen sense of humor and a zest for life.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Hawaii and a Revolution,” Scrapbooks of Mary Hannah Krout, Indiana State Library, accessed February 2, 2013 (hereinafter “Scrapbooks”).

<sup>15</sup> “In a Swiss Chalet,” undated newspaper article in Scrapbooks.

<sup>16</sup> “On the St. Gothard,” undated newspaper article in Scrapbooks.

<sup>17</sup> Russo and Sullivan, 16-17.

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### II. “We are 500 to 1 for Miss Anna”

While Mary Hannah Krout was traveling the country and the globe reporting on Hawaiian revolutions amidst the fruits and flowers, another maiden of Crawfordsville was making her mark at home.

Anna Willson was born in Crawfordsville on May 27, 1869, the oldest of three daughters of Levi and Sarah Webster Willson. Two sisters, Julia and Zeta, died in childhood. Her father graduated from the Indiana University Law School in 1873 and practiced in Crawfordsville until his early death in 1881. Her mother was considered an educated woman for her time, having graduated from the Indianapolis Female Institute in 1851.

Anna graduated from Crawfordsville High School in 1886 after three years’ attendance and was awarded a scholarship to Indiana University for being the best student in the graduating class. Her commencement speech was on Shylock, which *The Daily Argus News* described as “keen and comprehensive . . . ; it was evident that much preparation had been spent in its writing.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite her interest in serious scholarship, she was a lively person, with “fluffy auburn hair, transparent fair complexion, and merry blue eyes, [with a] sunny smile that endeared her to all. She was a little over five feet tall. During the shirtwaist period, she wore sheer blouses of blues, whites, and browns. French heels clicked as she walked.”

Because of financial constraints, Willson could not attend IU immediately after graduation and began teaching at Crawfordsville High School in 1887, initially in the English and history departments. (She eventually earned a college degree from Purdue and studied at the

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<sup>18</sup> *Anna Willson, Pioneer Educator of Crawfordsville, Indiana.* (Crawfordsville, Ind.: Iota Chapter, Delta Kappa Gamma Society, n.d.).

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University of Chicago during the summers of 1897, 1898, 1907, and 1915. She earned a master’s degree from Columbia in 1921.)

Like Mary Hannah Krout, Anna Willson never married. She reportedly turned down several marriage proposals, always giving as a reason that she could not leave her “little mother.”

Willson’s father’s death when she was twelve made an impression on her, as one might expect. From that day forward, she said that her ambition was to help teen-age boys for her father’s sake. In 1897, she was named principal of Crawfordsville High School, the same year in which she traveled to Europe for the first time, with a letter of introduction from Lew Wallace. (She returned at least twice more, including chaperoning five young women on a European tour in 1909.)

As was typical in small towns in those days, high school was generally the final education stop for young men and women. And smaller communities looked to high schools for entertainment and community building. Willson encouraged students to participate in debate, athletics, and drama — and no fluffy fare, either. Among the plays produced by the senior class in the early 20th century were *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Julius Caesar*. CHS also produced some memorable basketball teams during her era. There was no gym at the time, and games were played at the Crawfordsville armory. Willson was there, leading cheers and songs, with gold and blue ribbons flying.

In 1913, the *Journal of Education* reported that CHS held the record for sending the highest percentage of graduates to college of any high school in the nation. Fifty-six of the seventy-seven students in the class, or 72%, were to attend college. Forty-one of the seventy-seven, or 53%, were boys.

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Willson’s distinction as a principal won her respect throughout the state. In 1916, she was elected president of the Indiana State Teachers’ Association, which enrolled a record 2,000 members that year. One legacy of her leadership survives today: the Sunshine Society at Crawfordsville High School. This organization, which grew from discussions in the girls’ Sabbath School class Willson taught, raises funds for the less fortunate in communities throughout the state.<sup>19</sup>

In many respects, Anna Willson’s life is similar to that of many other unmarried women who for whatever reason decided to forgo marriage and homemaking and take up a career in teaching – then one of only a handful of careers available to women. However, her life had a couple of twists and turns that turned out not to lead to a happy ending.

In January 1919, Willson was offered a position as dean of girls at Arsenal Technical High School. L.N. Hines, Superintendent of Public Instruction and former Crawfordsville superintendent, urged her to accept the position. However, when news of this decision appeared in the Crawfordsville papers, “insistent demands were made by the teachers and students of the high school and the citizens through their representatives that she should continue in her capacity as principal. Students and teachers paraded through the city streets, carrying banners asking her to remain in Crawfordsville.” Letters poured in from as far away as Paris and as close by as Lebanon. She relented and stayed.

Just six months later, in June, however, the Crawfordsville Board of School Trustees fired Willson, summarily replacing her with D.H. Eikenberry. This turn of events sent shock waves through Crawfordsville. Citizens again sprang into action – with another parade and demonstration. “Loyalty to Miss Willson Shown by Monster Parade,” read the lead headline in

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<sup>19</sup> “Indiana Sunshine Society,” <http://www.indianasunshinesociety.org/IndianaSunshineSociety.html>, accessed February 10, 2013.

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the *Crawfordsville Journal*. The subheads (frequent and numerous in those days) read: “Public Sentiment for High School Principal Spiritedly Expressed; Declare ‘Miss Anna’ Must Be Reinstated.”

Handbills were circulated and posters were printed, reading “No CHS without Miss Anna”; “We are 500 to 1 for Miss Anna. She made the Band, Sunshine Society, High School”; “Give Us a Square Deal...” But all of this was to no avail, and the school board stuck by its decision.

Reasons for Willson’s dismissal are not clear. Some sources say that Ward Walkup, a member of the board, had it in for her. There were rumors that she “favored the boys.” The late Aquilla M. (Bud) Groves, a longtime Crawfordsville lawyer and historian, investigated these assertions as part of a two-part article he wrote for the *Journal-Review* in 1972. Asked about this, one student, Edith Hunt Honlehan, said, “Well, she was like me, I am a little partial to boys myself.”<sup>20</sup>

Even more dramatic than the parades and demonstrations were the actions of one single CHS student. David Warner Peck, son of the owner of a well-known men’s clothing store, was a junior at CHS when Willson was fired. He went home from school that day and told his father that he was quitting high school in protest. His father went to see the president of Wabash College, Dr. George Lewes Macintosh, and was able to have David admitted to Wabash in the fall of 1919 without a high school diploma. Peck graduated from Wabash in three years, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, graduated from Harvard law, was named a judge of the appellate division of the New York Supreme Court, and served for 10 years as its presiding justice. Then he joined Sullivan & Cromwell where had a distinguished career. He recalled telling Miss Anna

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<sup>20</sup> Evie Tracy, “David Peck Gains National Recognition,” *Montgomery Magazine*, January 1989

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that he wanted to be a politician. She replied, “You mean, David, you’re going to be a statesman.”<sup>21</sup>

Willson went quietly to New York City, where she attended Columbia University. But the dismissal took its toll. She wrote in a letter that the shock of her dismissal led to nine weeks’ hospitalization in New York.

Willson’s fortunes improved in 1921, when the school board was ousted and invited her back to Crawfordsville, this time as superintendent of schools. In her new position, she was instrumental in improving educational conditions in the city. A former “colored” school was replaced by Horace Mann School, which alleviated crowded conditions at Mills School. A new colored school was built on the east side of town. Her family had already sold their homestead to the city for a school in 1894, and a new building was built on the site in 1897, which your essayist remembers as a huge and forbidding pile of limestone that was replaced by a modern structure sometime in the 1960s.

She also continued to work with young boys – bringing them into her home and teaching them manners – the uses of cutlery, the art of conversation, and the courtesies of leave-taking. In a statement that is relevant today, she told a conference of school superintendents in 1923: “The teacher ought to be permitted to make suggestions; instead of having texts clamped on her. In large industries the employee who has a good, helpful suggestion to make is rewarded; but in the teacher’s case, she is squelched.”

Unfortunately, Willson’s triumph was short-lived. Two years later, the school board changed again, and she was asked to resign as superintendent, doing so on February 6, 1923. Willson had always suffered from anemia and died of it on July 6, 1923. Her mother died three weeks later, and they are buried in the same grave in Crawfordsville’s Oak Hill Cemetery.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

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### III. From Woyo San to Seventh Avenue

Our third woman of Crawfordsville, unlike her counterparts, left town as soon as she finished high school. According to one of her biographers, she said many times that all she wanted to do was get to the big city.<sup>22</sup> And she did, in a big way, invoking her longtime motto, “Don’t look back.”<sup>23</sup>

Eleanor Lambert was born in Crawfordsville on August 10, 1903. Her father, Henry Clay Lambert, was an advance man for Ringling Brothers, and her parents spent their honeymoon on the circus train. Twelve years younger than her next-oldest sibling, Eleanor had two older brothers: Kent, a highly decorated cavalryman whose wife, Janet, became a well-known author of children’s books; and Ward. Ward went on to be a standout basketball player at Wabash College, where he earned his lifelong nickname, Piggy, for always hogging the ball, despite being only 5’6.” Lambert coached basketball for 29 seasons at Purdue, compiling a 371-152 record, and the old baseball stadium there was renamed in his honor.<sup>24</sup>

Eleanor Lambert’s life in Crawfordsville was by all accounts unexceptional, although her father left the family before she was born, forcing her mother to raise all three children alone in a house at the corner of Green and Pike Streets. Like your essayist, she served on the staff of the *Athenian*, the Crawfordsville High School yearbook (in the same building that your essayist did some 50 years later). She had some experience in the dramatic arts while at CHS, appearing in the junior class play as Woyo San, “the little Japanese serving maid,” in *Blundering Billy*, described in the yearbook as a “clever and highly entertaining farce-comedy.”<sup>25</sup> Her nickname was Skeet, and she graduated with 40.27 credits in the class of 1921, during Anna Willson’s

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<sup>22</sup> John A. Tiffany, *Eleanor Lambert: Still Here*. New York: Pointed Leaf Press LLC, 2011, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Enid Nemy, “Eleanor Lambert, Empress of Fashion, Dies at 100.” *New York Times*, October 8, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> “Ward Lambert,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ward\\_Lambert](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ward_Lambert), accessed January 27, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> The Crawfordsville *Athenian* (Crawfordsville, Ind.: 1921), 60-61.

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tenure in New York. While other photos of seniors in the *Athenian* depict the young women in demure poses, their faces turned slightly away from the camera, Lambert faces the lens head-on, leaning slightly forward, in an I-mean-business posture that hinted at things to come.

Lambert’s dream to get to the big city was realized right after graduation, when she moved to Indianapolis, where she attended the John Herron Art Institute, then the Chicago Art Institute, where she studied sculpture.<sup>26</sup> But even the Windy City was not big enough for this aspiring artist and free spirit, and she moved to New York City in 1925 at the age of twenty-two. (Incidentally, soon after moving to New York for the first time, she met her father, whom she described as “an impressive but remote and solitary man”).<sup>27</sup>

Shortly after arriving in New York, Lambert noticed that opera singers — the superstars of that era — were receiving a good deal of publicity. Having made friends in the world of painting and sculpture, Lambert decided that these artists and their galleries deserved publicity, too. While designing book covers for Franklin Spear, the owner of an advertising agency in midtown Manhattan, she proposed the idea of representing artists. Jackson Pollock, Thomas Hart Benton, Salvador Dalí, Isamu Noguchi, and Cecil Beaton soon became her clients. When they could not pay her monthly retainer in cash, they paid her with art, and Lambert quickly amassed an amazing collection of paintings by Dalí and sculptures by Noguchi, among others.

These connections led to a position as the first press director of the Whitney Museum of American Art. In Venice to oversee the 1934 Biennale, she met Seymour Berkson, a journalist for the Hearst empire who was later to become publisher of the *New York Journal-American*. Although both married to others, those arrangements were soon unwound, and the couple married in 1936, a union that lasted until Berkson’s death in 1959.

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<sup>26</sup> Tiffany, *Eleanor Lambert: Still Here*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

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Lambert’s experience in representing artists and art galleries led to her greatest achievement: inventing and executing — almost single-handedly — the concept of public relations for the fashion industry. In the 1930s, American fashion designers were all but unknown to the world of fashion, which was still centered in Paris. She set out to change that, and change she did.

A designer named Annette Simpson was Lambert’s first fashion client, signed in 1932. By the end of the thirties, many department stores had been added to her client roster. At the same time, World War II was on the horizon, and the government was preparing directives to limit the use of fabrics. Fearing that dress sales would decline, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the manufacturers jointly formed the New York Dress Institute. Their initial effort was a patriotic campaign to encourage women to buy garments. It featured Martha Washington tending to a dying soldier, with the following slogan: “Aren’t you ashamed not to have a new dress?”

Appalled and embarrassed by this approach, department store executives asked the Institute to take a more subtle public-relations approach. Lambert agreed to represent the organization, but with two conditions. First, she insisted that the Institute include not only the manufacturers, but also the designers themselves. Second, she required the Institute to create a separate division, The Couture Group, which would promote emerging fashion designers along with the more established Seventh Avenue manufacturers.

These conditions were stroke of genius. Not only did they enable Lambert to promote American fashion design as a whole; they also provided her with a stream of new clients for the next fifty years as young designers entered the field.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Tiffany, *Eleanor Lambert: Still Here*, 18-19.

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Lambert’s first major event as press director of the New York Dress Institute was to introduce Fashion Press Week in 1943. In the 1940s, designers did not coordinate their showings to the press, and they made no effort to introduce the season’s new fashions to anyone outside of New York. Lambert realized that if local reporters from all over the country wrote about new fashions, the stores would buy more advertising in their newspapers. She offered all-expense-paid trips to fashion writers and editors, inviting them to New York for Fashion Press Week, where they enthused about the latest trends in dispatches sent home to Buffalo, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Denver, and other remote locales. Modified to suit changing tastes and journalistic practices, Fashion Week exists today, and it is used as a vehicle for introducing the world to American couture some seventy years later.<sup>29</sup>

Lambert is also responsible for creating the International Best-Dressed List in the early 1940s. Originally based in Paris, it remains, according to *The New York Times*, “a coveted honor among women who are serious about fashion and who are backed by serious bank accounts.”<sup>30</sup> Although the list has lost some of its impact recently, it is still of great interest to certain segments of the international jet set and is now controlled by *Vanity Fair* magazine.

As Lambert’s reputation grew, she acquired clients who are now household words in American fashion, including Norman Norell, Bill Blass, Halston, Oscar de la Renta, and Anne Klein. In 1943, she established the Coty Fashion Critics Awards for design excellence, which enhanced the reputation of the American fashion industry and not incidentally the reputation of the cosmetics company that sponsored them.<sup>31</sup> In 1962, Lambert created the Council of Fashion Designers of America, the first attempt to bring together a typically contentious group and

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<sup>29</sup> Tiffany, *Eleanor Lambert: Still Here*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Enid Nemy, “Eleanor Lambert, Empress of Fashion, Dies at 100,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

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encourage them to present a united voice on issues affecting them.<sup>32</sup> Other forays into the global PR world included productions of shows of American fashion in Japan, Germany, Italy, Britain, Australia, and even the former Soviet Union — a country not known for promotion of such a bourgeois enterprise.

The highlight of Lambert’s career came in 1973, when she produced a fashion show at the Palace of Versailles. Nearly seven hundred partygoers attended the show, in a theatre originally designed for Marie Antoinette. Liza Minnelli, at the height of her career, sang and danced, and the legendary, seventy-year-old chanteuse Josephine Baker sang “It’s Impossible” while tottering out on stage in four-inch heels.<sup>33</sup> But the real surprise of the evening were the American designers — Blass, de la Renta, Halston, Klein, and Stephen Burrows — whose creations eclipsed those of the five designers from France. According to the *Times*, “the success of the Americans helped further the reputation of American design.”<sup>34</sup>

Unlike our other two subjects this evening, Lambert apparently left her Midwestern modesty and self-effacement back in Crawfordsville, if she ever had any at all. John Loring, the longtime design director of Tiffany & Company, recalled that she sat down next to him at a press luncheon and said, “I’m Eleanor Lambert, and if I were a young man in your position today, I’d make friends with me.”<sup>35</sup> John Fairchild, former publisher of industry bible *Women’s Wear Daily*, once called her the scourge of the press. Another editor who wished to remain anonymous said she was “relentless, a terror,” and added, “She would say anything to get you to do what you wanted.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Tiffany, *Eleanor Lambert: Still Here*, 260-67.

<sup>34</sup> Nemy, “Eleanor Lambert, Empress of Fashion, Dies at 100.”

<sup>35</sup> Tiffany, *Eleanor Lambert: Still Here*, 310.

<sup>36</sup> Ruth La Ferla, “At 98, Still Fashion’s Miss Ballyhoo,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2002.

## “Ladies’ Night”

But Lambert had her share of champions and seemed to have an unerring knack for spotting talent. The great designer Oscar de la Renta said that she agreed to take on his fledgling firm in 1965, even though he didn’t have the money to pay the fees. “I’m not talking really about fees,” she told the young couturier. “I’m talking about talent. Are you talented?”<sup>37</sup>

Lambert’s influence began to decline in the 1980s as she entered her ninth decade. But she soldiered on, wearing outsized jewelry and a signature turban to her office on East Fifty-Seventh Street. When she died in October 2003 at 100, the *Times* said that her “tireless promotion of American fashion gave the industry an international presence and helped to elevate it from rag trade to respectability.”<sup>38</sup>

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These three women of Crawfordsville led very different lives. But each pursued her passion to its fullest — journalism, education, fashion. And each made her mark in a unique way. As a native of Crawfordsville, it is gratifying and humbling to claim them as fellow citizens of a town that justly earned its nickname as the Athens of Indiana.

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<sup>37</sup> Scott Malone, “Remembering Eleanor Lambert,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, November 23, 2003.

<sup>38</sup> Nemy, “Eleanor Lambert, Empress of Fashion, Dies at 100.”