

Lotta Crabtree – Child Superstar

Lotta Crabtree was a true child of the Gold Rush. In 1851, her father, John Crabtree, migrated from New York City to the Sierras to search for gold. Two years later, he sent for his wife and five-year-old daughter, Lotta. His plan was to run a boarding house in the booming Gold Country town of Grass Valley (as he had not succeeded in making his fortune in the gold fields).

Lotta's mother had more ambitious ideas for her gifted young daughter and immediately enrolled her in dancing school and, soon after, signed her up with a local variety troupe that toured the mining camps. By the age of nine, Lotta was a great favorite of the miners, earning up to \$400 a night – a great deal of money back then.

In 1856, the family moved to San Francisco to give Lotta a bigger audience (and more money). She immediately became a very popular performer, one of several child stars performing during this period. Over the next few years, Lotta performed constantly, and in better and better circumstances. She seems to have had a great deal of fun as a teenage San Francisco celebrity. She was generous with her talent and often performed benefits for different causes, including the City's firemen who took Lotta as their unofficial mascot.

In 1864, Lotta (and her ambitious mother) decided to take her talents to the East, playing one last benefit the night before her departure, leaving in a blaze of glory. Her debut in New York a month later was not so successful. Critics were lukewarm and some objected to the "rather free California style."

However, her ever-resourceful mother soon found the perfect vehicle for Lotta's charm and talent, putting together a selection of scenes from Charles Dickens novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*. After that, Lotta could do no wrong. She went on to star in a string of triumphant musicals tailored to her gifts and became the wealthiest performer in the country.

Dubbed "California's Pet" and "California Diamond," Lotta remained closely linked with San Francisco all her life, returning often to perform until her retirement in 1892 at the age of 45. Unlike many child stars, Lotta's sparkling personality and wholesome good looks helped her gain stardom as an adult.

In gratitude for all her success, Lotta Crabtree gave San Francisco a lasting gift – an ornately carved drinking fountain which miraculously survived the 1906 earthquake and still stands today in the heart of downtown San Francisco on Market near Kearny. Every year since 1906, survivors of the earthquake have gathered at Lotta's Fountain in the early hours to mark the anniversary of this cataclysmic event.

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