

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - the story of Leon Belmont
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REPORTER: Leon Belmont, just wanted to be left alone, but in 1880 he suddenly found himself at the center of a media frenzy, all because a girlfriend went to the Minneapolis Police with the story that her dashing, curly-headed Belmont was really a woman. Lizzie Ehrenhalt, a Minnesota historian with a focus on gender and sexuality is writing a book about Belmont. She's calling it, "Curious and Romantic Sensation," a title derived from contemporary newspaper accounts. It's part of our "Minnesota Now and Then" series. Here is Ehrenhalt reading from one of those accounts about Belmont's sudden and unwanted fame back in 1880, in a story produced by Britt Aamodt.

LIZZIE October 31, 1880--

EHRENHALT:

[TYPEWRITER CLICKING]

--the case of the masquerader Belmont is the sensation of the day. The municipal court was crowded yesterday morning at the hour of opening by a crowd curious to see the unsexed individual. Belmont was brought into court wearing the Brown overcoat, a wide brimmed felt hat, and the suit of black diagonal clothes, which are familiar. She was seated inside the rail, and a couple of hundred cruious eyes feasted themselves. In due course of events, the court was called to order, and the prisoner summoned to the bar.

My name is Lizzie Ehrenhalt. I'm a public historian at the Minnesota Historical Society, but I focus my own research on the History of gender and sexuality. I found Belmont's story, like we often do, while I was looking for something else, which I wasn't expecting at all. And I thought to myself, what is this 1880s match I have here? So I looked at that, and it was an article about someone named Leon Belmont, who was in Minneapolis in 1880 and caused a really big media sensation because he was suspected of having been born a woman.

And in the language of the time, the newspapers really say he is a woman. There is no idea of trans identity. There's certainly no support or acceptance of it. So basically, the way Belmont's story is framed in the media is that he's a fraud. That he's a con artist, he's a faker, and they use she/her pronouns for him. So he was born and assigned a female sex in Weswar in Massachusetts in 1853, and was given the name Addie Walker. But at the age of about 25, Addie Walker took on the identity of Leon Belmont, left Massachusetts forever and, went around the west.

While Belmont is in Dakota territory, he meets a woman named Clarinda Watts and her daughter Grace, and they're from Minneapolis, and he attaches himself to them. He goes on carriage rides with Grace, and courts her and eventually becomes engaged. And he goes back with the two of them to their house in Minneapolis. He lives rent free in Clarinda Watt's boarding house. This is a really nice perk for Belmont because he's not really bringing in a lot of money. And he's living in the same building as a woman named Sarah Bracket, who is Grace Watt's friend, and he transfers his affections from Grace to Sarah, basically breaks it off with Grace, and it's full on giving attention to Sarah.

What's remarkable is that the Watts family allows him to continue living rent free in their boarding house. I think it's because they still liked him, but he ends up getting money from his new girlfriend, Sarah Bracket. And she keeps trying to get the money back from him, and he won't give it to her. I think probably their relationship was souring at this point, too. And she eventually goes to the police, and she says she suspects him of being a woman, which is very interesting because that suggests it's possible that she saw him as a woman and wanted to have a relationship with him because of or in spite of that.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

And at this period in history, there are a lot of American cities that have ordinances against what they would call masquerading as a different sex, what we might think of as cross-dressing. But of course, for many of the people, it wasn't cross-dressing. They were just wearing the clothes that represented them, that they felt comfortable in. But because of these ordinances, it was very dangerous to do this at the time. Even more than it is now, because you could be immediately be arrested.

He was forced to submit to a medical examination, and the first doctor who examined him pronounced him female. A month or so later, Doc Ames, who was known as a corrupt mayor of Minneapolis, conducted a separate examination of Belmont, and declared that he was a man. The Saint Paul Pioneer Press recorded a version, at least, of Ames' recollection of examination number 2. Reporter: "It is a positive fact, then, that Belmont is a genuine man." -- Dr. Ames. "Belmont certainly is a man by a large majority, a man with no deviation whatever from the established formula."

This is very interesting. Of course, how can two doctors examine the same person and come to completely different conclusions? Belmont was not seeking the spotlight. He says to a reporter that he wishes people would just leave him alone. But because Sara Bracket goes to the police, the authorities find out about Belmont, and that just explodes the whole situation and gets the media involved.

So Sara Bracket eventually dropped her charges against Belmont, and at that point he was released from custody. And the police really never pursued him on the charge of violating the city ordinance against cross-dressing, and I don't know why. They just didn't do it. You know, Belmont was not necessarily a great person. I don't think he was a monster, either. He was just human, and he was complicated. He did bad things, and he did good things. He wasn't a savior, and he wasn't a devil.

REPORTER:

That is Ehrenhalt. She's a Minnesota historian who has written about Leon Belmont for the Minnesota history magazine, and is researching a book about him to be called "Curious and Romantic Sensation." Britt Aamodt produced that story.