

Sophia Huggins 1832-1903

Much of what is known about Sophia Huggins is based on two newspaper interviews: one with the Daily Pantagraph and the other with the Daily Bulletin.

Sophia Roundtree Huggins was born in Kentucky on May 4, 1832.¹ According to Sophia, her mother was Native American, and her father was a Frenchman named Captain Roundtree. Sophia was the youngest of seven children. She claimed that her mother was 67 years old at the time of her birth. In an interview with a reporter from *The Pantagraph*, Sophia was described later in her life as “a colored woman...large and heavy set, has a broad face, square jaws, a rather prominent nose and small black eyes. Her hair is but a trifle kinky and black, with here and there a gray hair. She looks more like an Indian squaw than one of Africa’s daughters.”² Sophia was always very vocal with the fact that there was “not a drop of Negro blood” flowing through her veins,” though most documents list her as either Black or mixed race.³ Sophia said her early life was spent near “Indian Territory” (possibly near the modern state of Oklahoma) and Iowa when the only inhabitants were Indigenous, with the exception of the American and French traders. “I went to school when I was older when the opportunity presented itself...I speak French even better and easier than my own tongue, but do not read it. I speak in all seven languages but read none but American.”⁴

It is not known exactly when and why Sophia came to Bloomington. Prior to moving to Bloomington, it appeared that she was living in Springfield, IL around 1850. By the next year, she was in Bloomington and married John H. Huggins (also spelled Hugins) on October 23, 1851.⁵ They were married by Reverend P.N. Ward.⁶ They had at least two children; a daughter named Sophia (born about 1860)⁷ and a son named Isaac (born on March 4, 1865).⁸ In 1855 John was working as a laborer and Sophia as a seamstress. At that time, they were living on the corner of Boon and Clay Streets.⁹

In July 1863, her husband, John, enlisted in the Union Army during the U.S. Civil War. He joined the 55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, which was one of the first Union regiments that Black soldiers could serve in during the Civil War (and entirely made up of Black soldiers). At one time, John was stationed at Morris Island, South Carolina where he was a Quarter Master’s Sergeant. A short time later he became ill and was sent to a hospital in Detroit, Michigan, and from there was sent back to Bloomington to recuperate. However, his condition did not improve, and he died on February 28, 1864, from camp diarrhea (also known as

¹ Tombstone of Sophia Huggins, Evergreen Memorial Cemetery, Bloomington, Illinois.

² “Speak For Yourself: A Pantagraph Adventurer Penetrates the Domicile of Dame Huggins,” *The Pantagraph* September 28, 1881.

³ Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future,” *The Daily Bulletin*, May 26, 1899.

⁴ Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future.”

⁵ Illinois State Wide Marriage Index for John H. Hugins and Sophia Roundtree, <http://www.ilsos.gov/isavital/marriage> .

⁶ McLean County Marriage Index, Volume C, page 29.

⁷ 1870 United States Federal Census, www.ancestry.com .

⁸ *McLean County Cemetery Records Volume 13: Bloomington Township Cemeteries, Old City, Bloomington, Some Evergreen* p. 85.

⁹ J.R. Freese, M.D. *1855 Bloomington City Directory*.

dysentery).¹⁰ John was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery (in the section then known as Old City Cemetery) in Bloomington. Sophia never remarried.¹¹

Sophia claimed to be a clairvoyant and made a living using her psychic powers.¹² A clairvoyant is a person who is “able to see images of people, places or things in their mind’s eye”¹³ and then described their vision during the reading using senses other than the known human senses. Clairvoyants are not fortune tellers and do not foretell the future; however, a reading may involve the future. A good clairvoyant will validate things that have happened in the past and things that are happening in the present. They do this by asking the person who is receiving the reading questions that encourage that person to offer information about themselves. The clairvoyant will use that information to give the person seeking information the answer they are looking for.¹⁴

In an 1899 interview with Madame Annette from the *Daily Bulletin* newspaper, “Aunt Sophia” (as she was known to many) claimed to have received her psychic powers when she was born. She asserted that she was “born with a veil over my face, with the power to read lives and see things unknown to other people.”¹⁵ However, in an earlier interview with *The Pantagraph*, she stated that she received her psychic powers at the age of 12.¹⁶ In any case, she touted the fact that she was consulted by “kings and princes with great success.”¹⁷ She also said that she would go on fortune telling tours quite often and had been to “27 of the states and territories, and out of this country, either into Canada or across the big pond 20 times.”¹⁸ When asked to show proof of these boasts, she produced an undated circular about her talents as a clairvoyant.¹⁹

Her clientele in Bloomington-Normal included “luckless swains, love-sick girls, unhappy husbands and wives, and businessmen in financial distress.”²⁰ Her prices ranged from one to ten dollars depending on how far she had to “send her mind away to get their past lives.”²¹ She also stated that it cost “a half dollar extra for each sitting after two [had been] given, and sometimes, it takes a good many!”²² Also, if she was not in the right frame of mind, the “day was too cloudy,” or if the person’s life was so bad that she could not bear to think of them, she would turn customers away, unwilling to read them.²³ She became a great curiosity to the people of Bloomington and many men and women sought her advice. Many residents referred to her as the “Witch of Endor” (a medium called upon by King Saul to raise the spirit of Samuel to seek guidance in battle, in defiance to God).²⁴

¹⁰ U.S. National Archives & Records Administration. Federal Military Pension Application of John H. Huggins, “Declaration of a Widow for Original Pension,” December 11, 1891.

¹¹ 1866 Bloomington City Directory McLean County Gazzetter

¹² 1899 Bloomington-Normal City Directory

¹³ “Medium, Clairvoyants and Psychics,” <http://www.mystic-mouse.co.uk>.

¹⁴ “Medium, Clairvoyants and Psychics,” <http://www.mystic-mouse.co.uk>.

¹⁵ Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future.”

¹⁶ “Speak For Yourself.”

¹⁷ “Speak For Yourself.”

¹⁸ Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future.”

¹⁹ “Speak For Yourself.”

²⁰ “Speak For Yourself.”

²¹ “Speak For Yourself.”

²² “Speak For Yourself.”

²³ Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future.”

²⁴ <http://www.amazingfacts.org/free-stuff/bible-studies/storacle-lessons>

In some cases, Sophia was hired to “find” things or missing persons. Bloomington resident, John (also known as George) Curtis, froze to death on February 23, 1895. He was found “frozen stiff” in his “hovel” near the Big Four railroad tracks. He was a Civil War veteran and served with a Union regiment in Wisconsin. It was reported that “for a long time prior to his death he had been receiving a pension of 12 per month” and that he carefully saved that money, never spending any of it because he made his living “picking up around town.” However, no one knew where the money was, as it appeared John had no surviving heirs. Sophia was hired to assist local officials to find his pension papers and the fortune he had supposedly amassed through his many years of saving. According to *The Weekly Leader*, after a long search, “Sophia came upon the papers,” but not the money. “Mrs. Huggins has been using her second sight on this for several days, but she can’t find it. She will keep on in the exploration.” Sophia received \$2.00 (or about \$75.00 in 2023) for finding the pension papers and would be paid more if she found Curtis’ gold.²⁵ However, it is not known if the gold was ever found, by Sophia or by anyone.²⁶

About a month before her death in 1903, Sophia was called upon to help find a missing toddler, Mabel Jordine. At around midnight on Friday, July 10, 23-month-old Mabel was reported to be missing from the family home at 1006 South Livingston Street in Bloomington. The toddler’s parents, Andrew and Anna Jordine, had left Mabel, and several other younger siblings, in the care of their eldest child, Maude (who was 17 years old). According to testimony, Maude took her siblings over to a neighbor’s house. At about 8 o’clock that evening (Thursday, July 9), Mabel had fallen asleep, so Maude carried her baby sister back to the family’s home and put her to bed. Maude then left the house to go retrieve the rest of their siblings. Maude stated that she left a lamp lit on a table and the back door open so she could see into the house from the neighbor’s house where she had returned to. Ten minutes later, Maude started walking back to her family home with the rest of the children. She said she heard a cry and thought Mabel was awake. However, upon returning to the house, Maude discovered that Mabel was gone. “An outcry was raised and a search at once instituted.” The children’s mother, Anna, was alerted by telephone and at once came home from Houghton’s Lake where she and her husband had been.²⁷

The search continued all night and into the day. At some point during the night, Anna Jordine, who was convinced her daughter had been abducted from the family home, sought Sophia’s gift of foresight. She visited Sophia’s home in Pone Hollow to see if Sophia could “see” where Mabel had been taken. According to Sophia, “when [Mabel] was taken she was alive and laughing.” Sophia claimed that Mabel had been taken away in a buggy and “would be found alive and well within three hours or three days.” However, that was not a satisfactory answer for Anna, so she asked Sophia to “cast the cards” again. This time Sophia proclaimed that Mabel would be found “alive or dead within three days or three weeks.”²⁸ Sadly, Sophia’s second prediction was correct to a degree. At 2:00 p.m. on Friday, July 10, Mabel Jordine was found dead. Her father, Andrew, found the body of the little girl in a field not half-a-mile south of the family’s home.²⁹

Not all of Sophia’s clients were satisfied customers. Sometime in May 1891, it was reported that a Mrs. Lewis, who lived on the corner of State and Washington streets, sought Sophia’s advice about “certain family troubles.” Sophia told Mrs. Lewis that “all her fears were well

²⁵ Measuringworth.com, date accessed, July 26, 2024.

²⁶ “A Sioux Indian,” *The Weekly Leader*, February 28, 1895.

²⁷ “Girl Baby Was Brutally Murdered,” *The Pantagraph*, July 11, 1903.

²⁸ “Vindication of Maude Jordine,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 19, 1903.

²⁹ “Girl Baby Was Brutally Murdered.”

grounded and that she should constantly pray to God.” Sophia assured Mrs. Lewis that if she followed Sophia’s instructions, that “all would turn out well.” Mrs. Lewis became so upset and worried that she began suffering from “some sort of delirium” and became very ill after seeing Sophia. However, Mrs. Lewis, once under the care of a skilled physician and receiving medical treatment, expected to recover and be out and about soon.³⁰

And sometimes her gift of foresight, or in this case the inability to “see,” landed her in trouble. In January 1874, Lewis Bunn had his “fine overcoat” stolen from his front hall.³¹ That same day, several other coats were also stolen from Leech and Adolph’s merchant tailoring establishment too. Suspected of the burglary was Jack Huggins (otherwise known as Isaac, or Ike Huggins), Sophia’s son. Goodman Ferre, the police magistrate, visited Sophia’s house the morning of January 28 in an attempt to locate the stolen goods. Sophia claimed that the coats they were looking for were not at her house and she possessed no knowledge as to their whereabouts. However, it was reported that “the natural powers of observation of the police officers proved keener than the supernatural powers of Aunt Sophia, and to her eyes, accustomed to look into and through all interesting objects and discover things hidden from mere mortal men,” Bunn’s coat was found hidden in her house in her bed! Sophia was horrified at the discovery and had no satisfactory answer as to how the coats ended up in her house. Because she was in possession of stolen goods, Sophia either had to come up with “\$800 security or go to jail.”³² Later that afternoon, several police officers (including James P. Butler) returned to Sophia’s home, armed with a search warrant, to search for more coats. Upon investigating the entire property, three of the coats stolen from Leech and Adolph’s were found in an old shed. Because of this, Sophia was arrested and taken to jail.³³ It is not known if this case went to trial, how long she remained in jail, or if her son, Ike, was ever convicted of stealing the coats.

For most of her life in Bloomington Sophia resided in an area of town known as “Pone Hollow,” a very poor area situated on the far southwest side. Local residents called this area “Pone Hollow” for two reasons. First, it was in a low-lying area situated between the high ground of downtown and the emerging German neighborhood of South Hill. Through the heart of the neighborhood ran a tributary of Sugar Creek (which was turned into a major underground sewer). The neighborhood also suffered from pollution produced by the meatpacking plants to the east (known as “Blood Alley”) which dumped blood, offal, and other slaughterhouse byproducts into the creek. This gave the neighborhood a distinctive smell.³⁴ Second, the name originated with a wager between two sawmill men (who lived in the vicinity of what became Pone Hollow) by the names of Dodge and Rankin. Each man thought that his wife made the best corn ponies, corn bread, and rolls. Dodge and Rankin made a wager over who could eat the most cornpone (a type of cornbread) in one sitting which had been made by their respective wives. Dodge beat Rankin, eating about a dozen. The match became the talk of the town, so much so that the area became known as “Pone Hollow.”³⁵ Sophia’s home was located at 529 West Water Street³⁶ (later renamed Taylor Street³⁷) on the south side of the Indianapolis, Bloomington and

³⁰ “All On Account Of Sophia,” *The Weekly Leader*, May 29, 1891.

³¹ “That Overcoat,” *The Weekly Leader*, January 28, 1874.

³² “A Fortune-Teller In Trouble,” *The Weekly Leader*, January 28, 1874.

³³ “More Coats Found,” *The Weekly Leader*, January 28, 1874.

³⁴ Bill Kemp, “Pone Hollow Once a Tumbledown Neighborhood,” *The Pantagraph*, June 5, 2011.

³⁵ “Pone Hollow: Interview with Dr. John Miller,” *The Daily Bulletin*, August 3, 1900.

³⁶ *Bloomington City Directories* for 1872-1873 and 1878-1879.

³⁷ Nola Marquardt. “Street Name Index: Bloomington-Normal Street and Subdivision Names, McLean County Road Names,” April 7, 2012.

Western Railroad “in a low, marshy spot, which was originally an almost impassible slough.”³⁸ Many of the homes in her neighborhood were not well kept. Sophia’s home included a little barnyard with a wagon, chicken coop, several ducks and geese, and a family dog.³⁹

Unfortunately, Sophia’s property became a source of great concern for her neighbors. On September 20, 1881, neighbors complained about the “sweet smelling” articles at Sophia’s house. Neighbors said the foul smell of the hog pens, geese pens, duck pens, and hard cider barrels permeated the neighborhood. She was summoned to court and was told that if she cleaned up her property and succeeded in “restoring it to a pristine flavor,” then she would “be allowed to depart on paying costs.”⁴⁰ In 1883 neighbors again complained about the conditions at Sophia’s home. A warrant for her arrest was issued on account of “an unbearable nuisance in the way of a hog pen” containing six full-grown hogs.⁴¹ In July 1885, health inspectors visited her home and declared it was “a breeding place for cholera and pestilence,” and that her house and property would need to be cleaned out to bring it to a sanitary condition.⁴² And in September 1895, she was in court once again for “keeping a bad smelling yard and allowing her horses to run at large.”⁴³ Neighbors complained that she would not confine the poultry she kept either.⁴⁴

Things escalated by September 1899 when Humane Society officers were called to Sophia’s home after several neighbors made complaints against her for the mistreatment of two horses. William H. Kerrick, with the Humane Society, visited her home and found the two horses were badly in need of some nourishment. According to him, the horses had hay to eat at the time, but there was evidence of them not having been fed previously.⁴⁵ The following month a trial was held against her and she was charged with animal cruelty. Evidence was presented that she only furnished bedding and food for the horses when she was forced to. One of the witnesses claimed that when Sophia finds out a “warrant is out for her, she hastens to the food store and has some straw and other food stuffs on the ground for the animals before the officers get there.”⁴⁶ Justice of the Peace William Hendryx, who presided over the case, fined Sophia \$3.00 (or about \$114 in 2023) for cruelty to animals, a decision she appealed in November that year.⁴⁷

As Sophia continued her fortune telling business, she began investing in real estate. This included a great deal of land in Pone Hollow. Perhaps she foresaw the city’s development of that land and wanted her heirs to benefit.⁴⁸ Madame Annette commented that “Aunt Sophia” owned a good deal of Pone Hollow. However, Annette wondered why she owned so much land in such a run-down area. She surmised that while the properties did not look “financially desirable,” the land at least was worth something good and “is a financial credit to the woman who has made it all by the reading of people’s lives.”⁴⁹ Sophia also purchased property in Livingston County, Illinois.

³⁸ “Speak For Yourself.”

³⁹ “Speak for Yourself.”

⁴⁰ “The City- News Items,” *The Pantagraph*, September 19, 1881.

⁴¹ “Yesterday, Sophia Huggins,”

⁴² “The City,” *The Pantagraph*, July 27 1885.

⁴³ “Sophia Huggins Again,” *The Weekly Leader*, September 19, 1895.

⁴⁴ “Fined for Maintaining a Nuisance,” *The Pantagraph*, September 20, 1895.

⁴⁵ “After Mrs. Huggins,” *The Pantagraph*, September 28, 1899.

⁴⁶ “Reserved His Decision,” *The Pantagraph*, October 18, 1899.

⁴⁷ “New Suits,” *The Pantagraph*, November 8, 1899; measuringworth.com, date accessed July 26, 2024.

⁴⁸ Judith Myers, Researcher notes on Sophia Huggins

⁴⁹ Madam Annette, “She Reads the Future.”

Not much is known about Sophia's children. Her daughter, Sophia, became Mrs. Marie Clifford and lived in Indianapolis. Her son Isaac remained in Bloomington and was married several times. Isaac's last wife was Anna Crawford who died a few years before him on July 19, 1933. She was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Isaac owned a tract of land in a suburban area of Bloomington where he kept hogs year-round. He also collected garbage for the city, which he probably fed to his hogs. Isaac lived for several years on Olive Street,⁵⁰ and at the time of his death was living at 204 Tanner Street.⁵¹

Sophia became ill about three years before her death. At that time her daughter brought suit against Sophia to declare her feeble-minded, most likely to have her will legally changed.⁵² The suit did not follow through because her son, Isaac, would not allow his mother to attend court on account of the fact that she was dangerously ill at the time.⁵³

Sophia Huggins died at her home at 525 West Taylor Street on August 8, 1903, of dropsy (the swelling of soft tissue due to the accumulation of excess water which is a sign of congestive heart failure).⁵⁴ Her funeral was held at her church, Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church⁵⁵ She was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington. Before her death she had set aside \$100 (which in 2023 would be \$3,750) for the erection of a tombstone at her gravesite.⁵⁶ In her obituary, she was remembered as the "sage of her neighborhood and was respected by every colored resident of town."⁵⁷

Sophia's will divided up her landholdings. The property was left to her son Isaac (then known as Isaac McFadden⁵⁸), daughter Ruth Hunter (a young girl she was raising), and David Rogers (an Black porter who worked at a Bloomington saloon whose relationship to Sophia is unknown). Nearly a year after her death, the land on which her home was located, which her son now occupied, was to be sold. Isaac attempted to outbid the buyers but was unsuccessful. He later petitioned that the auctioneers had unfairly stopped the bidding causing him (Isaac) to lose out on the purchase.⁵⁹ The result of the petition is unknown. Isaac Huggins died on July 6, 1939, of a heart attack and was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his mother and his wife, Anna.⁶⁰

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⁵⁰ *Bloomington City Directories* 1893, 1899 and 1905

⁵¹ "Ike Huggins, Aged Character in Colored Population, Dies," *The Pantagraph* (July 7, 1939)

⁵² "Ike Huggins, Aged Character in Colored Population, Dies."

⁵³ Venire for Jurors, Under Insane Hospital Act, State of Illinois, McLean County, July 28, 1903

⁵⁴ Tombstone of Sophia Huggins

⁵⁵ "Sophia Huggins Dead," *The Daily Bulletin*, August 9, 1903

⁵⁶ Myers, Researcher notes on Sophia Huggins; measuringworth.com, date accessed July 26, 2024

⁵⁷ "Sophia Huggins Dead."

⁵⁸ "The Last Will and Testament of Sophia Huggins, Widow," July 23, 1903

⁵⁹ Petition of Isaac Huggins, March 3, 1904

⁶⁰ *McLean County Cemetery Records Volume 13: Bloomington Township Cemeteries, Old City, Bloomington, Some Evergreen* p. 85