

## Whitby Archives

### May Irwin Collection

#### FONDS LEVEL

**Title:** May Irwin Collection (WA2011-01)

**Dates of Creation:** 1884 – 2005, predominant 1884 – 1918

**Physical Description:** 31 cm of textual records. – 8 books. – 37 photographs: b&w. – 1 cylinder recording. – 3 audio discs. – 1 audio compact disc. – 1 film reel

**Administrative History/Biographical Sketch:** May Irwin was an actress who starred in burlesques, musicals, and plays on Broadway and other stages in the United States and England. She was especially well-known for her performances of 'coon songs', a popular musical genre of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

May Irwin was born Georgina May Campbell in 1862 in Whitby, ON, second daughter of Robert Campbell and Sophronia Jane Draper. When her father died around 1875, she and her sister, Adeline Flora (Flo), in order to support themselves, began performing at the Adelphi Variety Theatre in Buffalo, New York. May's talent was noticed by impresario Tony Pastor and she spent the years from 1877 to 1883 under his management in New York City.

In 1883, Irwin acted with Augustin Daly's company and spent several seasons at Toole's Theatre in London, England. She returned to New York for the 1891-92 season and in 1893 she played Ophelia in a burlesque production of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windemere's Fan*. Irwin appeared in her first starring role in 1895 in J.J. McNally's *The Widow Jones*, a role for which she received critical acclaim. In it, she played Beatrice Byke, a young woman who poses as the widow of a man who turns out not to be dead. Irwin forayed into film when she re-enacted the play's kissing scene with co-star John C. Rice on film in 1896. 'The Kiss', as it became known, runs 47 seconds long and is considered the first on-screen kiss in film history.

May Irwin went on to appear in a number of other plays and musicals including *Courted into Court* (1896), *Mrs. Black is Back*, and *Belle of Bridgeport* (1900) until she retired in 1922 after her last performance in *The 49ers*.

In 1878, May Irwin married Frederick W. Keller but he died unexpectedly in 1886. The couple had two sons, Harry (born ca.1879) and Walter (born 1882). On May 26, 1907, she married her manager of 2 years, Kurt Eisfeldt, at Clayton, NY, her home on the St.

Lawrence River. She spent a great deal of her summers on her own island off Grindstone Island in the Thousand Islands region of the St. Lawrence. May Irwin died in New York City on 22 October 1938.

**Scope and Content:** Fonds consists articles, photographs, sheet music, playbills, books, newspaper clippings, tourist publications, films, and sound recordings relating to the professional and private lives of May Irwin and her sister Flo. Fonds is composed of the following series: **Textual Records, Sheet Music, Programs and Playbills, Photographs and Images, Material Related to the Thousand Islands and Clayton, NY, Books on May Irwin, Audio/Visual Material.**

**Custodial History:** These records have been accumulated over a period of 25 years from a variety of sources. Individual items were transferred to the Whitby Archives infrequently and only when they became available to collectors. Some records were obtained through EBay and inter-personal relationships.

**Restrictions on Access:** **No restrictions on access. Some records contain racially offensive language and images.**

**Terms for Use and Reproduction:** Copyright for many records has expired. Where copyright still exists, materials cannot be published without permission from the copyright holder.

**Notes:** Title based on the contents of the collection. These records were acquired from a variety of sources.

**Related Material:** There are a number of images of May and Flora Irwin that have been digitized and are available at [www.ourontario.ca/whitby](http://www.ourontario.ca/whitby)

**Accruals:** Further accruals are expected.

**Finding Aid:** A file listing exists for the Sheet Music and Programs and Playbills.

## SERIES LEVEL

**Title:** Textual Records (WA2011-01-01)

**Dates of Creation:** 1895 – 2008

**Physical Description:** 10 cm. of textual records

**Scope and Content:** Series contains a variety of material written about May Irwin during her lifetime and after. Records are comprised of newspaper columns, journals, features, magazine articles, collected stories, and other bits of information on the life, performances, and legacy of May Irwin. Series also consists of some material written by May Irwin, including a handwritten note. Articles written by May Irwin contain valuable information on the actress's opinions, upbringing, and her outlook on the entertainment industry in early 20<sup>th</sup> century United States. Records are organized chronologically and format.

## SERIES LEVEL

**Title:** Sheet Music (WA2011-01-02)

**Dates of Creation:** 1894 – 1916

**Physical Description:** 6 cm. of textual records

**Scope and Content:** Series consists of the sheet music of May and Flora Irwins' songs that were produced for mass consumption. The songs were performed separately by May and Flora in various plays and shows. Records are filed chronologically. Some records may contain racially offensive lyrics or artwork.

## SERIES LEVEL

**Title:** Programs and Playbills (WA2011-01-03)

**Dates of Creation:** 1884 – 1925

**Physical Description:** 2.5 cm. of textual records

**Scope and Content:** Series contains mostly photocopies or digital copies of playbills and theatre programs from the plays in which May Irwin performed during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some original playbills do exist.

## SERIES LEVEL

**Title:** Photographs and Images (WA2011-01-04)

**Dates of Creation:** ca. 1885 – ca. 1916

**Physical Description:** 37 photographs: b&w

**Scope and content:** Series consists of a variety of photographs of May Irwin. The majority of the photographs were taken by professional studios and so the images are formal portraits. Some candid photographs exist. Series also contains four images of Flora Irwin. The dates for many of these images do not exist.

#### SERIES LEVEL

**Title:** Material related to the Thousand Islands and Clayton, NY (WA2011-01-05)

**Dates of Creation:** Dates unknown

**Physical Description:** 1 cm of textual material: 1 book of photographs

**Scope and Content:** Series consists of tourism material produced by the Thousand Islands region, including a book of 121 photographic views of the area and a 'Greetings from Thousand Islands N.Y.' postcard.

#### SERIES LEVEL

**Title:** Books on May Irwin (WA2011-01-06)

**Dates of Creation:** 1899 – 2007

**Physical Description:** 8 books

**Scope and Content:** Series consists of 8 books on vaudeville actors and Broadway performers in America from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They have been collected because they either feature or mention May Irwin in some capacity. One book and an article deal specifically with May Irwin and her legacy as a vaudeville actress and performer of 'coon songs'.

#### SERIES LEVEL

**Series:** Audio/Visual Material (WA2011-01-07)

**Dates of Creation:** 1905-1978; predominant 1905-1908

**Physical Description:** 1 cylinder recording. – 3 audio discs. – 1 audio compact disc. – 1 film reel

**Scope and Content:** Series contains a variety of audio and visual material featuring May Irwin's performances. Of note is one Thomas Edison cylinder recording featuring May Irwin's 'She Forgot to Bring Him Back' recorded in 1908. There are two vinyl phonograph

records containing 'Don't Argify' and 'Frog Song', performed by May Irwin in 1905 and 1896, respectively. Two compilation audio discs contain vaudeville classics by May Irwin and other performers popular in the genre. There is one 8mm film reel containing 'Fashions in Love', a 1936 movie starring May Irwin and others.