

*Special to the women of
The Rehearsal Club*

Larri Thomas

1932 - 2013

RC 1949 – 1951

The Girl You Know

*By Kathleen Vestuto
RC 1978 - 1979*



Larri, circa mid-1950s. *Hoy family photo, Legacy.com*

Larri Thomas was someone you know, even if you didn't know that you know her. Have you ever noticed how Mary Poppins lands on Cherry Tree Lane with exquisite precision? And perhaps you've glanced at her face and thought, think, gee, she looks different. You would be correct. It's not Julie Andrews. It's Larri, who was Dame Julie's stand-in and double. You even get another glimpse of Larri in *Poppins*: the pretty lady in the carriage who blows Dick Van Dyke a kiss in "Chim Chim Cheree."

Oh, and Julie up in that tree in *The Sound of Music*? Also Larri.

And remember that dynamic dancer front and center in the "Pet Me, Poppa" number at *Guys and Dolls*' Hot Box Club? And the dark-haired Havana woman in that film who dances with Brando and then dukes it out with Jean Simmons? Both Larri.

She was one of the first Rehearsal Club girls to hit television screens, and enjoyed a decades-long career both in TV and film. Wonderfully photogenic, an outstanding dance artist, Larri was a tireless professional who added spark to every scene she was in. She may not be a household name, but she is instantly recognizable and was celebrated within the business.

"Larri was very stylized and gorgeous, very chic and aristocratic," said fellow film and television dancer, the late Bea Busch Wilcox. "She had a wonderful air about the way she danced."¹ Among her peers, she was known as "The Great One."²

Lida Larrimore "Larri" Thomas was born January 23, 1932 in Wayne, PA, to landscape artist Charles E. Thomas and his novelist wife, Lida Larrimore Turner Thomas. Growing up on Philadelphia's wealthy Main Line with creative parents, Larri traveled extensively and was introduced to the arts at an early age. Encouraged by her mother to follow her dreams as a dancer, Larri studied ballet at Philadelphia's renowned Littlefield Ballet Company (later the Philadelphia Ballet). The company's founder, Catherine Littlefield, selected 16-year-old Larri to work with Thomas Cannon, Ms. Littlefield's former dance partner, and perform with his small professional troupe at benefits and recitals.

It was Cannon who gave Larri her first professional job. The summer after she graduated with honors from high school, Cannon hired her as a dancer in the operettas he was choreographing for the inaugural season of St. John Terrell's Music Circus in Lambertville, New Jersey.



Larri's senior high school yearbook photo, Tredyffrin-Easttown High School, Berwyn, PA, 1949. *Ancestry*

Larri's mother knew her daughter had her sights set on New York. While Larri was doing stock, her mother read a magazine article about the Rehearsal Club, and immediately wrote to directress Kay Carleton to request a room for her daughter. "Somehow," Larri said, "I was in. It was the fall of 1949, right after high school."³ She was initially placed in the transient room on the first floor. When another girl moved out, she was able to share a room with two other girls on the second floor of the 47 side, facing front.

Larri was actually a few months shy of the Club's age requirement of at least 18 years old. Still, Kay Carleton may have been impressed with Larri's – and her mother's – credentials, and decided to make an exception.

Once Larri was in the Club, she says: "I loved it. I have nothing but pleasant memories of the Rehearsal Club. I made so many friends."⁴ She wound up staying for two years.



Larri with Jimmy Durante on *The Four-Star Revue*, 1951, a job she held while living at the Club *eBay*



Larri awaits her cue backstage at Rockefeller Center's Center Theatre during a live broadcast of *The Four-Star Revue*, May 1951. Ed Wynn is onstage, back to camera. Peter Stackpole/*The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images*

She was cast in her first New York job just a few months after arriving, as one of "Les Blondes" in Equity Library Theatre's revival of *Idiot's Delight* at the Lenox Hill Playhouse on East 70th Street. The lead role of Harry was played by "Gene Barry, before he was Gene Barry," she said. "I could dance, but I couldn't sing. Somehow, though, I could play roles."⁵ This was evidenced by her next being cast, not in a musical, but a courtroom drama, *Summersault*, with Butterfly McQueen and Robert Webber. The original play was presented at the Cape Playhouse in Dennis, MA, during the summer of 1950. "And when I came back to the Club that fall," she said, "I thought I'd have to go into the transient room. But I didn't. I got my old room back!"⁶

She also returned to the grueling rounds of auditions and rejections. One day, she received a phone call at the Club from her Philadelphia dance teacher, Catherine Littlefield, who was choreographing NBC's first TV variety showcase, *The Four-Star Revue*. Would she, Miss Littlefield asked, be available to audition for the show?

It wasn't theater, Larri considered, and this television thing was relatively new. Still, it was work, and it was Miss Littlefield asking. "Absolutely!" Larri said.⁷

The requirements for the audition were not so much based on dance, but on looks. The casting director wanted Ziegfeld-type showgirls. Comedian Ed Wynn,

one of the stars of the show and a former Ziegfeld *Follies* performer, picked Larri out of the lineup and said, “That’s a Ziegfeld face.”⁸ She was one of a mere handful out of 75 finalists who got the job.

The Four-Star Revue was broadcast live from the cavernous Center Theater (now demolished) in Rockefeller Center – a mere five-minute walk from the Club. The show had four rotating hosts: Wynn, Jimmy Durante, Jack Carson and Danny Thomas.

Larri was featured as “the pretty girl” in vaudeville-style sketches. She noted the irony that the show had hired Miss Littlefield, one of the country’s foremost choreographers, and yet dancing was not the women’s primary purpose on the show. “Catherine had no choice but to make do with us!” she laughed.⁹

It may not have been pure art, but it was pure entertainment. Still, as Larri recalled, in those pre-AFTRA days (neither AFRA, Equity nor SAG had any jurisdiction over television), performers had it rough. “We worked all hours,” she said. “There would be last-minute rehearsals in theater lobbies and women’s restrooms. And we wore rented costumes that didn’t fit and were hard to move in.”¹⁰

On the plus side, Larri was becoming something of a television celebrity. Club friends walking with her to movies in Rockefeller Center would be astounded when fans would call out “Hi, Larri!”¹¹

NBC-TV’s publicity department was keyed into fan letters about or addressed to Larri, and hyped audience interest with press coverage. For the women’s market, *The American Magazine* ran an article called “I Broke into TV – By Larri Thomas: How a young girl from Wayne, Pa., crashed the big-time in Radio City.” It was a rather sugary piece and almost certainly a series of interviews culled into a first-person story. But it was great publicity.



Backstage. Screen snip, Hoy family video



Choreographer Catherine Littlefield, left, next to Larri (at rear), rehearsing a “Bali” number, *Four-Star Revue*, May 1951. Larri Hoy collection reproduced in Catherine Littlefield: A Life in Dance by Sharon Skeel

For the male market, sports writer Ed Fitzgerald was persuaded to interview Larri. Fitzgerald headed over to “the Rehearsal Club, in an old townhouse on West 53rd Street, [which] provides low-cost housing and meals to young women who are trying to make it on Broadway.”¹² He assumed that Larri would be “typical of the beautiful young women trying to get on the Broadway stage, but she sure wasn’t typically typical. Larri was tall, close to six feet, big and blonde and beautiful. She would stop traffic if she walked down the street in in a Salvation Army uniform carrying a tambourine.”¹³ Fitzgerald, who apparently had typical ideas about dancers, seemed surprised by her poise, intelligence, and her dedication to her craft.

An interesting tidbit about the Ed Fitzgerald interview was his suggestion that he take her to the theatrical restaurant Dinty Moore’s at 216-220 West 46th Street. “Wonderful,” Fitzgerald claimed that Larri said. “Somebody took

me there once and I loved it.”¹⁴ Larri did not know that Dinty Moore’s was in the brownstone that had been the original Rehearsal Club from 1913 to 1920. (Actually, by that time, probably nobody knew.) When informed of this many years later, Larri was pleased, but confessed that she had no memory of Dinty Moore’s.¹⁵

With the combination of NBC’s savvy publicity and her own noticeable work, Larri moved up from *Four-Star* quickly. June Taylor asked Larri to join the cast of the new show she was choreographing, *The Colgate Comedy Hour*. It was NBC’s “sister show” to *Four-Star*, but much larger. *Colgate* was broadcast from the International Theatre on Columbus Circle (now the site of the Time Warner Center) – again, walking distance from the Club. Like *Four-Star*, it was hosted by a rotating list of stars, including Eddie Cantor, Abbott and Costello, and Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. It had the added gimmick of switching between New York, Chicago and El Capitan Theatre (now the Avalon) in Hollywood.

Colgate was the most expensive and prestigious variety show on television. Larri jumped at the chance. Her mother Lida was so proud of her daughter’s fast-moving career that she wrote her 1951 novel, *The Lovely Duckling*, based on Larri’s success.

But even though *Colgate* was a great gig, Larri sensed that New York was not where she needed to be. NBC was expanding its television programming, but not necessarily in the East. Its West Coast Radio City on Hollywood and Vine had become inadequate, so RCA had just purchased 19 acres in Burbank from Jack Warner to build new facilities. CBS was building a multi-million-dollar “Television City” in West LA. And there was talk of *Four-Star*, *Colgate* and other shows moving west in the fall.

“I saw the writing on the wall,” Larri said. “I had the feeling that everything was moving out here [LA] and I wanted to get in early.”¹⁶



Publicity shot, ca. 1952. Screen snip,
Hoy family video

In the fall of 1951, Larri made a tearful good-bye to the Club and boarded a train for Los Angeles. She moved in with a fellow Pennsylvanian, dancer-actress Ann McCrae, and rented a car that guzzled gas at six cents a gallon.

Her timing couldn’t have been more perfect. The *American Magazine* story hit the stands in December, making an impressive addition to her portfolio. Like a true Rehearsal Club girl, she exchanged tips and broadened her social network with her actress and dancer friends.

And she was very aware of her own marketability. LA was a town full of hopefuls and probably hundreds of girl dancers, so she would need an edge. That edge would be her looks. Beauty was a plus in New York, but, for better or worse, it was considered essential in looks-centric LA. Her talent was her gift, but her appearance was her currency. After all, she had been cast in *Four-Star* because Ed Wynn

thought she looked like a Ziegfeld girl. Then they had let her dance.

She thus began modeling for the then-requisite “cheesecake” photos that were reprinted in newspapers and magazines nationwide. She also broadened her versatility by mastering jazz and contemporary dance, in addition to maintaining her ballet base.

It worked. She began snagging variety shows right and left, including the popular *Ray Bolger Show* on CBS. She became the model for Halo shampoo live commercials on the LA *Colgate*. She had, columnist Earl Wilson gushed, “the most beautiful hair and legs on TV.”¹⁷



“Glorify your hair – with Halo!” Live commercial during *Colgate Comedy Hour*, LA version, October 1952. *Screen snip*



With Sylvia Lewis (a fellow *Colgate* dancer and lifelong friend) and Ray Bolger in an episode of *The Ray Bolger Show* (aka *Where’s Raymond?*), filmed November 1953 at Desilu. *Screen snip*

contracted by the Goldwyn studio to appear in the film as Adelaide’s nightclub backup dancers – with the stipulation that they embark on a three-month *Guys and Dolls* promotional tour.

It sounded grueling, and it would be. Larri was shrewd about it. “When they asked me to be [a Goldwyn Girl],” Larri related, “I said, ‘I have a very expensive appetite and like to make long-distance calls.’ They said, ‘OK.’ I had chateaubriand for two every night. But they jangled us up every morning at dawn and

Larri’s smart, early move to LA for television laid the groundwork for a TV career that would last nearly forty years in diverse capacities. In addition to musical shows, she would be cast for acting roles in *Peter Gunn*, *Bachelor Father*, *The Bob Cummings Show*, *Dr. Kildare* and *Route 66*. Lucille Ball, the most successful woman on television at the time (and Club icon for her role in the film *Stage Door*) was an admirer, and hired Larri for guest spots on both *The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour* and the later *The Lucy Show*.

And Larri’s arrival closely coincided with the 1952 founding of AFTRA. Working conditions improved considerably. “Custom-made costumes and decent hours at last!”¹⁸ she said.

She branched out from TV to film work remarkably early, shooting two films, *Million Dollar Mermaid* and *Road to Bali*, within just months of arriving. In the 1950s alone, her other films included *House of Wax*, *Easy to Love*, *Artists and Models* (with *Colgate*’s Martin and Lewis), *Oklahoma!*, *Love Me or Leave Me*, *Guys and Dolls*, *The King and Four Queens*, *The Pajama Game* and *South Pacific*.

She struck gold, publicity-wise, with the 1955 film version of *Guys and Dolls*. The Goldwyn-MGM musical starred an oddly miscast (and personally at odds) Marlon Brando as Skye and Frank Sinatra as Nathan, with Jeans Simmons as Sister Sarah and Vivian Blaine reprising her Broadway role of Adelaide. Arguably the most entertaining moments in the film are the musical numbers, staged by the legendary Michael Kidd.

Larri was named a “Goldwyn Girl,” one of six actress/dancers



“Take Back Your Mink,” *Guys and Dolls*, released 1955 *Screen snip*

we never got time to change our girdles. Rest time was usually four minutes between taxis.”¹⁹

As she had at the Club, Larri bonded with her fellow dancers: Barbara Brent, Jann Darlyn, Madelyn Darrow, June Kirby, and Pat Sheehan. The press coverage of the girls’ tour was invariably centered on their looks and potential rivalries. Larri was asked what it was like to fight with Jean Simmons over Brando in the Havana scene. “It’s my first fight with another woman,” she said, “anywhere. You are always hearing about women battling in powder rooms in nightclubs. Well, I never hit another woman in my life.”²⁰

Another typical reporter question was asking the girls’ physical measurements. In Boston, a reporter invited the dancers to lunch, jotting down the particulars offered by each. Larri took his pencil and pad and wrote her own: “5 feet, 7 inches, weight 125. (Dancer, lots of muscle.) Born Jan. 23, 1932. Hometown, Wayne, Penn. Long list of credits. Four main numbers in *Guys and Dolls*. In movies: *Easy to Love*, *Oklahoma*, *Love Me or Leave Me*. On Jimmy Durante and Milton Berle shows. Danced in the music circus in New Jersey. Ordered sirloin steak. Ate part of neighbor’s, too.”²¹



With Brando in the Havana nightclub scene, *Guys and Dolls*. IMDB



“Pajama Girl”: promo shot for *Pajama Game*, for which she assisted both director Stanley Donen and choreographer Bob Fosse; released 1957 *Pinterest*

Even though the reporter boasted about bringing his own tape measure, Larri was the only one not to provide her measurements.

Because of her wit, poise, and intrinsic dance knowledge, Larri became the designated spokesperson for the Goldwyn Girls. Ultimately, she said, she “had the best of it”²² when it came to the difficulties of the tour. The worst moment she experienced was when “one of Marlon Brando’s fans leaked her fountain pen all over my white stole.”²³

Guys and Dolls choreographer Michael Kidd was one of Larri’s great champions. In 1956, when director Stanley Donen asked Kidd to help him with *Pajama Game*, Kidd, who was committed in New York, told Donen, “Get Larri Thomas. She can take care of what you need.”²⁴

Donen appointed Larri his assistant on the film – uncredited, but she loved it. In addition to dancing in the film, she did everything: dance assistance to the singular Bob Fosse, music cues, crowd wrangling. She particularly enjoyed riding the boom, “the most fun I’ve ever had in show business.”²⁵ She

again was completely game for promotional press photos, posing cheesecake as a “Pajama Girl.” Larri knew her stuff.

One down side to press largely focused on her physique was the intrusion into her personal life. Gossip columnists invariably tried to guess who Larri was seriously dating. Bad-boy actor Scott Brady was a contender for a while, followed by *Singin’ in the Rain*’s Donald O’Connor. But while filming the 1953 Esther Williams musical *Easy to Love*, she noticed the second lead, John Bromfield, who looked rather amazing in a leopard-print swimsuit. Bromfield was a kind, friendly, journeyman actor soon headed for Western TV stardom, even if he was more interested in fishing than acting.

A romance began by at least 1954 (and is probably why Larri warned the Goldwyn studios that she liked to make long-distance calls). In December 1955, after the *Guys and Dolls* tour, Bromfield managed to get Larri a role in *Curucu*, a sci-fi he was filming in Brazil. They were married while on location on a ship off the Brazilian coast. For a while, the couple was photographed in scenes of domestic bliss. But they separated after four years, and divorced after two more.

Larri stated that she honestly did not know why the marriage failed. “He was such a nice guy, so handsome.”²⁶ They remained friends. At least, generally friends. Sometime later, an interviewer showed Larri a letter that Bromfield had written: “My third wife Lari [sic] Thomas was a dancer, a true gypsy who loved dancing more than she loved me so it didn’t work.” Larri responded, “I don’t like the sound of that at all. *That’s* interesting to know.” And after a pause, she added, “You’d think that after six years of marriage John would at least give me the second ‘r’ in my name!”²⁷



At a Beverly Hills Hotel gala with John Bromfield about two months after their Brazil wedding. *NY Daily News*, Feb 13, 1956

Between 1958 and 1961, Larri appeared in three Fred Astaire TV specials, for which the choreographer, Hermes Pan, did not even have her audition; she was hired on her reputation. She also shot a Bobby Darin special and at least four other television shows, appeared in four films, and in a production of *Guys and Dolls* with the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera.



Leo Durocher, 1960. *Getty*

Nevertheless, as soon as she separated from Bromfield, most of the press she received was speculation about her personal life.

In November 1959, the tabloid *New York Mirror* broke the story that Larri had been out on the town with baseball great Leo Durocher. Gossip columnists nationwide went wild.

Known as “Leo the Lip” for his argumentative personality, Durocher had been a shortstop for the New York Yankees before Larri was born. He had most recently managed the New York Giants before turning to sportscasting. Nearly 30 years Larri’s senior, he was separated from his third wife, actress Laraine Day, and was a friend of actors, bookies, pool sharks, and possibly mobsters.



Larri, center: “Marian the Librarian,” *The Music Man*, released 1962. *The Passionate Moviegoer*

No photos of Larri and Leo together surfaced, but newspapers covering the gossip made liberal use of Larri’s cheesecake shots from years before.

Larri insisted that there was no romance. “Leo is a friend of mine,” she told the Associated Press, “a friend of my husband, a friend of my family. That is all.”²⁸ How they all were so friendly with Durocher was never explained. *The New York Mirror* questioned her mother, Lida. “This is too intimate a thing to discuss,” Mrs. Thomas responded. As for her daughter marrying Leo, she had, she said, “no predictions.”²⁹ That was probably a good bet.

“Larri Thomas,” wrote a gossip columnist in 1961, “who made some news with Leo Durocher, has been signed as one of the dancing girls in Warner’s upcoming *The Music Man*.”³⁰

Tacky reference to Leo and “dancing girls” notwithstanding, the press mention of Larri doing *Music Man* is something of an historic marker in her life, for a couple of reasons. *Music Man* would be the first of four blockbuster – and now classic – film musicals of the 1960s that Larri would be involved with. The other reason was the casting of another former New York dancer named Bruce Hoy.

Athletic, acrobatic and witty, Bruce was born two months after Larri in Ohio, the son of a respected judge and grandson of William Ellsworth Hoy, the famous hearing-impaired center fielder for the Cincinnati Reds. Bruce had been a tumbler, footballer, swimmer and dance student when he entered Columbia University. It was dance that intrigued him most. He landed stock jobs before scoring a hit with *Silk Stockings* on Broadway, which he left to tour with the American Ballet Theater. By at least 1957, Bruce became a member of the American School of Ballet in LA, headed by *Silk Stockings* choreographer Eugene Loring. He progressed to engagements with the Civic Light Opera; *Funny Face*, where he was Fred Astaire’s stand-in and a specialty dancer with Audrey Hepburn; the film version of *Silk Stockings*; and serving as Loring’s assistant on film and TV work.



With husband, dancer-choreographer Bruce Hoy. Screen snip, Hoy family video,

It was a perfect combination of background, common interests, career arcs, mutual friends, outlook and talent. The match would last the rest of their lives.

Larri and Bruce were two of 40 dancers in *Music Man*, selected from hundreds. Auditions were held in a barn-like Warner studio as River City set construction proceeded noisily outside. Choreographer and

former Michael Kidd assistant Onna White, who had staged the dances for the Broadway show, assigned specialties to both of them.

Rehearsals lasted seven weeks, with another 14 weeks of shooting into mid-summer 1961. According to star Robert Preston, making the film with such a large, talented cast was a joy. “Why,” he said, “there’s a birthday party almost every night, soft drinks, cake and jokes on the set. Everyone’s always got something interesting happening to them.”³¹ Including Larri and Bruce, who soon became a couple.

In the spring of 1963, Larri got a call from Walt Disney’s office. She was asked if she’d be interested in working as stand-in for the Broadway actress-singer Julie Andrews in the new Disney film called *Mary Poppins*.

According to some press reports, Disney had spotted Larri doing a guest spot on the ABC-TV daytime drama *Day in Court* and decided she looked enough like Julie Andrews to be her double. But that story, run in 1963 gossip columns, may make one wonder how the workaholic Disney found time to watch soaps. He reportedly had never even seen an episode of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* before his casting department suggested he take a look.

However she came to Disney’s attention, Larri agreed that it was simply a matter of physical similarities. She told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “They picked me as her stand-in because we’re the same height and have the same bone structure. And we’ve spent so much time together, I’m even picking up an English accent.”³²

“We did look somewhat alike,” Julie Andrews writes in her 2019 memoir, *Home Work*, and notes that Larri “was a wonderful dancer and stuntwoman.”³³

Poppins proved a technically complicated shoot utilizing then-unprecedented effects. For the nearly 20 minutes of scenes involving animated backgrounds and characters, the actors responded to imaginary creatures while working in front of a screen infused with a yellow hue from sodium vapor lights (an improvement on the blue screen and predecessor of contemporary green screens).³⁴ The lights were intensely bright and hot. Wigs and costumes would add to the actors’ discomfort on the warm summer shooting days.

Julie was in awe of Larri’s work. “I discovered that being a stand-in requires incredible patience and skill,” she writes. “Whenever there is a new scene to set up and to light, a stand-in saves the actor’s energy by taking his or her place, usually wearing an equivalent costume or similar color palette that helps the director of photography do the lighting job. It’s backbreaking work, because you are mostly on your feet for great lengths of time, standing very still. Larri became a good friend.”³⁵ It may have been that friendship, or perhaps the fact that Larri’s work was



Surprise! It’s Larri.
Screen snip



The lady in the carriage, “Chim Chim
Cheree” Screen snip

appreciated by everyone, that led to her cameo as the lady in the carriage in the “Chim Chim Cheree” number.

Larri’s stand-in duties for the “I Love to Laugh” number meant a reunion with the man who helped her get her first television job back in New York: the great Ed Wynn, “Uncle Albert,” now frail but thoroughly enjoying his time on the shoot.

The most complicated dance in the film was the “Step in Time” number. Larri wasn’t in it – but Bruce was. The choreographers, Marc Breaux and Dee Dee Wood, had been suggested to Disney by Dick Van Dyke, who appreciated their skill with actors who were not primarily dancers. With dancers, however, they could be relentless. The married couple had been proteges of Michael Kidd, and utilized the demanding, uber-athletic Kidd style, which sometimes required dancers to be stuntpeople. This was Bruce’s specialty, and he was hired to be one of the acrobatic chimney sweeps.

Bruce inadvertently added a particularly memorable bit to the film. He was one of five male dancers assigned to create sound effects for the dancing penguins in the “Jolly Holiday” number by tap-dancing in flippers. The results were unsatisfactory, so they were told to break for lunch. Returning to the mic in the sound studio, dancer and future costume designer Pete Menefee said to Bruce, “The food is so terrific here.” Bruce slapped his stomach and said, “Great!” A technician in the booth asked, “Who made that sound near the microphone?” The result: the penguins’ dance taps were created by five chimney sweeps slapping their bare bellies.³⁶

Principal photography wrapped in September. Larri and Bruce then headed back over to Warner Brothers, about a five-minute drive from Disney in Burbank, to shoot *My Fair Lady*. This of course was the film version of the Broadway hit that had made Julie Andrews a star, and



“Ascot Gavotte,” *My Fair Lady*
Screen snip



Julie in discussion as Larri looks on.
Personal collection of Dee Dee Wood, reprinted in
Sound of Music: The Making of America's
Favorite Movie by Julia Antopol Hirsch

for which she’d been notoriously passed over – making her available for *Poppins*.

Fair Lady’s choreographer was Hermes Pan, Fred Astaire’s longtime collaborator who had hired Larri for three Astaire TV specials. Visually, the movie offers some of the most sumptuous combinations of choreography and costumes (by Cecil Beaton) ever filmed. (Yes, that’s Larri waltzing behind Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn in the Embassy Ball scene.) It proved a fairly smooth shoot, even the complicated Ascot races scene. On a day off, Sunday, November 2, 1963, Larri and Bruce were married, a cause for celebration among the cast; “everyone took time to say something personal” to them, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.³⁷

From the sublime to the, well, less so. Larri stayed at Warner’s for a brief but noticeable bit in the Rat Pack vehicle, *Robin and the 7 Hoods*, choreographed by fellow *Colgate* alumnus Jack Baker. Larri is the woman standing next to Sinatra, in his final musical film, for the hit “My Kind of Town” number.

By the end of 1963, Julie Andrews had signed to play Maria in *The Sound of Music*. It was a no-brainer that Larri would again be hired as Julie's stand-in. Larri was working as the "Billboard Girl" in early 1964 for first season of the variety show *The Hollywood Palace*, filmed at her old LA *Colgate* stomping grounds, the former El Capitan Theatre on Vine. It was basically a spokesmodel job, and nothing to compare with a major motion picture with a nice summer trip to Austria. She was replaced by a then-unknown Raquel Welch.



Larri rehearsing with the child stand-ins on location for *The Sound of Music*. Collection of former child stand-in Kate Huddleston, reprinted in *Syracuse.com*, March 22, 2019

Filming for *MUSIC* began at the Fox studios in Century City in March of 1964, followed by relocation to Salzburg for most of the exteriors. Far less studio-bound, it was obviously a very different experience from *Poppins*. And with no animated penguins. But the 12- to 14-hour workdays could be hectic and often subject to unpredictable weather. The "I Have Confidence" number was particularly arduous, requiring lengthy tech rehearsals with Larri due to the complexities of the traveling boom.

Larri would wind down in the evenings in the bar of the Hotel Bristol with castmates Eleanor Parker and Peggy Wood, and her fellow *Poppins* imports, choreographers Marc Breau and Dee Dee Wood. The gang would gather around the piano as Christopher Plummer played popular tunes. Plummer's evening bar residence was apparently legendary. "Sometimes," Larri said, "he'd stay up all night and then go to work from the bar, but he never forgot his lines."³⁸

In addition to stand-in duties, Larri doubled for Julie in the long shot with the children at the Shaftsbury railway for the "Favorite Things" instrumental montage, and cavorting in trees as the Captain drives by. The trees were damp from a recent rain that had delayed filming, as the late Charmian Carr ("Liesl") recalled, but all the children and Larri had "great fun" during the sequence.³⁹

By this time, at least, Larri truly understood the Julie Andrews resemblance. Salzburg residents would often stop Larri on the street, calling her "Miss Andrews" and asking for her autograph. Sometimes she'd relent and simply sign Julie's name. "It was easier," she sighed, "than trying to convince people I'm not her."⁴⁰



The 1965 Disneyland anniversary special. *Screen snip*.

Journalists looking for an Eve Harrington-type angle on Larri were disappointed. "Julie is a lovely person," she said to a reporter while filming *MUSIC*. "We were all terribly upset for her when she didn't get the movie of *My Fair Lady*. But now we feel it has worked to her advantage. She has been able to do three varied roles: in *Mary Poppins* – it's great – *The Americanization of Emily*, and this one. Audiences will be able to think of her as someone other than Eliza Doolittle."⁴¹ Larri had nothing but praise for Julie. For that matter, Larri never seems to have said a bad word about anyone she worked with.

In July, Larri wrapped up her work on *Music*, her final blockbuster of the '60s and the only one without Bruce. But she wasn't quite through with her *Poppins* duties yet. As she had with *Guys and Dolls* and *Pajama Game*, she had signed to participate in promotional events for the film.

Mary Poppins had a spectacular and singularly Disney-esque premiere at Graumann's Chinese Theater on August 27, 1964. Two days later, and for the next two weeks, Larri appeared as "Mary Poppins" at LA's Bullock's Downtown department store, greeting children and posing for photos along with actor Reginald Owen ("Admiral Boom") among displays of artwork and original costumes from the film.

For *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color: 10th Anniversary Disneyland Special*, broadcast January 3, 1965 on NBC, it was Larri dancing with the chimney sweeps to "Chim Chim Cheree" in front of the Sleeping Beauty Castle. The piece was sweetly peppy, choreographed by Disney dance director Tom Mahoney, with plenty of lifts, pirouettes, and somersaults to reflect Breaux and Wood's work. And Larri got to fly in and out, partially via studio-taped intercuts.



As "Dean's Girl," on *The Dean Martin Show*, 1966.
golddiggers.wordpress.com

It was now the mid-sixties. Comedy/variety shows were still going strong, and movie musicals, although changing, still needed dancers. Larri was one of the best known and most reliable performers to fit both genres, and she continued to work regularly to the end of the decade.

From 1965 until 1968, Larri was a familiar face to fans of her old *Colgate* pal Dean Martin as a featured dancer and sketch player on *The Dean Martin Show*. Her assignments ranged from the elegant to the cheesy – essentially, the assignments for all the female dancers on that program. Whereas the pretty-girl-dancer motif of 1950s variety shows had been comparatively innocent, '60s shows were applying that same formula to a looser sexual awareness with mixed results. The *Martin* show was very popular but notoriously tone-deaf in its presentation of women. Still, it was regular work. Larri was showcased, rose above the tiresome innuendos with aplomb, danced

with some of the best in the business, and enjoyed working with some longtime friends.

Another longtime friend, Lucille Ball, was impressed by reports of Larri's stand-in assignments. She hired Larri as her own stand-in on *The Lucy Show* and as a featured performer on the 1965 episode "Lucy Helps Danny Thomas" – giving Larri another reunion with an old *Four-Star* colleague.

In the off-season, she did a series of summer specials (including Martin's) and found plenty of film work. The *Martin* show dances were often staged by Robert Sidney, a former Balanchine dancer whom Larri had known from possibly as far back as *Four-Star*. He hired Larri to dance the opening title solo in Dean Martin's 1966 Bond spoof *The Silencers*. It's an elegantly performed, intentionally campy number, with Larri doing a perhaps male gay-coded striptease with a huge white feather boa and matching, obviously non-functional feather bikini



Dancing to the main titles in *The Silencers*, released 1966.

[Pinterest](#)

designed by Moss Mabry; impossibly high white heels; and her hair piled so high on top of her head that it probably made her close to eight feet tall. The boa is actually given most of the choreography.



Larri, ca. 1970. *Tumblr*

From Bond spoof to Elvis period piece was something of a leap, but Larri was happy to return to Goldwyn for *Frankie and Johnny* with Presley and fellow former Club girl Donna Douglas. Larri had perhaps less opportunity than usual to display her dancing skills, but decent screen time as a glamorous early 19th-century stage performer. Released in 1966, the film proved a harmless but futile attempt to make Elvis shine in a conventional musical.

Larri then returned to Disney one last time for what would be the final feature of Walt's lifetime, *The Happiest Millionaire*. The musical starred Fred MacMurray, Greer Garson, Leslie Ann Warren and John Davidson, with choreography again by the accomplished Marc Breau and Dee Dee Wood. Much of the picture was shot in the summer of 1966 on Disney's massive Stage 2, former home of Cherry Tree Lane (and now named the Julie Andrews Stage). The film was released in the summer of 1967, six months after Disney's death, and suffered, perhaps inevitably, from unfavorable comparisons to *Poppins*.

Millionaire would also prove to be Larri's final feature. She was pregnant with her and Bruce's first child while she was filming. In October of 1966, just before their third anniversary, their daughter Amy was born. Larri continued with the *Martin* show, but after the birth of their second daughter, Elizabeth, in 1969, she halted her career voluntarily to focus on her family. From then on, she would accept work only intermittently.

Bruce was by now a busy choreographer who acted occasionally. During the 1970s, he and Larri both took roles on children's television shows. Bruce was featured in episodes of *Sigmund and the Sea Monsters* for the Krofft brothers, and Larri played the graceful, shy Henrietta Hippo on the educational program *The New Zoo Revue*.

It may seem odd to a casual observer that someone who looked as beautiful and danced as magnificently as Larri should take a job where she wore a hippo costume. A dancer might know otherwise. She was a consummate professional, capable of swinging on wires and from trees, dancing in everything from sequins and boas and pink baby-doll nighties to, yes, a hippo costume. And no doubt, she was pleased to do a show her children could enjoy.

She was also without vanity. As she grew older, Larri made no attempts to artificially alter her looks.

A project dear to Larri's heart at this time was the Professional Dancers' Society (PDS), a Los Angeles nonprofit affiliated with The Actors Fund to assist active and inactive dancers in need of financial assistance. With friends such as Mitzi Gaynor, Sylvia Lewis and *Martin* show choreographer Robert Sidney, Larri became one of its champions beginning in the late 1970s.



With John Ritter on the set of *Life with Lucy*, 1986. *Screen snip, Hoy family video*



Larri ca. 2010
michaeljsonntag.wordpress.com

Interestingly, one goal of the PDS was to establish a residence for dancers – not unlike the Rehearsal Club. Unfortunately, the plan never materialized. Nevertheless, Larri and Bruce were tireless activists on behalf of their fellow former dancers. The couple was often cited in newspaper social columns attending fundraising galas.

In 1984, Larri received the Professional Dancers' Society's prestigious Gypsy Robe, an honor bestowed on Hollywood dancers, at its annual Fall Ball. She was recognized both for her distinguished career and her efforts on behalf of the organization.

Although Larri was selective in her work at this time, she could never say no to Lucy. More than 20 years after she'd last worked for Lucille Ball, Larri accepted Lucy's offer to serve as her stand-in for *Life with Lucy* in 1986. The series had only a brief run, but the set was a happy one. Lucy enjoyed working with people she had hired in the past, and Larri was delighted to re-unite with Lucy and her team.

But after a few TV guest spots and films into the early '90s, Larri began experiencing health issues. Her sight in one eye was diminishing, and she occasionally used a wheelchair. Nevertheless, she and Bruce remained active in their charity work and community of friends.

By the 1990s, Larri was a popular and generous interviewee, and goldmine of information, for writers chronicling her films, the early days of television, and her notable ballet teachers. Regardless of her compromised health, she was gracious, kind, and helpful, even to writers she had not previously met.

And she never forgot her roots. In 1998, Larri discovered that the The Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society in Berwyn, PA, home of her former high school, had an interest in the novels written by her mother, Lida, who had died in 1960. Larri proudly sent them a copy of *The Lovely Duckling*, the book Lida had written in 1951 based on Larri's teen years and early success as a dancer. The Society noted their "good fortune" in receiving the collector's item from Larri.⁴² After her years filled with success, Larri still held a fondness for the memories of her youth, and great pride in her late mother, who had been supportive enough to find her New York-dreaming daughter a room at the Rehearsal Club.

Larri had one last, notable stand-in assignment in 2003, for Mary Tyler Moore in the TV version of *The Gin Game*. The filmed play also starred Larri's *Poppins* pal, Dick Van Dyke.

Ten years later, in the autumn of 2013, Larri suffered a fall in her home in Sherman Oaks, CA. She never recovered. Larri Thomas Hoy died peacefully on October 20, 2013 at age 81. Sadly, Bruce passed away only three months later. Their daughters coordinated a special memorial celebration for both their parents.

Larri's friends to this day recall her laughter, down-to-earth persona, delightful sense of humor, discipline, and deep commitment to her craft and to her fellow dancers.

She knew what she was doing, she loved doing it, and she did it extremely well. She survives in her work. She's that dancer we can't help but notice, that woman who stands out in that scene, the girl we didn't even know that we knew.

“There is a particular moment you work for, and when it happens, all you can say is, ‘Aah.’” —
Larri Thomas ⁴³

A Larri Gallery

Will Dance at Longwood

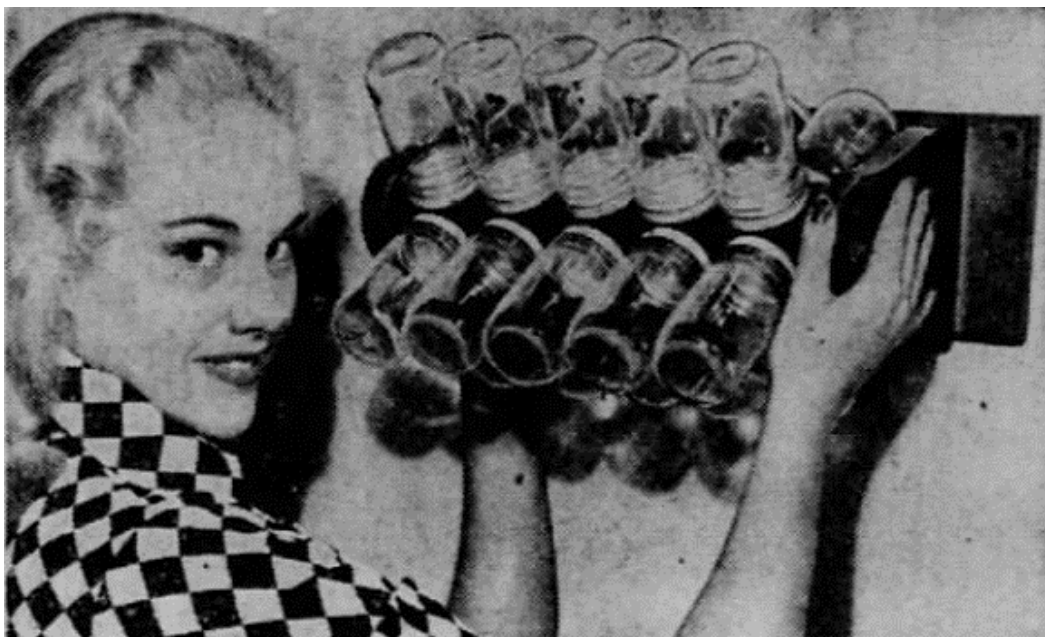


Three dancers from the ballet *Walpurgis Night*, to be staged June 29 in the Longwood open air theatre as a benefit performance for the Girl Scouts of Chester County, are (left to right): Nance Lynch, Rhoda Winter, and Larri Thomas. *Walpurgis* is one of three new ballets to be staged during the evening by Thomas Cannon and his international troupe.

Larri, right, in recital, age 16. *The News Journal*, Wilmington, DE, June 16, 1948



Promo shot shortly before moving to LA. *Pasadena Independent*, Pasadena, CA, Oct 31, 1951



Early LA early modeling job: displaying storage rack. *Sacramento Bee*, December 22, 1951



Goldwyn Girls (Larri, third from left) with Brando on the Hotbox Club set, *Guys and Dolls*, released 1955. *Pinterest*



With choreographer Michael Kidd on the set of *Guys and Dolls*. *IMDB*



Doris Day, Larri, John Raitt and Barbara Nichols between takes of *The Pajama Game*, released 1957. *Pinterest*



With first husband, TV Western series actor John Bromfield. *TV-Radio Life*, March 8, 1958



“Bob and the Ballerina” episode, *The Bob Cummings Show*, aired May 5, 1959. *SylviaLewis.net*



“Lucy Wants a Career” episode, *The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour*, aired April 13, 1959, with Lucille Ball. *Pinterest*



With Bromfield, 1959, the year they separated. *westernclippings.com*



“Blues and All That Jazz,” with her friend Sylvia Lewis, choreographed by Tony Charmoli; *The Dinah Shore Chevy Show*, aired December 11, 1960. *SylviaLewis.net*



A non-dance role: Sharon in “A Rough Buck,” episode of *Peter Gunn* with Craig Stevens, aired November 10, 1958. *Screen snip*



“Night Train” in *Another Evening with Fred Astaire*, aired November 4, 1959. Larri plays the role of Fred’s former girlfriend, who he meets at a train station with her husband and children in tow.

Screen snip, Hoy family video



NBC promo shot for January 31, 1961 special *Bobby Darin and Friends* with Darlene Engle, choreographed by Tony Charoli *Clarion-Ledger, Jackson, MS, Jan 29, 1961*



“The Wells Fargo Wagon,” *The Music Man*, released 1962. *Screen snip*



“My Kind of Town” with Frank Sinatra, *Robin and the 7 Hoods*, released 1964. *Screen snip*



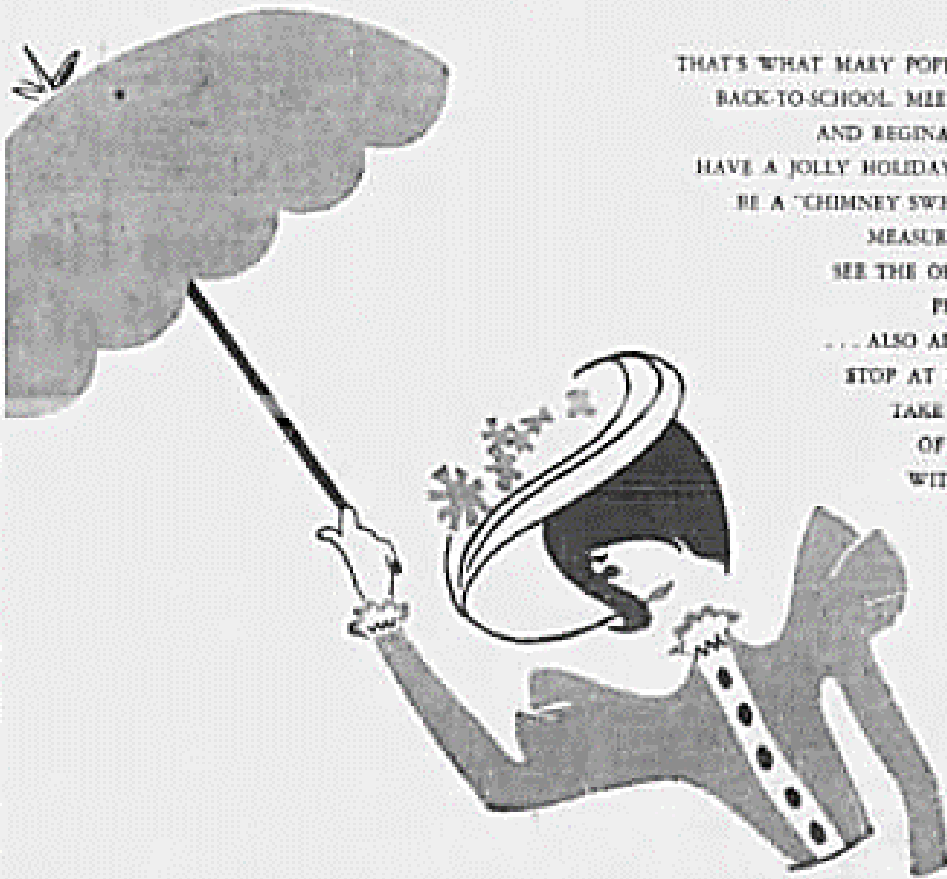
“Blues for the Left Foot” episode, *Route 66*, aired March 9, 1962. *Screen snip*



Larri rehearses for the February 18, 1964 episode of *The Andy Williams Show* in a leg cast. This was a press photo syndicated nationwide, and it's unclear if the cast was a gag, as some newspapers claimed, or real, as did others.
Tampa Times, Feb 15, 1964



It's...supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!!*



THAT'S WHAT MARY POPPINS* SAYS ABOUT BULLOCK'S DOWNTOWN FOR
BACK-TO-SCHOOL. MEET LARRI THOMAS COSTUMED AS MARY POPPINS
AND REGINALD OWEN, TOMORROW, SATURDAY, AUGUST 29.
HAVE A JOLLY HOLIDAY ON THE MARY POPPINS MERRY-GO-ROUND . . .
BE A "CHIMNEY SWEEP" AND SLIDE DOWN OUR MAGIC CHIMNEY . . .
MEASURE UP WITH OUR MAGIC MEASURING STICK . . .
SEE THE ORIGINAL ART AND ANIMATION EXHIBIT ON THE
PREPARATION OF WALT DISNEY'S MARY POPPINS
. . . ALSO ALL THE ORIGINAL COSTUMES FROM THE MOVIE!!
STOP AT BULLOCK'S DOWNTOWN FOR BACK TO SCHOOL,
TAKE YOUR TRIP THROUGH THE WHIMSICAL WORLD
OF MARY POPPINS AND SEE OUR LATEST FASHIONS
WITH THE "MAGIC OF MOTION" . . . FLYING SKIRTS . . .
AUGUST 29 THROUGH SEPTEMBER 12
YOUNG FASHION CENTER, FIFTH FLOOR,
BULLOCK'S BROADWAY BUILDING
*WALT DISNEY PRODUCTIONS

Bullock's
Downtown

"Meet Larri Thomas costumed as Mary Poppins..."

Advertisement for Disney promotional event at Bullock's Downtown Los Angeles, August 29 - September 12, 1964.

(Personal aside: the author of this story attended this event.)

. *LA Times*, August 28, 1964



Sound of Music shoot, summer of 1964
Screen snip, Hoy family video



“Lucy Helps Danny Thomas” episode, *The Lucy Show*, aired November 1, 1965, with Lucille Ball (left) and Miriam Nelson. *Screen snip*



The Dean Martin Show, aired November 16, 1967, with Martin (left) and Buddy Ebsen
Screen snip



Frankie and Johnny, released 1966, with Elvis Presley and fellow former Club girl Donna Douglas. *Screen snip*



With Walt Disney, ca. 1966. *Screen snip, Hoy family video*



Larri and Bruce. *Screen snip, Hoy family video*

-
- ¹ Levinson, Peter. *Puttin' On the Ritz: Fred Astaire and the Fine Art of Panache, A Biography*. New York: Macmillan, 2009, Kindle version
- ² Levinson, *ibid.*
- ³ Larri Thomas phone interview with author, March 2009
- ⁴ Larri, *ibid.*
- ⁵ Larri, *ibid.*
- ⁶ Larri, *ibid.*
- ⁷ Larri, *ibid.*
- ⁸ "Wynn Selects 'Ziegfeld Face' for TV Show." UP Syndicate story in *Times Dispatch*, Richmond, VA, Sept 25, 1950
- ⁹ Skeel, Sharon. *Catherine Littlefield: A Life in Dance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, Kindle version
- ¹⁰ Larri, *ibid.*
- ¹¹ Former Rehearsal Club resident conversation with author, March 2009
- ¹² Fitzgerald, Ed. *A Nickel an Inch: A Memoir*. New York: Athenium, 1985, p 90
- ¹³ Fitzgerald, *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Fitzgerald, *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Larri, *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Larri, *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Wilson, Earl. "It Happened Last Night." *Rapid City Journal*, Rapid City, SD, July 17, 1952
- ¹⁸ Larri, *ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Wilson Earl. "It Happened Last Night." *Courier-Post*, Camden, NJ, Aug 3, 1959
- ²⁰ "In Hollywood: Brando Takes a Whirl at Wild Latin Dance." *Lancaster Eagle-Gazette*, Lancaster, OH, May 23, 1955
- ²¹ Riley, John Wm. "Reporter on a Mission: Goldwyn Girls Interview Calls for Tape Measure." *Boston Globe*, Boston, MA, Sept 16, 1955
- ²² Wilson, 1959, *ibid.*
- ²³ Wilson, 1959, *ibid.*
- ²⁴ Endeman, Edith. "Bromfield Visits, Plugs TV Program." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Richmond, VA, Feb 12, 1957
- ²⁵ Heimer, Mel. "My New York." *Danville News*, Danville, PA Feb 14, 1957
- ²⁶ Weaver, Tom; Schecter, David; and Kronenberg, Steve. *The Creature Chronicles: Exploring the Black Lagoon Trilogy*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014, Kindle version
- ²⁷ Weaver, *ibid*
- ²⁸ "Laraine Day Denies Rumors of Rift with Leo Durocher." *Los Angeles Times*, Nov 14, 1959
- ²⁹ "Durocher May Shed Third Wife." UPI story in *Pasadena Independent*, Nov 14, 1959
- ³⁰ Mortimer, Lee. "New York Confidential." *Eureka Humboldt Standard*, Eureka, CA, March 16, 1961
- ³¹ Holland, Dave. "'Music Man' Has Film Crew's Happiness." *Valley Times*, North Hollywood, CA, June 21, 1961
- ³² Wilson, Barbara. "The Best of Europe: Salzburg." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, PA, June 23, 1964
- ³³ Andrews, Julie, with Emma Walton Hamilton. *Home Work: A Memoir of My Hollywood Years*. New York: Hachette, 2019, Kindle version
- ³⁴ Lee, Nathaniel. "How the original 'Mary Poppins' transformed the way movies are made today." *Business Insider*, Dec 26, 2018
- ³⁵ Andrews, *ibid.*
- ³⁶ Bailey, Caryn. "An Interview with *Mary Poppins* Chimney Sweep Pete Menefee." Rockin' Mama blog, 2013; retrieved 5/3/20
- ³⁷ Seidenbaum, Art. "Eliza Doolittle: Everyone's 'Fair Lady.'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 1964
- ³⁸ Hirsch, Julia Antopol. *Sound of Music: The Making of America's Favorite Movie*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2018, Kindle version
- ³⁹ Carr, Charmian. *Forever Lies: A Memoir of The Sound of Music*. New York: Penguin, 2001, Kindle version
- ⁴⁰ Wilson, Barbara, *ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Wilson, Barbara, *ibid.*
- ⁴² Fry, Barbara. "Lida Larrimore: Tredyffrin Novelist (Lida Larrimore Turner Thomas 1896-1960)." Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society History Quarterly Digital Archives.. Source: October 1998 Volume 36 Number 4, Pages 113–118
- ⁴³ Levinson, *ibid.*