

# A Masquerade

## Sometimes clothes don't make the man

*The relationship between dress and identity is a complicated one, and the territory this relationship stakes out is large. Often we dress to communicate who we are, but sometimes we dress to communicate something else entirely, as in this excerpt from Lois Barland's The Rivers Flow On.*

About 1855 there arrived in Eau Claire a small, dark haired, smooth faced, soft voiced young fellow called Billy Williams. He was as strong as an ox and a good mixer, going out with the boys and spending money like water. Although he drank, he always stopped before he became intoxicated. Billy secured employment as a cook in the woods and was such a good cook that he was much in demand and earned more than any other cook in Eau Claire. It was said that he cooked in this section of the state for thirty years, spending much of his time in Eau Claire and accumulating a good deal of property.

Billy was a great ladies' man and used to call on the girls and take them to dances and have a real good time. He never hesitated to go out with the lumberjacks and spend money in the saloons and became very popular with everybody.

He was quite a linguist and could speak Norwegian, English, German and Indian quite fluently, the latter language having been picked up while he cooked in the woods.

He was also of a very charitable turn of mind visiting those in want and leaving five, ten, and even fifteen dollars behind him without letting his identity be known. Another characteristic was his attention to the sick. He made it a practice to visit the sick and when he thought the patient was not getting sufficient care he would stay up night and day and administer to his or her wants.

After Billy had lived in Eau Claire some years, it began to be rumored around that Billy was not what he pretended to be, that instead of being a man, he was a woman. No one knew for sure but his manners voice and rather feminine shape had started the tongues wagging. Billy would not say a word one way or the other but kept right on cooking in the winter time and spending his time and money here during the summer, sometimes going away for short periods of time, but no one knew where.

Shortly before the eighties, there moved to Eau Claire a family from Allamakee County, Iowa, who

had come over from Norway and were acquainted with the events surrounding the disappearance of a Norwegian girl, Ingeborge Wekan. Now some of the members of this family saw Billy Williams several times and heard the rumors floating about that he was a woman masquerading as a man. They noted that Billy bore a marked resemblance to Mrs. Wekan down in Allamakee county. When one of the daughters went there to visit relatives, she told the aged Mrs. Wekan who promptly sent her son to see if this were his long-lost sister. Wekan recognized his sister at once, but could not persuade her to go back home. Billy sold 'his' property in Eau Claire and went further west working for several years on the big Dalrymple farms in North Dakota and later for 18 years cooking near Manhattan, Montana, using the name Sammy Williams.

Sammy died in 1908 and with 'his' death the masquerade of over half a century was revealed and the story of disappointed love which led to it unveiled:

Back in Hallingdal, Norway, about 1830, Ingeborge Wekan and Sven Norem were born and grew up as playmates and schoolmates. They fell in love and became engaged to be married. Shortly before the wedding, the Wekan family moved to America, settling in Allamakee County, Iowa. Sven came also and the date was set for the wedding. Ingeborge made her wedding clothes little dreaming the fate that was in store for her. Mrs. Norem, Sven's mother, forbade the wedding, saying the girl did not rank high enough in society for her son and Sven told Ingeborge that the wedding was off as his mother would not consent.

This was a terrible blow to Ingeborge and she never got over it. She could not endure remaining home with her parents and among her acquaintances any more and suddenly disappeared after giving her wedding clothes to her brother. Her parents were grief stricken, but their efforts to locate her were futile. Sven married another girl and was still living in Pine Lake, Iowa, in 1908.

*The River Flows On is available in the CVM Museum Store. The book is chiefly a history of Eau Claire from 1910 to 1960, but tucked within its pages are many interesting anecdotes from the city's earlier history.*