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FRIEND OF T. ROOSEVELT, HUSBAND OF OPERA DIVA

John Fox, Jr.

THE MOUNTAINS WERE HIS MUSE

*To the extent there was national fame back in the early 1900s,
“Lonesome Pine” author John Fox, Jr. had it.*

by **ROBIN ROENKER**



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lage of his schoolteacher father. At just 15, in 1878, he moved to Lexington to attend Transylvania University (then known as Kentucky University) before ultimately transferring to Harvard in 1880 as a sophomore. There his father's insistence on classical education paid dividends.

In a postcard home dated Oct. 17, 1880—accessed from the University of Kentucky Special Collections' extensive holding of Fox family papers—the young Fox wrote in crisp penmanship about his academic success at Harvard: "In my examination I was the only one of the new candidates (25 or 30 in number) that passed successfully in Latin. Am studying Latin, Greek, French, Italian and English."

Fox graduated Harvard *cum laude* just a few months shy of his 21st birthday, in 1883. Then followed short stints as a reporter for two New York papers, a failed attempt at law school, and periods as a private tutor, punctuated by sudden illnesses and periods of convalescence that

would plague him periodically throughout his life. (In "John Fox Jr., Appalachian Author," Fox biographer Bill York writes, "He seemed to be almost constantly sick . . . and one is tempted to suspect hypochondria.")

A major turning point in Fox's life came in 1882, when his love affair with the mountains—and their people—took hold. That summer, he visited his half-brother James's mining operation in Jellico, Tennessee, and was awestruck by the mountaineers and their ways.

In a "personal sketch" written in 1908—published for the first time in a 1955

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TOP: Fritzi Scheff, a native of Vienna, was married to John Fox, Jr. 1908-1913.

ABOVE: John Fox, Jr. circa 1894, age 31.

If you're familiar with the name John Fox, Jr., it's likely because you've been to Big Stone Gap, Virginia, where the John Fox, Jr. museum, in the author's one-time home, and the long-running outdoor drama "The Trail of the Lonesome Pine"—based on one of Fox's most successful novels—help keep his legacy alive. (The book was also adapted into at least four films, including a 1936 version starring Fred MacMurray and Henry Fonda—the first-ever cinematic release to be filmed outdoors in full Technicolor.)

Or, maybe your travels have taken you through Kingdom Come State Park—atop Pine Mountain near Cumberland, Kentucky—which was named for Fox's 1903 novel "The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come." A blockbuster of its time that secured Fox's status as an author of note, "Little Shepherd" was one of the earliest American novels to sell a million copies.

Though Fox was inducted posthumously into the Kentucky Writers Hall of

Fame earlier this year, few today have read deep into his canon of nine novels and 25 short stories, all of them set in the Appalachian Mountains.

Perhaps fewer still know the intricacies of Fox's own life story, which itself reads—on some levels—like a novel, one that saw a Kentucky boy at the turn of the century rise to achieve national fame, cover two wars, build a long-term friendship with a future president, and marry the country's most famous opera diva.

A writer is born

Both Virginia and Kentucky claim Fox as their own—and rightly so. His devotion to both states was deep and lasting. (He often said that his home in Virginia's Big Stone Gap was the only place he could really write; and yet he insisted that he was to be buried in the family's cemetery near his Kentucky birthplace.)

Born in December 1862 in Stony Point, near Paris, Kentucky, Fox grew up studying Greek and Latin under the tute-



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ABOVE: John Fox, Jr. around the time of his Harvard graduation, age 20, ca. 1883.

LEFT: John Fox Jr. at the train station in Lexington, Ky., located roughly 30 miles from his birthplace in Stony Point.



LEFT: John Fox, Jr. reading outside Big Stone Gap home, ca. 1905.

RIGHT: John Fox Jr. as he was rising to national fame, circa 1900.

collection of papers compiled by his sister, Elizabeth Fox Moore—Fox waxes poetically about the people he met and came to befriend in the mountains: Uncle Tommie, Uncle Billy, Old Hon, and a beautiful, young milk maid. “Without knowing it, I began now gathering material for the work I was to do,” he wrote.

His love of letters helped him cultivate intimate, lifelong friendships with many of the most noted regional writers of the time, including James Lane Allen, Thomas Nelson Page, and James Whitcomb Riley.

Still, Fox didn’t become a published author himself until he was nearly 30. His first short story, “A Mountain Europa” was published in serial format in *Century* magazine in 1892, and for it he received a princely sum of \$262. (He was so proud of the check he had it photographed.)

In 1890, Fox had moved along with his entire family—including his parents and younger siblings—to Big Stone Gap, Virginia, where his eldest half-brother, James Fox, had established mining and land development interests. The family expected to find their fortune there.



But by 1893 or so, Big Stone Gap’s anticipated real estate boom had gone bust, and Fox was forced to turn his full attention to writing. (The economic fallout of the bust would plague Fox’s parents for the remainder of their lives. In letters preserved at the University of Kentucky, Fox opens nearly every missive home—following the commercial success of “The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come” in 1903 until his death in 1919—with a note of how much money he’s enclosing, often \$150, \$200, or more. By April 3, 1904, he was promising to send a minimum of \$150 per month, and by July 2, 1908, he advised his mother to simply “go to the bank and transfer the balance of any account” to his own.)

The call of fame

Appraising Fox’s work in 1969, biographer Warren I. Titus confessed that reading all of Fox’s writing “proved, frankly, to be a rather dreary assignment, for the fictional tastes of 1903 and 1908 are not those of today.”

And yet, for readers of the time, his

books were riveting. Struck by the talent he saw in Fox’s prose, future president Theodore Roosevelt wrote to him on June 4, 1894, as “a fellow Harvard man” wishing to “congratulate [him] most heartily on the way [his] novel is opening.” (From the date, it’s likely Roosevelt is referring to Fox’s novella “A Cumberland Vendetta,” published serially in *Century* in summer 1894.) In the typewritten but hand-signed missive, held at the University of Kentucky—the first of dozens of letters offering a glimpse into the pair’s enduring friendship, which culminated in frequent invitations from Roosevelt to dine together, including at the White House—Roosevelt wrote that he felt Fox was on a path to create a “lasting and real addition to American literature.”

Through the success of his serialized stories, “the name of John Fox, Jr.” had become, according to the Nov. 9, 1901 edition of *The New York Times*, “inseparably connected with the world’s knowledge of the Southern mountaineer—with his primitive ways, his moonshining, his open-handed hospitality, and his feuds.”

But it was the breakout success of Fox’s 1903 novel “The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come,” a coming-of-age tale set in Civil War-era Kentucky, which took his life on a new economic and social trajectory. The book had something for everyone—war, romance, drama—and it seemed there was no one in America at the time who hadn’t fallen under its spell.

In correspondence dated Sept. 8, 1904, preserved in the Fox family holdings at the University of Kentucky, a 17-year-old reader named Kent Brooklyn Stiles wrote to Fox to admit that he’d been initially reluctant to read the novel, fearing it was a “goody goody book.” He finally acquiesced and was riveted. It was the “best book I ever read,” he attested. And, to drive home the point further, he added this postscript: “‘The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come’ makes me wish I had been born in Kentucky instead of New Hampshire. I’ll always have a longing for the Bluegrass State now.”

An unlikely pairing

If Fox’s life reads like its own rags-to-riches novel, then the most titillating chapter surrounds his improbable, late-in-life

marriage to opera star Fritzi Scheff, a native of Vienna who had been the talk of New York following her 1901 stage debut.

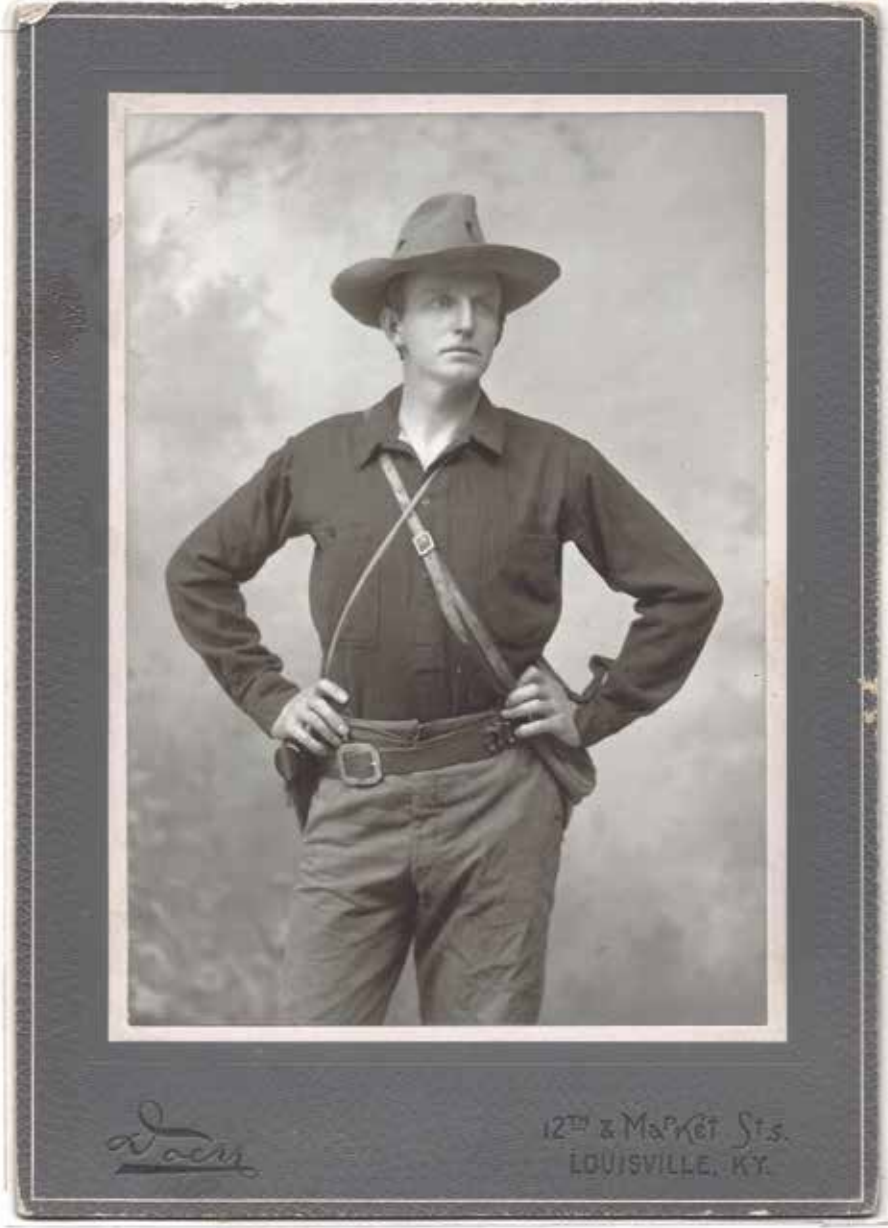
Fox and Scheff married in December 1908—when he was just shy of 46 and she was 29—mere months after her divorce from her first husband, Baron Fritz von Bardeleben, was finalized. The union brought an unexpected cadre of sophistication to Big Stone Gap whenever the couple visited. In a public address in 1957, Fox’s brother-in-law William Cabell Moore recalled Scheff’s first visit to Virginia to meet the family, in which she brought with her “her companion, her personal maid, eight trunks, and a number of bags, including one important bag or case in which she carried many beautiful jewels.”

Best known for her roles as Fifi in “Mlle. Modiste” (1905-1908) and as the title role in “The Prima Donna” (1908), Scheff was, by most accounts, a prima donna in real life as well. A favorite singer of composer Victor Herbert, her performance of his song “Kiss Me Again” became iconic—so much so that she appeared on Ed Sullivan’s “Talk of the Town” to sing it again

**She was
legendary
both for her
beautiful voice
as well as her
antics on and
off the stage.**



John Fox Jr. was a gifted musician and performer, appearing in many theater productions during his time at Harvard.



Wearing the uniform of war correspondent, covering the Spanish-American War for Harper's magazine, 1898. During his coverage, he was embedded for a time with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders.

Between 1901 and 1910, *The New York Times* ran articles with titles such as "Fritzi Scheff Faints," "Fritzi Scheff Ill," "Fritzi Scheff Collapses"—or variants of them—no less than seven times.

Still, the Fox family seems to have embraced Scheff fully—she struck up a particular closeness with Fox's younger sister, Minnie, who often traveled with her on tour—and by March 14, 1910, she felt close enough to Fox's parents to add the following postscript to a letter he had written home:

"Love to you and Papa, I wished it was not so Dang far to you all . . . Your little in-law, but I hope by now more related, Fritzi."

In the early days of their courtship and marriage, the pair seemed to be genuinely happy. Fox completed the manuscript for "The Trail of the Lonesome Pine" (1908)—his biggest commercial success since "Little Shepherd"—while courting Scheff, and he dedicated the work to her.

Nearly a year into their marriage, their bliss was still apparent in letters Fox sent home. On December 2, 1909, Fox wrote: "[T]his afternoon Fritzi bought and dressed a doll for little Helen and got some other things for her other nephews and nieces in-law. She is like a child about Xmas and it is fearful to think about the lonely Xmas she has had. She is devoted to Minnie and to all of you and she has no greater pleasure than in doing things for other people. I wish she had all the money that she wants at all times, but especially now."

In time, though, their relationship soured—perhaps, according to Fox's biographers, in part due to Scheff's incessant touring, or the pressures of her extravagant lifestyle and the money it demanded. Adding fuel to the fire, York writes that "[r]umors of John's drinking and jealousy started to surface not too long after they were married." He backtracks that assertion immediately, though, saying "[t]here was nothing serious about any of it." Still, in subsequent paragraphs, he details an alleged instance in which Fox threatened "to shoot a man if [he] so much as looked at [Fritzi] again."

All that aside, Fox may also have begun to miss his decades-long bachelor lifestyle. He would sometimes "disappear

for days at a time, never telling [Scheff] where he was going nor when he would return," York writes. But biographer Warren Titus seems to place the blame more squarely on Scheff's shoulders, asserting that "Fritzi was too wedded to her career really to take marriage seriously."

Either way, by early 1913, the ill-fated union had run its course, and Scheff filed for divorce. *The New York Times* noted in announcing the split that "Rumors that Mrs. Fox and her husband had not found their lives suited to each other . . . have long been current." (Scheff would go on to wed for a third time later that same year. Her final marriage—to George Anderson, a co-star—also ultimately ended in divorce.)

Following her divorce from Fox, Scheff faced financial turmoil. In a letter that's been dated to Aug. 1, 1913 by University of Kentucky library archivists, Fox wrote home to warn his mother: "Sam [last name unclear] has just written to me that Fritzi is going into bankruptcy and that she is going down to Big Stone Gap to look after her interests there! I think she must be mad. I am writing Sam to dissuade her and that you and Minnie should probably leave town to avoid the torture of being there when she comes."

A life in letters

If Fox was devastated by the divorce he didn't show it, at least not in letters home. By March 9, 1914, in correspondence penned on stationary from Melton Mowbray, England, Fox was in high spirits, noting that his travel abroad plans included a visit to the theatre, a stop in Paris and dinner with the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland: "Personally I feel like a king and am having the very time of my life," he wrote. (Earlier in his career, Fox had traveled to Cuba as a correspondent covering the Spanish-American War for *Harper's* and to Japan, covering the Russo-Japanese War for *Scribner's*. But his post-divorce trip was his first opportunity to experience Europe.)

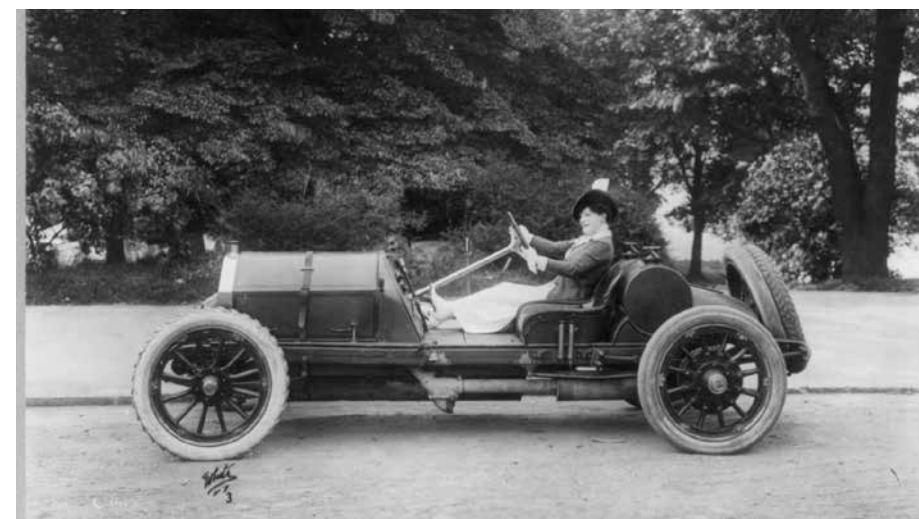
The final years of Fox's life were spent in Big Stone Gap, where he wrote and published two more books—"The Heart of the Hills" (1913) and "In Happy Valley" (1917)—and worked on a third, "Erskine Dale: Pioneer," which was published

Struck by the talent he saw in Fox's prose, future president Theodore Roosevelt wrote to him on June 4, 1894, as "a fellow Harvard man."

posthumously in 1920. He died on July 8, 1919, at age 56, from pneumonia.

In its obituary, *The New York Times* reported that Fox had once been asked how he came to know the mountaineers about whom he wrote. His reply seemed to express his feeling that he'd lived among them—and in a certain sense, become one himself.

Fox's sister, Elizabeth Fox Moore, wrote that upon his death, a page of manuscript for "Erskine Dale" was still in his typewriter. On it were the last words Fox is believed to have written: "It is well," he repeated and wearily his eyes closed, "And thus Erskine knew it would be." ▲



Fritzi Scheff's fame was such that *The New York Times* ran seven articles during the years between 1901 and 1910 about her penchant for fainting on stage.