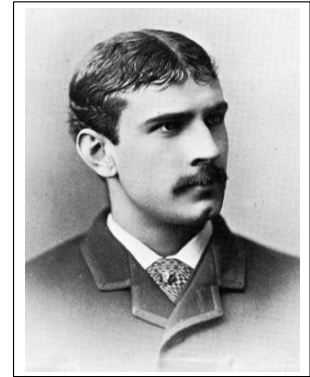


## Once Upon A Time Marshall WAS Center Stage. The Shooting of Maurice Barrymore

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During the period the first Boogie Woogies were being played, Marshall, Texas, briefly occupied center stage in the world of entertainment. That was in 1879 when a local thug attacked three traveling thespians at Nat Harvey's Lunch Room, near the Texas & Pacific train station, not far from where the present depot and the Ginocchio Hotel are presently situated.



Maurice Barrymore

Big Jim Currie (*sometimes spelled Curry*) was the bad guy who put Marshall on the map and in newspapers far and wide. So far as is known to recorded history, he was not working from a plan designed by consultants. He was just being Big Jim – a notorious prevaricator, murderer, drunkard, and sometime T&P detective. There was nothing likeable about him.

The occasion was this. A theatrical group, the Wade-Barrymore troupe, was touring the south and west performing a play titled, ironically enough, “Diplomacy.” After a successful performance at Mahone’s Opera House March 19, 1879, three members of the troupe were having lunch at the railroad station as they awaited the northbound train that would take them to Texarkana and their next performance.

The actors were Ben Porter, Miss Ellen Cummins, and Maurice Barrymore.

Barrymore is remembered today as the scion of a great family of actors. He was the father of Lionel, Ethel, and John Barrymore, and the great-grandfather of contemporary actress Drew Barrymore. In the late 1870s, he was making a name for himself on the New York stage and beyond – literally. Barrymore was born Herbert Blythe in India, the son of a British civil servant.

A standing screen divided the lunch counter and bar at the Marshall station. A long mirror ran the length of the wall behind the counter. Patrons on both sides of the screen could see each other in the mirror.

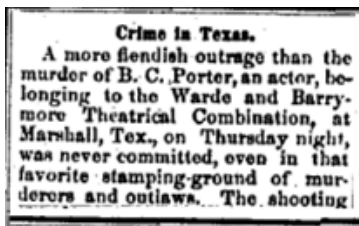
As Barrymore, Porter, and Miss Cummins (Ben Porter’s fiancé) were served at the lunch counter Big Jim Currie ate a bite and had “a budge” of whiskey, against the advice of the barkeep, N.A. “Nat” Harvey, who thought Currie had already had enough to drink.

Most accounts indicate the trouble began when Currie pointed to Miss Cummins and declared her to be a “first class whore.” He then went into the dining area to pick a fight

and Barrymore, who had won the Middleweight Boxing championship of England in 1872, took off his coat and offered to oblige him outside.

Without further ado, Currie pulled out a pistol and began firing. Porter was fatally injured as he rushed to the aid of a badly wounded Barrymore. Currie also shot several times at Miss Cummins and, by some accounts, a small boy. The Arkansas Daily Gazette reported that Currie then stomped a dog to death and walked outside the station house and whooped that no man could arrest him.

Big Jim was arrested, however, when fearless lawman Arch Adams arrived with a double-barreled shotgun "at half-mast." Later, Currie was indicted for murder. There were many delays before his trial, one of which was owing to the fact that the court was occupied with another celebrity episode, the Abe Rothschild "Diamond Bessie" murder trial. On June 10, 1880 Jim Currie's case was finally called.



In the interim and after the verdict, the city of Marshall, Texas was indeed center stage in the minds and hearts of the entire theatrical profession. One of the outcomes is an actors' assistance organization still in existence today, now known as The Actors Fund of America.

But back to events that immediately followed the tragic shooting. T&P officials arranged for Porter's body to be transported back to New York, accompanied by an actor named Albert Murdock. Railroad employees contributed \$139 toward Porter's burial expenses.

The rest of the troupe was stranded in Marshall, however, where Barrymore, whose recovery was uncertain, was cared for at the home of R.W. Thompson, Jr., who was the T&P station agent.

With their leading man gravely injured and the supporting actor dead, not to mention the trauma affecting the entire cast, the Wade-Barrymore troupe was unable to continue their tour. They were broke, disheartened, and stuck in an area of the country being roundly pilloried in newspapers across the continent.

By all accounts, the people of Marshall did their best to make the actors comfortable and worked to alleviate their situation.

Barrymore was said to have remained in good spirits as he convalesced. His wife Georgiana arrived. As soon as he could be moved, four of the city's elite carried him on a stretcher from the Depot to the Capitol Hotel, Marshall's best. General Walter P. Lane, hero of San Jacinto and the Civil War, walked alongside the stretcher with an umbrella to shield Barrymore from the sun.

Marshall folks organized a benefit at the Opera House, going all out to provide “leading citizens” as ushers and volunteering all necessary services. The remaining cast members, including Miss Cummins, performed. The event raised \$415.25 for the troupe.

Not to be outdone, the citizens of Dallas arranged another benefit performance March 26, 1879. A group of town worthies met the troupe at the Dallas train station and escorted them to their hotel. When Miss Cummins appeared in the opening scene of the farce “My Uncle’s Will” a Mr. J. B. Simpson, representing Dallas, took the stage and presented her with a Roman gold locket and necklace and spoke of “the affair at Marshall” during which “words of bitter insult were offered toward yourself, lady, without provoke, by a drunken desperado.”

Simpson is quoted in the Marshall Tri-Weekly Herald March 27, 1879, as stating “*We feel the deepest sympathy and respect, and as an evidence of that feeling, I beg to present to you, to be held in remembrance of us, these jewels – a gift of the people of Dallas. That we are not all ruffians and desperadoes in Texas, lady, let our conduct here tonight attest...In the name of Texas and Texans, lady: in the name of the people of Dallas who feel the profoundest sympathy, do not remember us altogether with feelings of bitterness and reproach.*”

The troupe was then presented with \$800. Other benefits were organized, including one at the Tremont Opera House in Galveston. Texans were eager to counter the characterizations of the state as “blood thirsty” with outpourings of support and condolences for Barrymore and the surviving members of the traveling show.

\$5,000 was ultimately raised by Texans to benefit the troupe. Barrymore, although ruined financially, insisted all the money be sent to Ben Porter’s mother.

Texas newspapers were quick to point out that Currie was not a Texan. Barrymore himself later commented on the kindnesses and attention provided him by Marshall’s leading citizens and said “Texas surgical skill and Texas attention and care brought me through all right.”

Still, the outrage over the tragedy played on in publications throughout the country. The *St. Louis Democrat* called the state “a place where whiskey and pistols are too plentiful and law and order too scarce.” *The New York Times* reported on the shootings eight times during the spring of 1879.

GENTLEMEN:—Your kind and most generous note, tendering a benefit to the Wards & Barrymore troupe, has just been received. I most earnestly assure you that it is warmly appreciated. In behalf of the troupe I accept your tender, and on Tuesday, the 25th; we will play at the opera house, and shall devote the entire proceeds to Mrs. Porter, who in our calamity has sustained a loss that is irreparable.

MAURICK BARRYMORE.

Currie’s trial began July 3, 1879 – but was quickly postponed.

Currie’s brother was Mayor of Shreveport and spent unflinchingly on attorneys and bribes. The key witness, Nat Harvey, had sold his lunchroom to an undisclosed buyer for

a large sum and disappeared. Barrymore, who had returned to Marshall for the trial, was keenly disappointed when Judge A.J. Booty granted the defense a continuance because the witnesses – whom they had bribed or intimidated into departing – were not present.

"This reminds me of our performances in England," Barrymore told the court. "We commence with a tragedy and end with a farce."

Nearly one year later – June 10, 1880 – Big Jim Currie was brought to trial.

Nat Harvey had been found near Fort Worth and brought back under arrest. Maurice Barrymore again attended this trial and Ellen Cummins did also. According to accounts of the period, witnesses provided unimpeachable testimony of Currie's drunken and murderous attack. Currie's eight attorneys were unable to undermine the 23 witnesses who appeared against him – so they changed strategies. A Dr. T.G. Ford of Shreveport appeared and declared that Jim Currie could not be held accountable for his actions because he had not been in his "right mind" at the time of the shootings.

The judge gave the case to the jury at 7 P.M. on June 18, 1880.

10 minutes later the jury emerged and the foreman announced – with "unabashed pride" according to the Marshall Tri-Weekly Herald – "not guilty by reason of insanity."

Members of the jury were conspicuously in possession of large sums of money following their civic service – one reportedly paying for a shave with a ten-dollar bill peeled from a large roll. Another boasted that he had not served on the jury "for nothing."

On his departure from Marshall and all of Texas for a final time, Maurice Barrymore commented "there wasn't a man in court who wouldn't sell his soul for a whiskey sour."

It is useful to be aware that in the decade or so following the Civil War, the dramatic arts did not enjoy a lofty reputation. There had long been prejudices against the acting profession, but in the years following Lincoln's assassination by the prominent actor John Wilkes Booth, those engaged in the performing arts were held in low regard. It was commonplace for actors to be denied most forms of charitable assistance. When an actor died, typically an unmarked pauper's grave awaited.

The events in Marshall helped spark a movement among supporters of the performing arts. A young New York University Freshman, Harrison Grey Fiske, began a letter writing campaign to create a charity expressly for actors. Later, as Editor of the New York Dramatic Mirror, Fiske continued the campaign and on June 8, 1882, the Actors' Fund of America was established. It continues today as the preeminent organization worldwide to assist performing arts professionals who are in need.

Barrymore thrived as an actor until he suffered from a mental disorder a few years before his death in 1905. He founded a family whose legacy on stage and film is unrivalled. His final years he was confined in the Amityville Insane Asylum.

Jim Currie moved to Fort Worth, where he murdered again – this time serving some time in a penitentiary before his influential brother again got him free. A few years later it was reported that he had his last scrape. A Mexican desperado, quicker on the draw, done him in with a revolver at close range. That report was later refuted, however, and Currie was said to have died of natural causes in the Northwest.

Marshall, Texas – Center Stage?

Center stage for the performing --- make that the entertainment – arts? Sounds like a stretch to some of us, and music to the ears of others.

But 128 years ago, Marshall did indeed hold the center of the stage for a brief period.

If it happens again, let's try to make sure no one shoots the leading players.

*Much of the information in this piece was originally compiled by C. Richard King for the July 1963 East Texas Historical Journal.*

