

The Original Television Girl

by Richard Brewster

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We are here in Dundee, Scotland preparing for the arrival of our sometimes home, the M/V Anastasis. Isn't e-mail great? Conveniently, I recently visited a TV collector near Edinburgh, whom I expect will be the subject of a future column--RB.

The TV column in the July issue of the OTB explained how CBS began TV broadcasting back in 1931. A photograph of Natalie Towers was shown in front of the mechanical camera. A bit of sleuthing resulted in my locating the ninety-six year-old star herself, alive and well and living in New York City! In fact, some weeks ago, I was privileged to have a long phone interview with her. She subsequently sent along lots of historic news clippings.

Natalie was able to set the record straight and provide some interesting information about her career. One thing was made quite clear: she did not approve of the photo I used. In fact, she said, "Mr. Brewster, I was so appreciative of [your article], even though it included that terrible, terrible picture of me.....when I think of the readers of the Antique Wireless Association, what must they think? How

could anyone who looked like that have been named 'The Television Girl'?"

Natalie kindly sent along this photo in which she is shown wearing \$660,000 worth of jewels for a publicity stunt in front of the W2XAB (WCBS) TV camera. CBS, in a spot news release, claimed that this was done "merely to test the possibilities of television in bringing interesting and unusual events into the home." The November 1st issue of *The American Weekly* reported that ten policemen guarded her during that broadcast!

How did Natalie Towers get her start? She was eagerly seeking a job in the theater, but with no success, so one day she went over to CBS and managed to get a radio audition. The next day she got a phone call and a man who introduced himself as the head of publicity at CBS said, "Is this Natalie Towers? Are you seated?" Then he went on, "We have named you 'The Original Television Girl'."



Natalie about to be televised in \$660,000 worth of jewels as a CBS publicity stunt.

Well, Natalie told him that she had never heard of this television thing and did not give the impression that she was excited or grateful. Nevertheless the caller continued to explain that not only was "television the thing of the future" but that, "within one year television will have eclipsed the movies and the stage."

Meanwhile Natalie's father, who had wanted her to become a doctor, was terribly disappointed at her desire to go into the theater. She explained, "[The theater] at that time was something not nice at all! So when he heard about 'this radio and television,' this was something at least respectable."

When she went over to CBS after the phone call, they met her and asked, "Well, what are you going to do?" She had done some singing in college, and after a vocal audition she was told, "You know that your voice comes over very, very nicely!"

Natalie related, "They told me I was going to have this show, that's called 'The Natalie Towers Show' three times a week! But they didn't do any writing for me, Mr. Brewster, they just said, 'It's my show'." She had to devise everything that she would do on the air. "...this I did not like; it was hard! I mean when I was performing I liked it all right, but I had to plan it three times a week...practicing and all that. For me it wasn't terribly enjoyable."

As was noted in the July column, the initial broadcast was made on the 17th of July 1931. New York Mayor Jimmy Walker raised a curtain and introduced Natalie Towers, described by the Herald Tribune as 'the perfect radio vision type.' Actors and singers such as Ed Wynn and Kate Smith were also featured on that telecast.

When I asked Natalie to tell me what it was like in front of the TV camera and wondered if they had the room lights off, she said, " Yes, yes, they did and I did this dance, a dance step on a high platform, I remember that I got hurt and it was dark. Once in a while CBS would come up with a little script for me that I was very grateful to play, and I would do that."

In the June, 1931 issue of *What's On The Air--'The Magazine For The Radio Listener*, an article entitled, "Television Peeps Around the Corner," revealed that NBC, not to be outdone, had selected its own Dorothy Knapp as its own "television girl." But Natalie Towers will forever be "The Original Television Girl!"