

# From Stage to Screen: Verna Felton

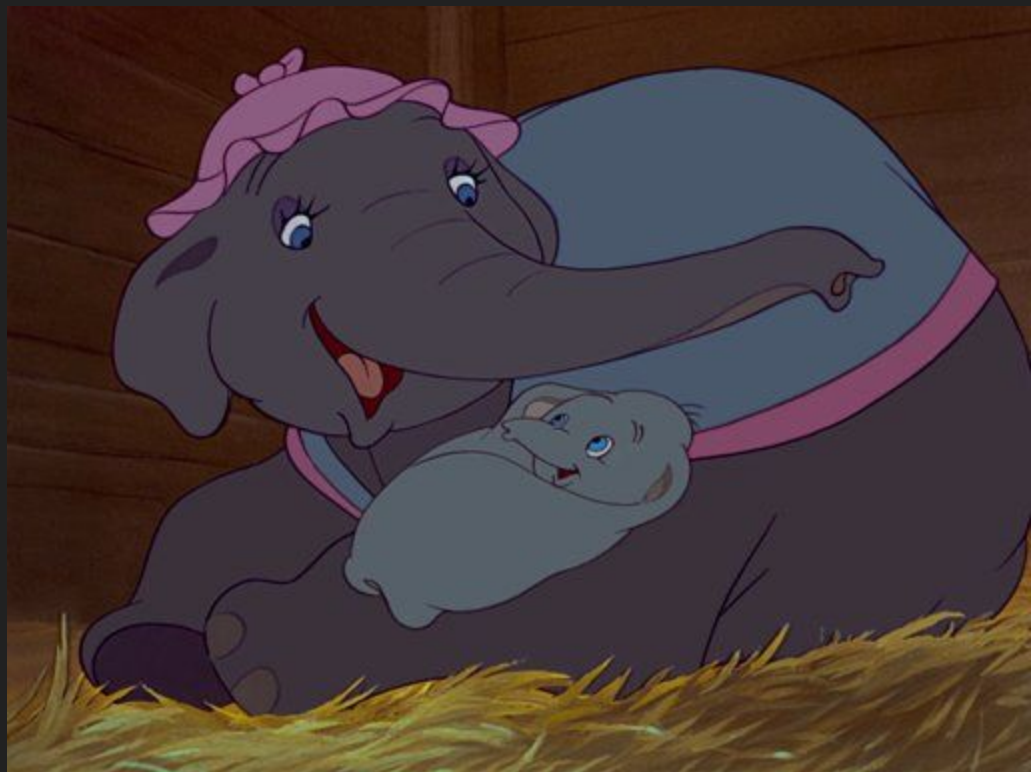
Presented by: Morgan Stutler

Who am I?

Curator at The Grove Museum  
in Tallahassee, Florida

# THE GROVE MUSEUM





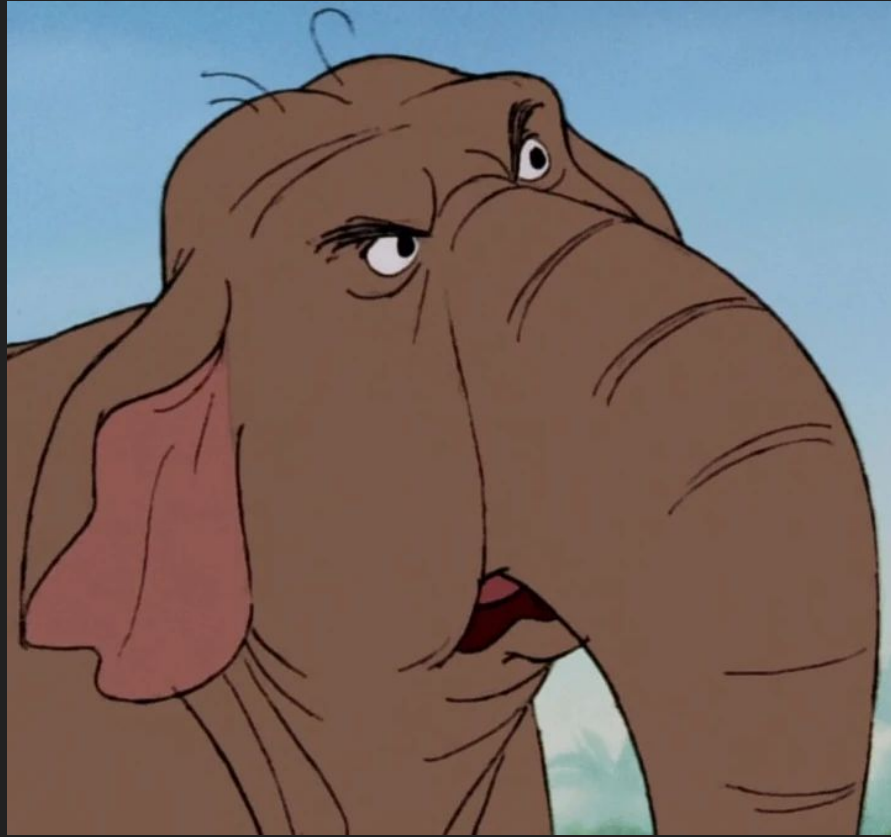




















# Felton Connection

Horace was a 7th generation descendant of the American branch of the Felton family.



# Small Beginnings

Horace ran his medical practice out of San Jose, California.

Clara would tend to Verna.

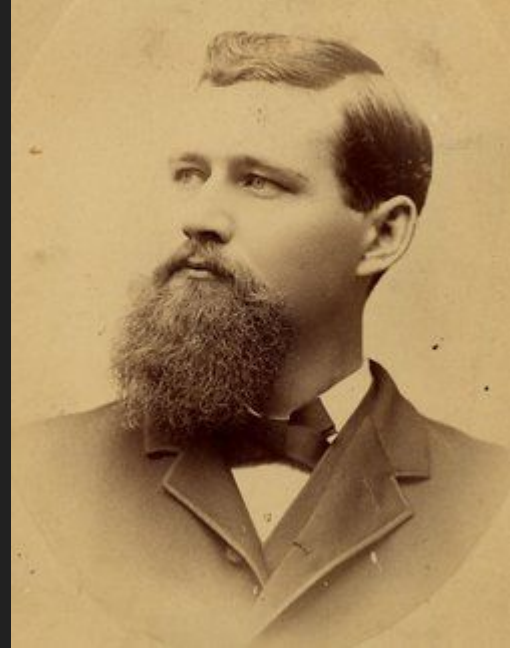
Verna's introduction to the stage started early. She would perform at small fundraisers in San Jose, doing singing and dancing routines.

# Harsh Reality

Horace would die suddenly in 1900.

Although he ran a large medical practice, the records showed they were practically penniless.

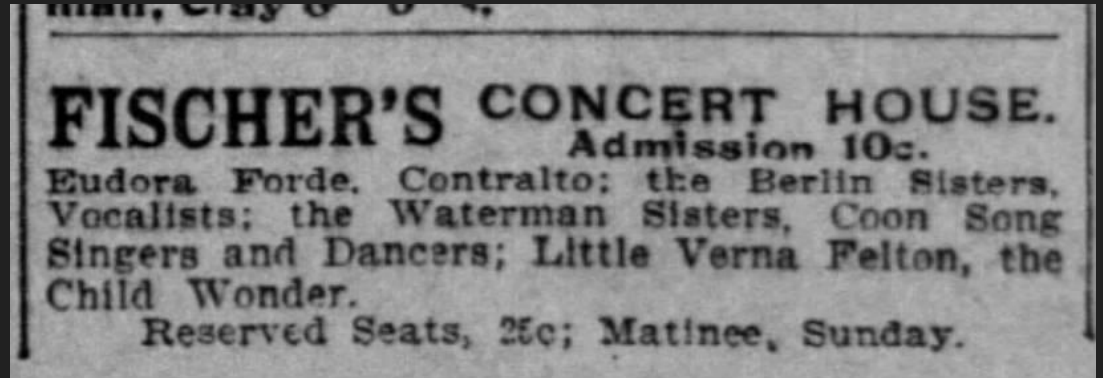
Clara was faced with a harsh realization that the family had no money.



# First Performance

Verna's first "official" performance would be at Fischer's Concert House in 1900.

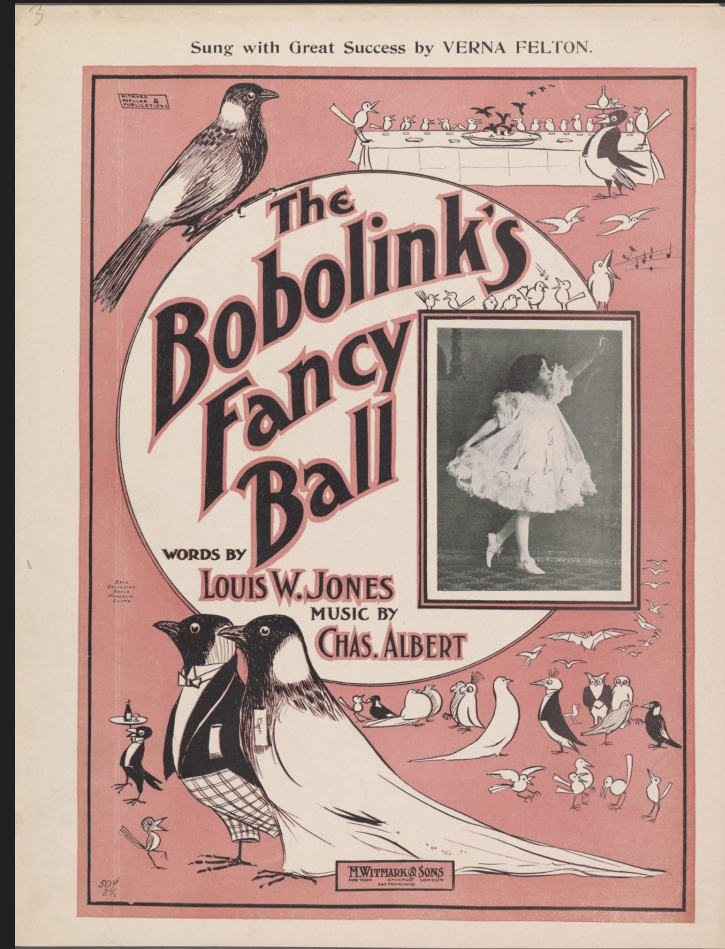
But her talents would not be truly recognized until the September of 1900, where Verna would perform at a benefits show for the victims of the Galveston Hurricane.



# Enter Stage Left: Jessie Shirley Stock Company

Verna's performance at the Galveston Hurricane benefit concert would grab the attention of the road show manager for the Jessie Shirley Stock Company.

A promised salary of \$18 a week for Verna and Clara was convincing enough to get them on the road and traveling with the troupe.





# Jack of All Trades

Verna was perfectly suited for playing “boyish” roles during this time. Her curly hair and round face made it so she would almost exclusively play these roles at the start of her stage career with the Jessie Shirley Stock Company.



# Pearl Allen

During their travels with the Jessie Shirley Stock Company, Verna and Clara would meet Pearl Allen.

Pearl was the stage director at the Jessie Shirley Stock Company.

He saw potential in Verna that was not being advertised, so he branched off and created his own stock company—The Allen Stock Company in 1902.





## Center Stage

Pearl convinced Clara and Verna to join his stock company and posted Verna's name everywhere he could.

"Little Verna Felton" would draw a crowd almost every week.

### The Allen Stock Company.

The Allen Stock company will appear at Turner's hall Monday evening for a week's engagement, featuring Little Verna Felton in a variety of plays. The company has a number of noted players and some good dramatic scores and want to give us the best show on earth for the week.

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# The Allen Players

Through 1902 to 1915, the Allen Stock Company (and later rebranded as the Allen Players) would travel throughout the west coast and even Canada.

Verna would be featured as the leading lady throughout these eight years.

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SATURDAY DECEMBER 23

The Daily News

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## Nelson Opera House

### Miss Verna Felton

Matinee To-Day  
The late Clyde Fitches' Greatest Play  
"The Truth"  
Built on Entirely New Lines—A Comedy  
With a Plot

To-Night  
"Zaza"  
David Belasco's Masterpiece

Prices 25c., 50c. and 75c.  
Seats on Sale at Poole's



MISS VERNA FELTON

### And the Allen Players

Next Week  
Opening Monday Night in Ounda's  
"Under Two Flags"

The Repertoire for the balance of the week  
will be chosen from the following  
high-class plays:

- "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray"
- "Mrs. Dane's Defense"
- "Carrilla"
- "Sherlock Holmes"
- "Our New Girl" and "Caprice"

SAVED ANWFUL ACCIDENT

When they discovered a broken  
rail, which left an opening in the track  
several feet long, between a person  
and train was due to pass along the  
track line, about the train,  
which was temporarily stopped  
and the passage of the  
switched train was stopped  
until the broken rail was replaced.

## First Film

In 1915, in the midst of World War I, the impact was noticeable.

Verna, Clara, and Pearl would return to California after seeing a decline in the attendance of their shows.

Verna would become a freelance artist, taking jobs where she could get them and traveling with other stock companies.



## Enter Stage Right: Lee Millar

Verna's stint with the Baker Stock Company is where she would meet her future husband, Lee Millar.

Verna convinced Lee to join the Allen Stock Company for a time before he would take another opportunity in 1922.

The two would stay in close contact during this time, and in January of 1923, Lee would wire Verna to come to New York to wed.





# The Newlyweds

With Clara and Pearl's blessing, Verna packed her bags and joined Lee in New York.

They would wed on February 9th, 1923.

Verna traveled with Lee as they made their way back west and would eventually rejoin with the Allen Players.

By 1924, Verna was pregnant and the couple would welcome their only son, Lee Millar Jr. on June 13th, 1924.



# Depression Impacts

The Great Depression was reaching its height and impacting showbusiness.

With his final paycheck, Lee and Verna set their sights on Hollywood, California to look for film work.

But they would find something much different.



# Radio.





# The Power of Radio

Verna and Lee both thought that the rising popularity of radio would be a passing fad.

Lee was the first to secure a job on a radio program due to his theater connections.

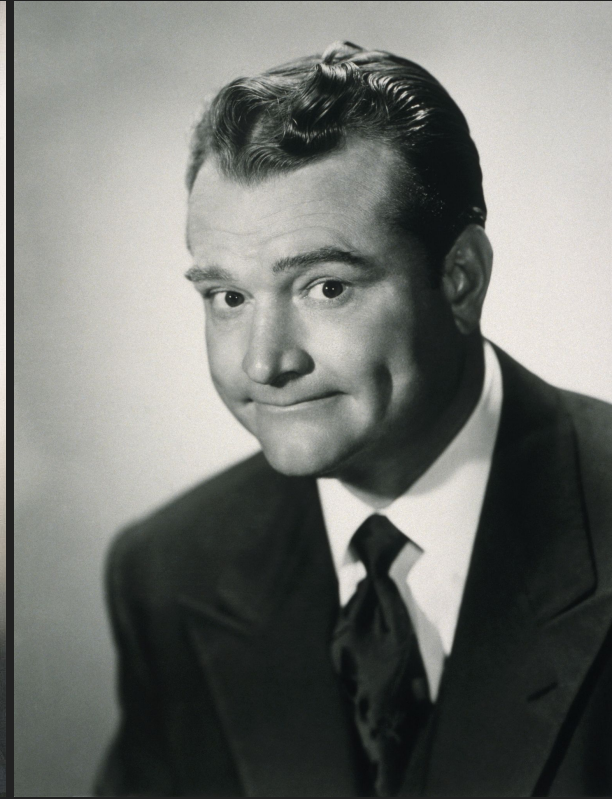
Verna would follow after, with a bumpy transition from stage to radio.

But, she maintained the sentiment that radio was her “one true love” for the rest of her life.



## Maternal Figure

Verna's most prominent roles during her radio days would be her portrayals of Dennis Day's mother on the Jack Benny show, and Junior's "Namaw" on the Red Skelton Show.



# Loss and Coping

Verna would become a widow at 51 years old when Lee would suddenly pass away on December 24th, 1941.

Verna would throw herself into her work to keep herself busy after the loss of her husband.

Her most favored role during this time would be her role as “Namaw” on the Red Skelton Show.

1939-1946: Lux Radio Theater

1939-1940: Little Old Hollywood

1952-1955: My Little Margie

1945-1949: Red Skelton Show as “Namaw”

1939-1962: Jack Benny Program as “Dennis Day’s Mother”

1942-1945: Sealtest Village Store as “Blossom Blimp”

However, Verna's next gigs would put her in the spotlight and secure her place among those forever immortalized in Hollywood.

# The Walt Disney Family

Verna would join the Walt Disney Studios family and earning her spot as one of Walt Disney's primary choices for a matronly voice.

Fun fact: Lee also joined the Disney family in 1936, providing the "voice" for Pluto in many of the animated shorts.





# Sing It With Me!

Verna was such a favorite with Walt Disney that she was chosen to audition for a film that had been on hold since 1938—Cinderella.

Verna's voice was the ideal choice for Cinderella's Fairy Godmother.

Walt Disney Studios was in hot water financially, and Cinderella netted \$7.9 million.

“Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo” would receive an Academy Award Nomination.



# Down the Rabbit Hole

Following the success of Cinderella, Disney felt they could bring another concept forward that they had on the backburner since the war.

Alice in Wonderland featured Verna's booming and dominating voice for the role of the Queen of Hearts.





# A Family Affair

Next in Verna's Disney venture was "Lady and The Tramp" in 1953.

Verna considered this movie to be a family affair.

Felton voiced Aunt Sarah, while Lee Jr. provided the voice for the dog catcher and Jim Dear, while Verna's cocker spaniel Hildgarde, or Hildy, served as the model for Lady.

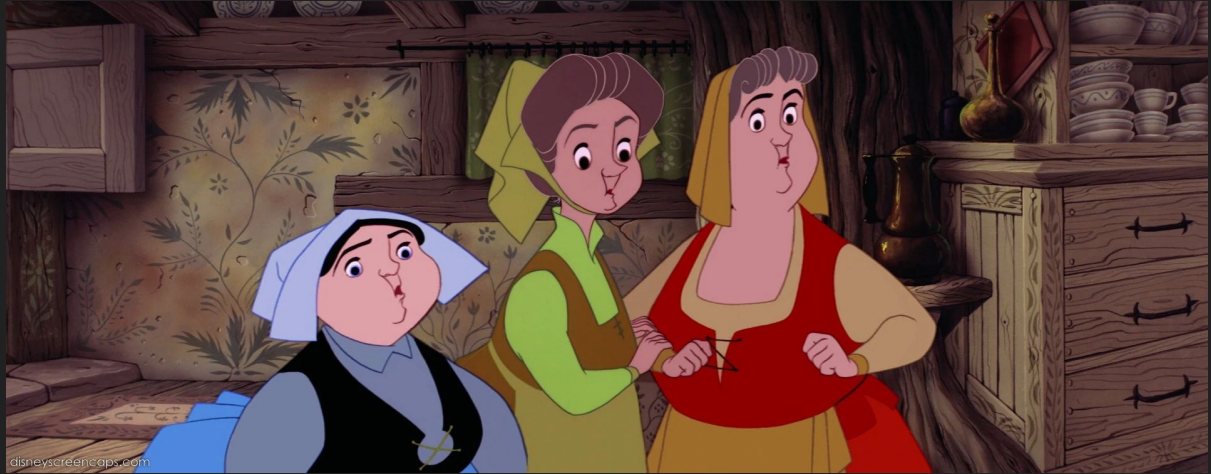


# Noticing a Trend?

While Verna was visiting the recording studio to record her lines for Lady and the Tramp, she was also working on another project that would not debut until 1959.

Sleeping Beauty.

She would make another appearance once more as a watchful guardian: Flora the Good Fairy.



# Guest Appearances

Verna was busier than ever before.

Between visits to the Walt Disney Studios, she was making guest appearances on shows and films such as *I Love Lucy*, *The Gunfighter*, and *Picnic*.





# December Bride

It was not until 1954, with the pilot episode of December Bride, that Verna would secure her longest and most notable role—Hilda Crocker.

December Bride originated as a radio show in 1952.

Verna was offered a guest spot on an episode, and made such an impression that Hilda was written in as a recurring character.

December Bride would reach No. 4 in Nielsen television ratings.





# Retirement

After December Bride came to a close in 1959, Verna started to ease into retirement at 69 years old.

She would become the Honorary Mayor of North Hollywood and would hold that role for 6 years.

Verna was active in community outreach in her neighborhood as well.

# Final Curtain Call

Verna's final role would be in 1965, where she would return to Walt Disney Studios one final time.

Walt Disney had a soft spot for Verna's portrayal of the Elephant Matriarch in *Dumbo* so she would play another elephant role.



## December 1966

Verna began to slow down after her final role in the Jungle Book, both physically and mentally.

On December 14th, 1966 Verna would pass away after suffering from a stroke.

