

**RUBY ETHYL
DARBY
HARRISON
1895-1936**



**QUEEN
OF THE
OIL
FIELDS**

The flashy red car sped down the dusty main street of the oil boomtown of Drumright. In the back of the chauffeur-driven car was a beautiful woman dressed only in a fur coat. Immediately, the news spread all over town. Ruby Darby was in town.

Like a breath of fresh air, Ruby Darby would suddenly appear in the oil towns of Oklahoma and the most hardened oil field workers would turn soft. Ruby was their darling. Not only did they love her vaudeville show, but she loved them as well. Her trademark song, which would always bring down the house, was “Memphis Blues”. Her husky, sultry voice would captivate the audience, but she also moved her eyes, hips and torso in a provocative way. Ruby was the Mae West, Sally Rand, and Gypsy Rose Lee of her day.

Ruth Ethyl Darby was born in September 1898 in Alva. Her show business career began about 1912 as a singer with a blues band in Memphis. By 1913, she was appearing at Dallas’ Candy Land Theater. Her big break came when Ed Gardiner, the theater owner’s son, plucked her from the chorus line. He not only promoted her shows, but also married her. Ruby was only fifteen years old.

Ruby’s show, “The Gal with the Blues” hit the road about 1915, playing oil towns in northern Texas and Oklahoma. Many of her troupe became lifelong friends, including comedian and piano player, Hank Patterson and his showgirl wife Daisy. Patterson later played Fred Ziffel, the owner of “Arnold the Pig” on the television show Green Acres.

Ruby was a gypsy who refused to stay in one town too long, often leaving in the middle of a successful run, simply because she wanted to move on. In the midst of her success in Tulsa, a New York agent saw her at the Broadway Theater and talked her into auditioning at the Palace Theater in New York City in front of 200 of Broadway’s toughest agents representing top vaudeville circuits.

She received a long-time contract, with her first playing date in Baltimore, but she never arrived. Her independence and free spirit wouldn’t allow her to be tied down, and she returned to her beloved boomtowns, where she could sing and dance as she pleased. Ruby had the talent to become a big-time star, but she could not stand the confinement.

Ruby divorced Gardiner in 1920, and briefly married Oklahoma City banker Luther Jones. She later moved to Los Angeles where she married her third husband, comedian Bud Harrison, in 1922 and had two children, Eugene and Ruby. She was still a popular entertainer, and while on tour had enjoyed a reunion with her old friends Hank and Daisy Patterson. In April 1936 at age 38, Ruby died of pneumonia, aggravated by her alcoholism.

In 1977, the University of Tulsa produced a musical based on her career. Ruby’s daughter, Ruby McEnery, attended the premiere. She described her mother as a daredevil and free spirit who was highly unpredictable. Once she went to the store for a loaf of bread, and ended up in Mexico!

Ruby left behind a unique legacy among the oil field workers she entertained from 1912 through 1922. During the 1920s, the word “darb” came to mean “handsome, attractive, or excellent”. Supposedly, Oklahoma oil workers called any bountifully-producing oil well as a “Ruby Darby”.