

Verna Felton

BY FREDRICK TUCKER

VERNA FELTON
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR	1
CHAPTER ONE: EAST MEETS WEST	2
CHAPTER TWO: DESTINY STEPPED IN	15
CHAPTER THREE: LITTLE VERNA FELTON	32
CHAPTER FOUR: A MAN NAMED PEARL	53
CHAPTER FIVE: MISS VERNA FELTON AND THE ALLEN STOCK COMPANY	93
CHAPTER SIX: THE ALLEN PLAYERS EN ROUTE THROUGH CANADA	117
CHAPTER SEVEN: CALIFORNIA	149
CHAPTER EIGHT: ENTER LEE MILLAR	162
CHAPTER NINE: HARD TIMES, COME AGAIN NO MORE	216
CHAPTER TEN: RADIO DAYS	247
CHAPTER ELEVEN: WAR, WIDOWHOOD, AND RED	294
CHAPTER TWELVE: DISNEY DAME	371
CHAPTER THIRTEEN: DECEMBER BRIDESMAID	440
CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE LAST ACT	528
EPILOGUE	595
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	598
APPENDICES	604
BIBLIOGRAPHY	728
INDEX	739

*To my parents,
who taught me to appreciate
what they (and Verna Felton)
called “cute” shows*

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Why write a biography of Verna Felton? I was consistently asked this question not only in casual conversations but also during interviews with individuals who actually knew the actress. One questioned whether there was an audience for such a book “in a world much changed” since Verna Felton’s heyday. Another suggested that she did not deserve a book of her own but perhaps rather an inclusion in one that featured career profiles of sitcom second bananas. Yet another doubted that there was much of a story to tell at all. Such talk only provided more fuel for my research.

However, I did not know much about Miss Felton’s background when I was asked to write her biography. I had fallen in love with her characterization of Hilda Crocker on television’s *December Bride* when I was no more than six years old and from time to time, I caught some of her movies on television. I had tried to find out more about her, but like so many other supporting players, Miss Felton remained overlooked by contemporary film historians.

Delving into her background, I discovered that Verna Felton had led a most interesting life. As an amateur genealogist, I got swept up in her family history as well. While the average reader may consider some content as superfluous, I have chosen to include detailed information regarding my subject’s relatives and intimates because their life stories might never be recorded otherwise.

Verna Felton’s career spanned sixty-five years and encompassed nearly thirty years of stage appearances, countless radio credits, a top-ten television series, and twenty-four films—including six Disney classics.

Why not write a biography of Verna Felton?

FREDRICK TUCKER
JULY 20, 2009

CHAPTER 1

EAST MEETS WEST

The well-stocked shelves were lined with chamois skins, sponges, trusses, atomizers, brushes, combs, hair oils, perfumery, stationery, eyeglasses, and a full line of patented medicines. Prominently displayed was a newly installed soda fountain, shipped by train from the East, which attracted large crowds of interested observers. John B. Scott took great pride in his drug store on Main Street in Salinas City, California. The newspaper advertisements of his stock were footnoted with the assurance that he could be located at any time day or night since he lived in rooms above the store. Another onsite convenience for Scott's clientele in the summer of 1890 was the office of Horace Wilcox Felton, a physician-surgeon, who specialized in women's diseases.

From his office in Scott's store, Dr. Felton could walk south on Main to the San Luis Street house he rented from attorney Henry V. Morehouse. A Salinas City resident for two and one half years, Dr. Felton hoped to build his own home in the near future, but for now he and his wife were adjusting to a new family addition: daughter Verna Arline had been born on the third Sunday in July. The Felton house was suddenly filled with the piercing cries of a newborn girl, but for the doctor it was a time to rejoice because baby Verna was his only child. However, he wasn't without parenting experience; for the past four years he had been practicing his childrearing skills on his stepson Clayton, age seven.

Horace Felton, at thirty-seven, had been in the medical profession for seven years. The youngest of seven sons, he was not satisfied to follow the path of his father and brothers who were all farmers in the Midwest. But Horace came from sturdy Yankee stock, and like his forebears, he was unafraid to strike off into unknown territory and face far-flung challenges. The American branch of the Felton family stretched back to 1633 when Nathaniel Felton arrived in Salem, Massachusetts, as an eighteen-year-old sent over from England to scout the living conditions of the new colony. The following year, Nathaniel sailed back to the mother country to offer favorable reports, and in 1635, he returned to Salem along with his mother Eleanor and other family members. The following year, Eleanor was granted twenty acres on a rise of land, which would come to be called Felton Hill. Here, in 1644, Nathaniel's home—originally two rooms but

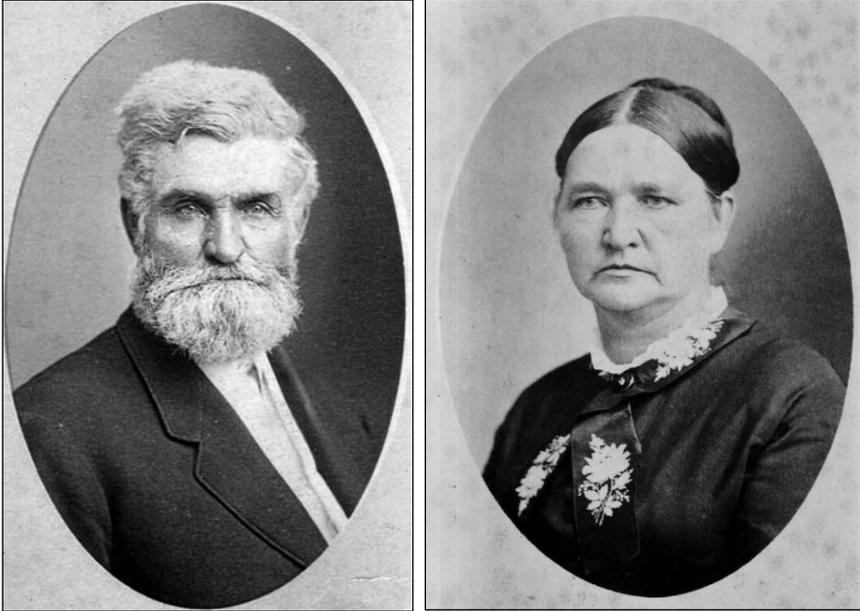


The Nathaniel Felton house as it looked in the 1880s. Today it remains as the oldest surviving home in Peabody, Massachusetts.

later enlarged numerous times—was built.

Because Nathaniel was a man of good faith and judgment he was frequently called to give his testimony about litigated estates. In 1692, when his neighbor John Proctor was tried for witchcraft, Nathaniel led a group to sign a testament vouching for the Christian character of the accused. However, it was all in vain. Proctor was executed on August 19 of that year. Nathaniel also vouched for the reputation of Rebecca Nurse, perhaps the most famous of the twenty individuals put to death during one of the darkest chapters of New England history. At the Rebecca Nurse Homestead in Danvers, Massachusetts, Nathaniel's name is listed on a stone monument, along with forty other neighbors who attested to the upstanding character of Nurse. Indeed, he and the others placed themselves under suspicion by defending their accused neighbors. Nathaniel's sprawling house and the one built by his son Nathaniel Felton Jr., still stand in 2009 on a maple-lined avenue—named Felton Street—in Peabody, just outside Salem.

Dr. Horace Felton's own grandfather Robert Felton had fought for liberty during the American Revolution and later moved his family to upstate New York where his youngest son Nelson—Horace's father—was born in 1812. Around 1836, Nelson took as his bride Emily Raymond, three years his junior. Over the next fifteen years their Oneida County farmhouse, situated in the heart of upstate New York, was filled with the lively sounds of seven growing sons. Of the six who lived to adulthood, the youngest was Horace Wilcox Felton, born on



(LEFT) Nelson Felton, Verna's grandfather. (RIGHT) Emily Felton, Verna's grandmother.

November 14, 1852. When Horace was just a lad, Nelson moved the family to Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin, where Nelson's brother Robert had relocated in the mid-1840's. Ten years previous to Robert's arrival, this territory, part of the Winnebago Indian nation, had been wilderness. Then came the mass migration of thousands of New Yorkers, Pennsylvanians, and New Englanders, including the Feltons.

Nelson Felton became a prosperous farmer in this new territory. According to the 1870 Federal Census records, his real estate was valued at \$9000, and his personal estate was worth the exacting amount of \$1645. The family farm, totaling 160 acres, was situated in the Rosendale community in Fond du Lac County's Springvale township. By this time, Nelson's older sons Merritt, Alanson, Albert, and Theodore were off on their own. At home still were newly married George and seventeen-year-old Horace, both laborers on the family farm. Nelson's ventures met with continued success, and he was considered one of the most prominent and wealthy farmers in Rosendale. In the spring of 1878, his handsome new residence was nearing completion when he suffered a fatal heart attack on the night of May 30. Soon after his burial in Rosendale Cemetery, Nelson's widow Emily moved in with son Albert. Meanwhile, Horace set off to seek a living other than farming.

Horace chose medicine as his course of study and relocated to Oshkosh where he trained for a while under Drs. Thomas P. Russell and George M. Steele. When Horace decided to enroll at Rush Medical College in Chicago in the fall of 1881,

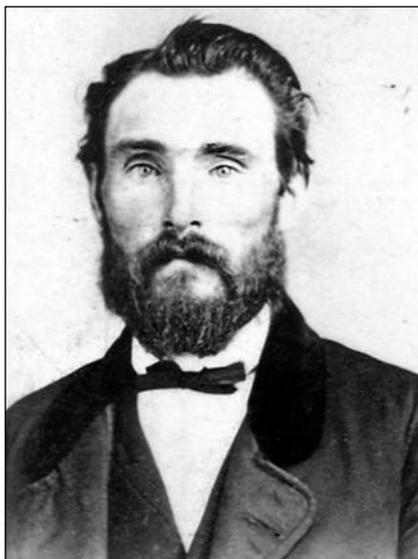
Dr. Russell provided the necessary references. While a student at Rush, he participated in clinical instruction at the Central Free Dispensary as well as at the Cook County Hospital. His studies were completed in early 1883 when he received his degree of Doctor of Medicine.

By August of that year, Dr. Felton was residing in Grant County, New Mexico, where he was first granted the license to practice medicine. His stay in this state was rather short-lived; by the next April he was certified by the Board of Examiners at San Luis Obispo, California, to practice in that state. It is uncertain how long he stayed in this area, but by July 1885, he had made his way north to Sierra County. There, between the north and south forks of the Oregon Creek, in the remote little mining town of Forest City, Dr. Felton opened his practice.

Forest City, elevation 4600 feet, lay at the base of the southern slope of Bald Mountain in southern Sierra County. The town was given that appellation in 1854 by a consensus of area residents. Gold had been discovered in the forks of nearby Oregon Creek around 1851. According to James J. Sinnott's *History of Sierra County, Volume III*, "Forest City grew rapidly with the locating of many mines. In 1853 the population of the town was 'over four hundred,' which had swelled by 1854 to one thousand. By this latter year there were at the least fifteen mines of significance in operation at the town or in the vicinity." Prosperous times lasted until the mid-1860s, and then the mines played out. However, the early 1870s brought another boom to Forest City with the discovery of the Bald Mountain mine, one of the great drift placer mines of California. Good fortune lasted another ten years until a terrific fire flattened the town on March 16, 1883, destroying over eighty buildings. However, the hardy citizens of Forest were experienced in overcoming such hardships; the 1883 fire was the most recent of three such devastations. They rebuilt their town with remarkable speed.

At the time of Dr. Felton's arrival in Forest City, one resident, Mrs. Clara Van Alstine was enduring a serious financial hardship and a great emotional burden of her own. Abandoned by her husband Edward eighteen months earlier, Clara had found it necessary to give up the older of her two young sons to a childless couple in the nearby county seat of Downieville. Subsequently, she was forced to eke out a meager living for her younger son and herself by finding work wherever possible. In the summer of 1885, she was operating a private summer school in her home for the miners' children of Forest City.

A first-generation American, Clara was born in the Sierra County mining village of Port Wine on July 13, 1863. Her father, David Lawrence, born in Dublin, Ireland on December 4, 1835, arrived in America, perhaps as a teenager. His elder brother George, quite possibly an original forty-niner, had been become a United States citizen in 1854, having made his application for citizenship in neighboring Plumas County. Like his brother, David sought his fortune in the gold mines, settling with George in the Port Wine section of northern Sierra County, some ten miles northwest of Downieville, the county seat. George married soon thereafter, but David worked hard and saved his money for several years.



(LEFT) David Lawrence, Verna's grandfather. (RIGHT) Agnes Lawrence, Verna's grandmother.

Then, on January 25, 1860, at Port Wine he took as his bride twenty-two-year-old Agnes Gleason, a native of Thurlis, Ireland. Their infant daughter was christened as Clara Winder Lawrence on July 29, 1863, by the Reverend B. Morris, officiant of the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Downieville. (This structure still stands in 2009 on the same knoll, its white bell tower reaching far above the tall pines.) Clara's middle name was derived from the surname of David's fellow miner, an English immigrant named Edward Winder. The two men must have shared a close bond because each of their firstborn children was named for their father's friend. Winder's firstborn, David Lawrence Winder, preceded Clara by three months.

Interestingly, Clara Lawrence and Downieville were also of the same age. The town was incorporated the very same year she was born, although Major William Downie, a Scottish prospector, had settled the area soon after gold was found on this fork of the North Yuba River in 1849. Word of this discovery soon brought hundreds, and then thousands, of prospectors into the area. By the mid-1850s, Downieville was the fifth largest town in California. At the time of Clara's parents' marriage, the population of Downieville had reached an astounding 16,000. A photograph taken in 1865 shows a mix of rustic store buildings—some of brick or stone construction—and whitewashed cottages, houses, and churches. (Among the businesses was the office of the town's newspaper, *The Mountain Messenger*, which remains today as California's oldest continuously published weekly. Another unique fact about the *Messenger* is that Mark Twain was once a staff writer.) The photograph also reveals that the surrounding mountainsides appear completely denuded of any trees.

By the time of Dr. Felton's arrival in Sierra County twenty years later, the gold strikes had diminished considerably and Downieville's population dwindled, but the charm of the town, now lying in a forested canyon, remained. A writer in 1882 offered this description: "I write from the quaint little town of Downieville, which in its day was teeming with thousands of eager gold seekers, but now has settled back into a pretty mountain village. Its situation is the strangest of any I have ever seen. Nestling at the base of lofty mountains that seem to rise but a few rods away from it, which enclose it as in a basin; with a width not possibly more than a quarter of a mile and extending up and down the river of less than half a mile. Downieville presents a delightfully novel appearance to one born and bred in a country flat as a kitchen floor, so to speak."



Clara Lawrence.

David Lawrence was granted full citizenship in 1868, the year following the birth of his younger daughter Mary. His wife Agnes evidently either died following Mary's birth or when her daughters were very young. By the time little Mary died on January 27, 1870, David had moved his family thirty-five miles south of Port Wine to Grass Valley in Nevada County. With the end of the Gold Rush, some miners, like David Lawrence, were forced to find other employment, such as hard rock mining. The federal census, taken five months following Mary's death, reveals a widowed David working in a Grass Valley quartz mill, stamping ore mined near there. Since her father David was away at the mill all day, it was necessary for little Clara to lodge with other families. An early tintype image of her reveals a tiny somber girl with closely cropped hair, posing stiffly in her hoop skirt and pantaloons. Over the next fifteen years, David Lawrence moved wherever the work was, living for a while in Nevada County, California, and then in Storey County, Nevada. Soon he had accumulated enough means to enroll Clara in the convent school operated by the Daughters of Charity in nearby Virginia City, but she was unhappy there, and according to family tradition, ran away at age fifteen.

By 1880, Clara had moved back to Sierra County to live with her uncle George Lawrence, now the successful proprietor of the Union Hotel, home to twenty-five miners in Forest City. His ad in the *Mountain Messenger* boasted: "First class in every respect. Tables first class. Large, Airy Rooms. Neat Servants. Good Accommodations. Board and Lodging by the Week \$6. Board by the week \$5." Operating the Union Hotel was a family affair; George's wife and four children assumed the duties of running the "first class" establishment. His wife Mary received praise from an anonymous *Messenger* correspondent in 1878: "Mrs. Lawrence has her hotel fitted up in good style, and somehow the lady of the house is possessed with the faculty of inspiring her guests with the idea that they can do not better elsewhere, consequently her house is generally full." Clara earned her keep, too, by waiting on tables in the hotel dining room, alongside her first cousin Agnes Lawrence, named for Clara's late mother.

At times, things could be rowdy around the hotel and in Forest City. Since the remote area was without police protection, sometimes the citizens had to handle certain situations without the "long arm of the law." One such incident occurred in February 1883 when Agnes "Aggie" Lawrence paid off a hotel employee, a Chinaman who was called Big Dick. He watched her as she took \$10 from her bureau drawer, then sneaked back in her room later, only to be caught there by her father. Dick told George Lawrence that he was there to ask Aggie about buying a chicken for Chinese New Year. Soon after that, \$126 was found missing, and George immediately started for Chinatown to find Dick. He met the Chinaman on the bridge, but before George could say anything, Dick exclaimed, "I no took your money, Mr. Lawrence!" The *Messenger* further reported, "George collared him and led him up town. When it got noised abroad, the people got ropes and threatened to hang the thief, but more prudent counsels prevailed, and upon his countrymen returning the stolen sum, he was released. It was a narrow escape for the Big [*sic*] heathen." Perhaps some of the citizens were sobered enough by reminiscences of the most infamous incident in the history of nearby Downieville. In 1851, a crowd of white men had lynched a Spanish woman named Juanita after she stabbed to death one of their own.

One of the miners lodging at the Union Hotel in the summer of 1880 was twenty-three-year-old Edward Van Alstine, a native of New York. His older sister Lizzie lived five doors away with her husband James McGregor, secretary of the Bald Mountain Mine Company. It was perhaps James who secured a mining job for Ed Van Alstine (sometimes spelled Van Alstyne). Ed made the acquaintance of Clara Lawrence as she performed her duties as hotel waitress. Her days and nights were busy, filled with food preparation, clean-up, and waiting tables. Breakfasts were substantial in those days, usually consisting of oatmeal or corn meal mush, bacon or ham, eggs, toast or hot cakes, and coffee. The hotel also packed lunches in tin buckets for the miners. The evening meal included a choice of two meats, a soup, vegetables, fruit, pie or cake, and coffee.

Whether over a cup of coffee or as she cleared the supper dishes, an attraction developed between Ed and Clara. A whirlwind courtship ensued, and the couple eloped to Downieville, where they were married by Father Curley of the Immaculate Conception Church on Sunday, July 4, 1880. Clara was of the Catholic faith, and while there existed a Catholic church in Forest City, there was no resident priest there. On occasion Father Curley traveled from the Downieville parish to hold Mass in Forest City, as well as in nearby Alleghany.

On the day of the marriage ceremony, Clara Lawrence was nine days shy of her seventeenth birthday. When notice of the marriage ran in the *Mountain Messenger*, Clara asked that it also be printed in the Virginia City, Nevada, papers so that her father, residing near that place, would be informed of her change in marital status. The young couple quickly became the parents of two sons, David Howard Van Alstine, born on June 13, 1881, and George Clayton Van Alstine, born March 24, 1883.

Clayton's birth came just a week after a devastating fire destroyed most of the town. On March 16, the fire started on Main Street in the rear of a hotel called the Forest House. Soon the entire roof was ablaze, and the inhabitants barely escaped with their lives. The fire hoses, which had been allowed to dry rot, burst when the water valve was opened, so the citizens of Forest City stood by helplessly as the fire crossed the road and raced up Main Street, reaching the last business in town and destroying everything in its path. In less than two hours from the time the fire was discovered, eighty-two buildings—including George Lawrence's hotel—were reduced to a blackened ruin. The damage was estimated at over \$200,000, but the insurance on the destroyed property amounted to only one fourth of that. The homes of James McGregor and several other prominent residents were lost in the inferno as well.

Gifts of money, groceries, provisions, bedding, and lumber soon poured in from surrounding towns and communities. By late spring, at least a dozen structures had been rebuilt. George Lawrence had been delayed in rebuilding his establishment due to a lingering illness brought on by the cold he caught while exposed to the elements on the night of the fire. On June 9, it was reported in the *Messenger* that he would erect a "large and commodious" hotel on the site of the Forest House, but in a related article in the same edition, it was announced that he had sold his interest in that parcel of land to Archie Henderson and James McNaughton. Less than a week later, George bought McDonald's Hotel—three stories tall with a steeply pitched roof to handle heavy snows—in Downieville, renamed it the Capitol Hotel, and relocated there before month's end. Evidently he had realized that his fragile health would not provide the fortitude required to reconstruct in Forest City. Clara Van Alstine was sad to see the departure of her uncle. In the absence of her father David, Uncle George had been like a father to her. She had even named her second born son after him.

More sadness enveloped Clara on January 21, 1884, when Ed, who had grown too fond of gambling and alcohol, deserted her and the boys for the big-city

attractions of Sacramento. Twenty-year-old Clara was forced to depend on the help of nearby relatives and friends as she struggled to support her two tiny sons. Gone were the more carefree days when she could visit family and friends in Downieville, taking a thrilling nine-mile stage ride down the treacherously winding Mountain House Road. How long that first winter alone must have seemed, trapped in a snow-covered house with a two-year-old and an infant.

Later that year, Clara Van Alstine moved to Downieville and became acquainted with Elizabeth Millar Wiggins, the twenty-nine-year-old wife of the town's saloon-keeper. "Lizzie" and her middle-aged husband James had been married for nine years, but their union had produced no children. James Samuel Wiggins had been born in Chicago in 1839 and came west with his father in 1852. With the exception of the war years, he had been a resident of Downieville since 1853, holding various positions, including pony express rider and mule train operator. His wife Lizzie, born in Australia in 1855, was the eldest child of James C. Millar, a Canadian who had settled his family on a Sierra County farm soon after the Civil War ended. (It should be noted that this Millar family was in no way connected to the Lee Millar family mentioned in subsequent chapters.) Soon it was arranged for this childless couple to help Clara by taking in her older son, three-year-old Howard, and rearing him as their own.

Meanwhile, Clara found a job opportunity in Forest City so she moved back there with her toddler Clayton. On occasion, she was able to visit with Howard in Downieville, and the Wigginses sometimes brought the boy to Forest City to see his mother, so it seems that open communication was maintained between the two parties. Only conjectures can be entertained about the explanation offered to Howard concerning this great change in his life. However, the little boy—already showing a physical resemblance to his grandfather Lawrence—was soon answering to the name of Howard Wiggins.

The summer of 1885 brought Clara more grief when her uncle George Lawrence died on August 7, never having recovered from the prolonged illness dating back to the fire two years earlier. Shortly before George died, Clara's father David, who by now had relocated from Nevada to Idaho, came to Downieville to visit him. He remained for the funeral, conducted in the Masonic Hall, which drew one of the largest crowds of mourners ever seen in Downieville. David's eloquent "card of thanks," published in the *Messenger* a week later, does not resemble the language of a rugged miner, so perhaps he had acquired an education either before entering that field of endeavor or after becoming very successful in the same. David left town a week after the funeral for his home in Bullion City, a small mining town in southern Idaho.

As Clara was mourning her own recent loss, the nation was grieving for former President Ulysses S. Grant who died July 23. When Forest City citizens decided to hold a memorial service for Grant on August 8, they asked Dr. Horace Felton to speak on behalf of the organizing committee, despite the fact that he was very much a newcomer, having opened his practice scarcely two weeks before. The