

## Harry Leonard “Lem” Sebring

John Thomas Sebring and Anna Lee Hayden Sebring were natives of the state of Kansas. They lived in a farming area in Johnson County, Kansas, about twenty-five miles southwest of downtown Kansas City. Sebring’s paternal ancestors were Dutch and had arrived in America in 1660. Their name had been something like “Sebruek”, the name was changed to “Sebring” after they arrived in this country.

In June of 1896, Harry Leonard Sebring was born to John and Anna here in Gardner, Kansas. Just two years later, in 1898, his younger brother Harold L. “Tom” Sebring was born.

When the boys were very young, their father worked for the Santa Fe Railroad as a telegrapher. This job took the family to Colorado. In 1904, Anna divorced the boys’ father and moved back to Gardner to live. Leonard and his brother Tom graduated from Gardner High School. Even though the boys were two years apart in age, they graduated the same year, 1916, because Leonard dropped out of school for two years.

1918 was when Leonard had his first “important” work published in Cappers Publication. The work consisted of poems and an illustration for the cover of a farmers’ magazine, which circulated in about six different states, and papers like the Topeka Daily Capital.

In 1919, Leonard's mother Anna Lee Hayden Sebring, married Ed L. Eaton, the editor of the *Gardner Gazette*.

From 1921 to 1923, the University of Kansas had Leonard as a student. He studied journalism art as his major. Being an avid piano player, Leonard would play for Lawrence boarding houses in exchange for his meals. After he left KU, Leonard drifted around finding jobs with engravers, advertising firms, newspapers, or any business that needed an artist.

Beginning in 1932 until 1937, Leonard did animations for Walt Disney Studios. A few of his animations involved Snow White, Santa's Workshop, Silly Symphonies and Mickey Mouse cartoons. Animators were not credited by Disney studios during this time so documentation of the specific work Leonard did is difficult to confirm.

In 1932, a duck scene was Sebring's first assignment with Disney. The toy duck was wound up and walking in a parade, it would wobble back and forth and go, Quack! Quack!



Prototype KU hat made by Leonard.

Hot Chocolate Soldiers came in the summer of 1933. Leonard animated the chocolate soldiers with a band to start their march. A chocolate general on horseback who lead troops; gingerbread soldiers who fired rifles; chocolate soldiers who fired melted marshmallows; gingerbread soldiers who were splattered by marshmallows; the chocolate soldiers and band marched home with the gingerbread soldiers as prisoners; and the chocolate soldiers melted as they marched in the closing scenes.



Mickey's Service Station (with Donald Duck the Mechanic) is the 1935 work remembered.

In 1937 and up until 1941, Leonard worked as an animator at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. He often told stories about working on the motion picture Snow White, and other animated "shorts". Hugh Harman's "The Field Mouse" was in 1941 and Leonard handled the scenes of the grandfather stubbornly remaining behind the family, along with their fight for survival against the waterfall of wheat. 1942 came and Leonard grew tired of the "blackouts" in Los Angeles prior to World War II. He left MGM and animation and returned to his Kansas hometown, where he felt it was more peaceful and safe. His ailing mother, who was dying from the effects

of cancer, also needed some care. During that same year in July, his stepfather Ed I. Eaton passed away.

After his return home from Hollywood, Leonard worked on advertising projects for local companies. He continued to “entertain” the citizens of Gardner and to use his artistic skills, which included creating artwork used to advertise products from Gardner’s own Cramer Chemical Company. One of his more unusual and amazing abilities was the cutting of player piano rolls, with a razor blade or his pocket knife. You could tell him a song and he could cut it into the paper rolls. Sebring often added more notes than a human hand could play, but the player piano could play all the notes.

On August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1949 Anna Lee Hayden Sebring Eaton, age 78, died at the Reece Hospital. After her death, Leonard began to make his mother’s house at 116 West Main Street into “Snow White’s” home and the garage into the Dwarf home. He cut all the windows to size and took his order to Mr. Hodge at the lumber yard. Mr. Hodge replied, “Sorry we do not carry that many windows in stock. We will have to wait for a special order.” Leonard replied, “Oh, what do I do?” Mr. Hodge replied, “Just have to hope for no rain.”

In an article by Bill Moore of the *Kansas City Star*, he said, “I can’t believe that anywhere in the world is there a man so dedicated to the player piano as Leonard Sebring. He lives in my hometown, Gardner, Kansas. To me Leonard will remain the great genius, a genius of sorts, at least.”

December 1974 Project Life sponsored a Leonard Sebring Day and Mayor J.C. Hart proclaimed that day “Leonard’s Own Day”. From 1975 to 1978, the Lion’s Club had meeting cards designed by Leonard and the Gardner Historical Museum houses 8 postcards that were sent to R.C. Stevens and Steve Brown during those years.



The bicentennial of the celebration of the United States of America arrived with Leonard’s design of a plate for Gardner on February 25. The plate read City of Gardner, Johnson County Kansas, 1857, Where the Trails Divide, To Oregon, To Santa Fe. Citizen of the Year honors were bestowed on Leonard in July of 1976 by the Jaycees and Jaynes.

Leonard never married over the years. When he was asked why, he replied, “I’m too ugly I guess – there just hasn’t been too many going my way. But I’ve been a part of the family in many of the place that I’ve lived.

Always, Leonard had a pencil in his hand doodling and drawing pictures wherever he went. He was a musician,



artist and friend. They remember his baritone voice in the church choir, where he stood out bedecked in a bow tie and turtleneck. People remember his assistance in painting backdrops for community theater productions and his white goatee.

Mrs. Powell a close friend, remembered him as being somewhat cantankerous. He insulted people and he sometimes overstayed his welcome even at her house, but she was able to say, "I felt I was greatly enriched by knowing Leonard."

May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1978 "Lem" signed his last art piece.

