

THE HILTON SISTERS: CHARLOTTE'S SIAMESE TWINS

By : Brandon Lunsford

I love the movie *Freaks*. Dracula director Tod Browning's 1932 horror cult classic created instant controversy when it was released, and was pulled from circulation all over the country while actually being banned outright in Great Britain for decades. Audiences were shocked not only with Browning's use of actual circus sideshow freaks like Schlitzie the Pinhead and Prince Randian the Human Torso as cast members, but with the muddy and bloody climax that shows them exacting revenge on those who have wronged and tormented them. A commercial flop that largely ruined Browning's career, the film gained cult status on the midnight movie circuit in the 1960's and is now viewed by horror fans as a classic. I first discovered *Freaks* like many others my age on VHS when I was in my late teens, and I was instantly hooked. There just isn't anything like it even now, and there certainly wasn't anything like it in 1932. There is one particular sequence in the movie that had nothing to do with horror that has always affected me strongly. The film's Siamese twins were both involved romantically, one with one of the circus clowns and the other with the circus' owner. There's an amazing scene where one twin is being kissed by her fiancé, the owner, and the other sighs with pleasure. It's a rare moment of beauty in a movie filled with ugliness and violence, and it always stood out to me. I was extremely surprised to learn when I got a little older that Daisy and Violet Hilton, the conjoined sisters who played the twins, lived out their last remaining years and died here in Charlotte.



The Hilton sisters were born in February 5, 1908 in Brighton England as pygopagus twins, meaning they were attached at the pelvis and fused at the sacral bone near the base of the spine. The two did share some blood vessels together but had completely separate organs, and as far as conjoined twins go they were able to move around with relative ease; in this day and age they would be very likely prospects for surgical separation. Their mother was horrified and rejected them, and Daisy and Violet were adopted by her landlady and midwife Mary Hilton. "Adopted" might be a strong word, because what Mrs. Hilton really wanted to do was exhibit the twins in carnival sideshows, which she did in England and Australia from the time they were a year old. When she died the twins were willed (like the property they essentially were) to Mary's daughter Edith and her husband Myer, who relocated the "family" to San Antonio, TX into a home built with money earned from the twins' exhibitions. The sisters soon became a national sensation in the States, touring the burgeoning sideshow market as well as vaudeville shows where they sang, danced, and

played clarinet and saxophone. They made lots of fans including Harry Houdini, who supposedly taught the sisters how to mentally separate themselves from each other if one of them wanted to have relations. "I just turn over and read a book and eat an apple," claimed Violet.

Despite their success Edith and Myer were physically abusing them and cheating them of their earnings, and in 1931 the 23-year old twins won their emancipation in an \$80,000 court settlement.

Daisy and Violet continued to tour the vaudeville circuit, but by the 1940's the public's fascination with vaudeville and sideshows as entertainment had faded as their love affair with the movies (and soon television) began. The sisters landed the role of a lifetime in *Freaks* soon after they gained their freedom, but there obviously wasn't much of a chance of a career in film for them. Throughout the 1940's and 1950's they continued to perform their novelty act in theaters and nightclubs across the country to dwindling audiences, and even appeared at the Carolina Theater in Charlotte in 1945. In an interview with the Charlotte Observer before their appearance the sisters talked about the challenges of being conjoined: "We may seem like one, but everything costs us for two. We pay insurance for two, but could only collect for one." They had both attempted to get married for years but their applications were turned down in various states for indecency, and short lived marriages they did both enter into were soon annulled and derided as publicity stunts. Their last big attempt at fame was their appearance in the 1952 film *Chained for Life*, where they played vaudeville singers involved in a romance that ends in murder. The movie flopped resoundingly, and by the 1960's the twins were trying to cash in on the cult revival of *Freaks* by making often humiliating personal appearances at rural theaters to make ends meet. They got in touch with Philip Morris, local magician and horror host who booked live acts and soon became the founder of Morris Costumes, and he got them on as guests for his weekly live show on WBTV, *Dr. Evil's Horror Theater*. He booked them at the Fox Drive-In Theater in Charlotte for a showing of *Chained for Life*, and only a handful of people showed up. Another agent got them a gig at a theater in Monroe, took all their money, and abandoned them at their hotel, penniless and alone. Like many other choices in their lives it wasn't their choice at all, but the Hilton sisters soon found the rundown Huffman Trailer Park on Wilkinson Boulevard in Charlotte to be their new home at the age of 54.



They were eventually introduced to Charles and LaRue Reid, owners of the Park-N-Shop grocery store on Wilkinson, and they begged them for a job. The Reids hired them as produce checkers, on the condition that they stop wearing the stage clothes and garish makeup and nails that they still maintained even at their most destitute. The produce counter was turned to accommodate them, and one of the twins would work the register while the other one weighed and bagged the items. Most customers didn't even realize they were conjoined, and the ones that did were respectfully fascinated. For the first time in their unfortunate history they seemed to be living quiet and normal lives; the Reids convinced their church to rent the sisters a house it owned at 2204 Weyland Avenue, and church members and friends donated furniture for them. They became involved with the church and made many new friends, and by all accounts were extremely friendly and generous with everyone they knew. They never talked about their days in show business, however, and they refused interviews and photo ops. Some doctors attempted to convince the twins to try separation with the advancing medical techniques now available to them, but they declined; they had been together their entire lives and saw no reason to change that now.

Sometime before Christmas in 1968 the twins came down with the Hong Kong Flu that had been an epidemic that year, and perhaps due to their distrust of the doctors who had always poked and prodded them they didn't seek treatment. Violet got it first, and as soon as she was getting a little better Daisy got it. The Reids, concerned that they hadn't come to work in a few days, went to their house on Jan. 2, 1969 and had the police force the door open when they wouldn't answer. They found the sisters dead in the hallway, where they had managed to drag themselves over a heating vent to keep warm. Daisy had died first, and Violet must have known her death would quickly follow. They were buried together in an oversized coffin in the Forest Lawn West Cemetery off of Freedom Drive, where they share a plot with a Vietnam veteran whose mother was their friend.

The Hilton Sisters had a hard life; they were taken advantage of, denied the rights and privileges others enjoyed, and were often laughed at and ogled. Even though they ended up

in Charlotte out of pure desperation, however, it seemed to be the happiest and most stable time of their lives. They certainly haven't been forgotten. In 1997 the Broadway musical Side Show was loosely based on the sisters and received four Tony nominations, and in 2012 the award-winning documentary Bound by Flesh told their story. Daisy and Violet were indeed "chained for life," but they never seemed to mind it. To many people they were many different things, and they have certainly become part of Charlotte lore. To me, they will always be those two beautiful girls in 1932, enjoying the bliss of the same kiss.

References and photo information:

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