

“Mystery Biography”
by Rick Rickards

To the Philosophical Club of Cleveland
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Ladies and Gentlemen and distinguished guests...

...I plan to share with you a strange story which invokes the principles of Serendipity. The word comes from the Persian legend about the three princes of Serendip, [now called Sri Lanka] who kept finding something of great importance when it was least expected...

My quest started several months ago when I was researching into the history of a man that had always been intriguing to me. He was William M. Vander Weyde who lived from 1871 to 1929. He was a Dutchman, a historian and an early 19th century photographer. He was a very impressive figure of a man, larger than life. I remember seeing him depicted at public ceremonies, cutting ribbons, ground breaking etc. He was unforgettable, statuesque and usually wearing plaid knickerbockers! For some years he was the President of the Thomas Paine Society and as I read about him my curiosity was piqued. I reviewed his portfolio and saw some remarkable photography. Incidentally his art collection was recently rediscovered and you can check it out on the internet. The picture which finally caught my attention was that of an intense young man with unusual features. The caption, written in 1906, said, “...one of the strangest and most original men of letters of the day is Sadakichi Hartmann, the poet, art critic, and lecturer ...he reputedly fried eggs with Walt Whitman, discussed poetry with Stephane Mellarme and drank with John Barrymore who described him as a living freak...sired by Mephistopheles out of Madame Butterfly!”...This man at the age of 23 had written and produced a play about Jesus which had opened in Boston in 1893. He was jailed and all the copies of the play were burned. I had one burning question of my own...Why had I never heard of him before?

I must confess to you that for the past year I had been planning and researching two interesting talks to deliver to the PCC. One was on the mysterious Voynich manuscript, the other was on the effect which China had on the European Renaissance. Both are interesting subjects but when I came across this individual above and his story I abandoned everything else.

Origins

On an artificial Island, Dejima, in Nagasaki Harbor, Japan, our subject Carl Sadakichi Hartmann, was born. The year was 1877.

His father was a German entrepreneur in the armament business and his mother, Osada, was a Japanese lady. He had an older brother Taru, and both children were brought up in luxury. Unfortunately his mother, died soon after he was born. He was baptized as a

Lutheran and given the name of Sadakichi which in Japanese means “Fortunate if constant.” After the death of his mother, he was shipped off to Germany to be raised by a wealthy uncle and his family. His father remarried a German woman who had two daughters; in order to pacify his new wife, the two boys were shipped off to Germany again to private education and tutoring. Little Sadakichi was something of a child prodigy and it is alleged he had learned to read all or most of Goethe and Schiller, plus Latin and Greek texts, before he was 9 years old!

Later Sadakichi was sent to the (German) Naval Academy in Kiel, which was famous for its discipline. Sadakichi didn’t like it at all so he decided to run away. Not just away from the school, he ran away to Paris! That must have been a real eye-opener for a 13 year old!

His father strongly disapproved and disinherited him. He was exiled and sent off to live with a great-uncle, this time in Philadelphia, PA, America. It was a pretty dull life for a young man, but he soon found a system of lending libraries where he spent all his spare time, studying at the Spring Garden Institute and Mercantile Library.

Art had a fascination for him and he soon began to put his creative ability to some use. He became correspondent for two newspapers, the *Criterion* and the New York *Staats-Zeitung*. His new family also helped him earn some money doing menial tasks.

Sadakichi had a love of poetry and had read extensively on his own. He was a great admirer of Walt Whitman and he discovered that he was living fairly close to his home. He managed to pay a visit and get himself a part time job translating some of his foreign correspondence. We can imagine his excitement of regularly visiting with the greatest living poet of the day!

There is a lovely picture of the two of them chatting over a pile of books. It was drawn by Sadakichi and sent out to the New York newspapers with titles like “Tea with Walt Whitman”. The *Herald* made much of it but unfortunately Sadakichi forgot to get Walt Whitman’s consent! Worse yet, Sadakichi included a lot of critical remarks which Whitman had allegedly said about prominent people. That was the end of their relationship. Year later, scholars came to the conclusion that what the young Japanese artist had said was true; it was just tactless. Undaunted, Sadakichi picked up the pieces and published them in a small book “Conversations with Walt Whitman”. His controversial career had started.

The scene changes. Sadakichi sold his collection of books and booked the first of a series of five visits to Europe. There he spent his efforts to learning all he could about the stage and acting. He studied dancing, and all his life he demonstrated a unique style of interpretive dancing which many people learned from him. People who had seen him dance remembered its uniqueness. He taught some special steps to Isadora Duncan and allegedly recited to her from Omar Khayyam while he did so. He was crazy enough—maybe he really did! He also studied stage presentation in Germany and Holland and came up with his own original methods of stage lighting, some of which persist to the present day. He originated what is now known as psychedelic lighting.

While he was in Europe he interviewed personalities like the musician Franz Liszt and Swinburne, an English writer, and got them published in the British publication "Curtain" to support himself. While in France he was well received by the French symbolic poets with whom he had an immediate rapport

In 1893 he completed his three act play "Christ" and planned to have it performed in Boston. It was written in the style of the French symbolic poetry. He wrote a promotional piece which he published in his own magazine. It looked innocent enough here and abroad. The play was favorably reviewed by such people as Stephane Mallarme, a leading light of the French Symbolist movement. The American critic James Huneker said it was the most extraordinary piece of writing ever written by a 17-year-old! The title of the play was "Christ". There were two nude scenes. And on opening night in Boston, the police came in and arrested and jailed the author, and picked up all the copies of the play which were burned by the New England Watch and Ward Society.

Sadakichi stayed in the Charles Street Jail No. 2 over Christmas and New Years and was charged with blasphemy. He pled guilty and paid the fine of \$500. This wiped him out completely and destroyed his magazine. He remarked afterwards that if he ever did anything like this again, he would open in Paris or London. Actually, the play is quite good but it was a lot more than the audience could handle, especially in 1894. Sadakichi published several similar full-length plays, on "Buddha", "Mohammad", "Moses" and "Mary Baker" but I do not think they were ever staged, which is a pity, because they were well-written and provocative. Perhaps some time the future?

Sadakichi had hit hard times. His health had not been good. He suffered with allergies and he was a heavy drinker and maybe he had picked up some other bad habits while he was in France? I don't know if he had ever indulged with the "green fairy", the slang term for absinth, a powerful and addicting form of alcohol which was legal in Paris. Many people partook of the fiery liquid and there are different opinions as to its' toxicity. Some say that it was hallucinogenic and habit-forming—others claim it as no worse than regular alcohol;. Whether this was the cause of his problem, I cannot say. But around this time he wound up in the hospital after an attempted suicide. Always believing that things would work out for the best, Sadakichi made a play for his pretty nurse, Elizabeth Blanche Walsh and wound up marrying her! It turns out she was the daughter of British Colonel and also an accomplished artist and screen writer They had five children together, then they parted. For years afterwards she always spoke of him with affection." He was three parts genius and one part devil and I was in love with all 4 parts." During this time, Sadakichi had another affair with another lady, a poet, Anne Throop, who bore him at least one "love child," while he was still married to Elizabeth.

Sadakichi lived in Greenwich Village for much of his creative life. He was known as the "Bohemian King". In those days the term "Bohemian" had a different connotation from today. It was romantic, artistic and popular. There were operas and songs written to extol the Bohemian life, but not synonymous with the beatniks in the 1950's and '60's or the hippies on the '60's and '70's.

Elbert Hubbard--who was he? He ran a little print shop on an artist community called the Roycrofters. It was the source of hundreds of pamphlets and essays. One of his famous remarks was, "If you want a friend, be one". He had dozens of little essays depicting visits in the homes of famous people. He also ran a colony for artists and Sadakichi lived there for a while. Sadakichi said that Hubbard wasn't too fussy about where his material came from; he would write for Hubbard and Hubbard would publish the work as his own. We will never know the truth about Hubbard's authorship because the old freethinking printer went down with the Lusitania on May 7, 1915.

During that time Sadakichi remarried, this time to a poet who lived in the colony at Roycrofters. Her name was Lillian Bonham, and the couple produced 7 more children.

Life in Greenwich Village must have been getting boring, so Sadakichi took off and joined the boisterous Hollywood crowd. Here he rubbed shoulders with the likes of Errol Flynn, W. C. Fields, Lionel Barrymore and with Douglas Fairbanks, with whom he co-starred as the Court Magician in the 1924 version of the "Thief of Bagdad". He was paid the grand sum of \$250 a week, plus a case of whiskey. (If you want to see it, you can view it on YouTube!)

While in Hollywood, Sadakichi wrote the script for "Don Quixote" but none of the studios wanted it. About that time he also wrote, "The Last 30 Days of Christ" which was highly original and well-thought of. Charlie Chaplin said in an interview that it was the finest piece of literature he's ever seen and he would like to play the key role. It never happened.

As he aged he did less and less writing but he still made time to update some of his previous books. He became a recluse and lived by himself on the edge of an Indian reservation in a little shack which he built himself and called "Catclaw Siding". Some of his old drinking buddies would stop by from time to time and share a drink with him. At the end of his life he was engaged in a fierce battle with the FBI who were trying to incarcerate him on the grounds that he was part German and part Japanese. He retaliated by saying that he'd done so much for the United States that they should celebrate his birthday as a national holiday.

In November of 1944 he went to Florida to visit one of his daughters to do some work on one of his books and while he was there, he died. His shack in California was left abandoned for several years until one day a young reporter was asked by the newspaper to do a story about Sadakichi. His daughter, Wisteria, who lived nearby, at first refused to let anyone touch the material. Later she agreed to cooperate. The Library at the University of California at Riverside took over the whole project and created a special section of the library just for him and his work. Some material is water-stained and there has been some evidence of mice nibbling at a few pages but by and large most of it was saved. I am glad to say that it is quite difficult to acquire copies and that there is considerable pride in the collection. I would love to read it all but so far it has not been

possible. One day I would like to see the plays put on by professionals; in the mean time we must be patient.