

CHAPTER 5

Warren Bunkerr: Monmouth's Celebrated 19th-Century "Drag Queen"¹

Jeff Rankin

If asked to name a 19th-century Monmouth, Illinois, native who performed in Paris as a renowned serpentine dancer, one somewhat knowledgeable about Monmouth history might answer Loie Fuller, but that would be incorrect. Fuller—the celebrated dancing star of the Exposition Universelle of 1900—was not born in Monmouth and only lived in the city for two years. The other flamboyant dancer from Monmouth was just as graceful and inventive as Fuller and wore equally elaborate gowns but possessed one major difference—this artist was a man.

Born November 18, 1864, to a middle-class Monmouth painter and his seamstress wife, Warren Bunker was one of nine children.² From an early age, he demonstrated that he not only inherited the artistic talents of both parents but also possessed a creative streak that defied the norms of a Victorian Midwest town. His ever-evolving résumé would include the following diverse occupations: snake charmer, Circassian prince, female impersonator, man milliner, fire and serpentine dancer, clairvoyant, palm reader, costume designer and vaudeville impresario. Those talents would lead him around the world — performing for royalty and befriending Hollywood stars.

The death of his father when Warren was just five years old³ may have influenced his early development, as he became close to his mother and learned to sew at an early age. By sixteen, he had quit school and was working as a cigar maker. The first indication of his unusual talent emerged shortly thereafter when he won a satin-lined chinchilla overcoat for designing the winning costume at a Davenport, Iowa, masquerade in 1885.⁴



Warren Bunkerr

Figure 5.1: A photograph of Warren Bunkerr in drag, published in the *San Francisco Review*. Photo courtesy of Jeff Rankin.

¹ The bulk of this article originally appeared in my weekly column, "The Rankin File," in the *Daily Review Atlas* (Monmouth, Illinois). It was published as a two-part series in the June 13 and June 20, 2017, editions.

² Account of the 80th birthday of Warren's mother, Polly Bunker, in *Warren County Democrat* (Monmouth, Illinois) October 25, 1905.

³ *Ibid.* Bunker later changed the spelling of his surname to Bunkerr.

⁴ *Evening Gazette* (Monmouth, Ill.) January 14, 1885.

In 1887, Warren Bunkerr took out an ad in the *New York Clipper*, describing himself as the “champion amateur female-impersonator of the world,” seeking a position with a sideshow or circus as “Almolette the Circassian,” and noting he had “the most elegant wardrobe and make-up ever produced.”⁵

While one might expect that some residents of a conservative Midwest town like Monmouth would take offense at a male citizen immodestly parading on stage as a woman, there is no evidence in local newspapers of the day ever publishing negative remarks about Bunkerr. In fact, Monmouth seemed to take pride in Bunkerr’s antics. After a newspaper in neighboring Galesburg wrote derisively that as [Bunkerr] “strutted around in his gilt-edged disguise, his long legs encased in tight hose, and his abbreviated dress fluttering in the wind, he created quite a sensation and some amusement... Evidently female impersonation suits him, but what particular necessity there is for his imitating the circus lady when he appears in public is not plain,” Monmouth’s *Evening Gazette* responded, “This reflection upon one of Monmouth’s residents must be resented and the esteemed contemporary can prepare itself for the onslaught.”⁶

Bunkerr’s brazen antics seemed to be embraced with good humor by many of his Victorian contemporaries. In January 1888, the Keokuk *Gate City* published the following note: “Warren Bunkerr, the costumer of Monmouth, Ill., represented a female Hindoo snake charmer at the masquerade last evening. It was a deceptive costume. A Main street clerk became quite infatuated with him and was very solicitous about making a date. When Mr. Bunkerr unmasked, the deeply chagrined counter-hopper left the hall.”⁷

Later that same season, Bunkerr changed his stage name to Zelldo, Circassian Prince, and was booked for three weeks in Columbus, Ohio.⁸ In 1889, he billed himself as Prince Zelldo, the Wonderful Snake Charmer, who worked with live cobras, boas and anacondas, and wore magnificent jeweled costumes,⁹ and performed in such far-flung locales as St. Joseph, Missouri, and Harlem, New York.

⁵ *New York Clipper*, March 26, 1887.

⁶ *Evening Gazette*, October 10, 1887

⁷ Report copied in *The Daily Atlas* (Monmouth, Illinois) January 13, 1888.

⁸ *New York Clipper*, April 7, 1888.

⁹ *Ibid.*, January 5, 1889

NOTICE.
WARREN BUNKERR,
CHAMPION AMATEUR FEMALE-IMPERSONATOR
OF THE WORLD WOULD LIKE AN ENGAGEMENT
WITH RESPONSIBLE SIDESHOW OR CIRCUS MAN-
AGER AS ALMOLETTE THE CIRCASSIAN; or with some
Minstrel or Specialty troupe.
P. S.—Have the most elegant wardrobe and make-up
ever produced. Address BOX 1,023 Monmouth, Ill.

Figure 5.2: Bunkerr took out this 1887 ad in the *New York Clipper* to promote his female impersonation act. Photo courtesy of Jeff Rankin.



Figure 5.3: A circa 1890 cabinet card used by Bunkerr in advertising his Prince Zelldo snake charming act.

By age 27, Bunkerr was touring the south, performing as a snake charmer at museums in New Orleans and St. Louis. Using Monmouth as his home base, over the next few years he would tour widely, including an 1894 trip to Europe, where he was said to have performed before Queen Victoria.¹⁰

A Monmouth newspaper reported upon Bunkerr's return that he spent five weeks in Paris, two weeks of which he danced in two opera houses almost every night, going from one to the other. It added that during his time in Paris he was employed in some of the most fashionable millinery establishments and turned out patterns that were sent to New York.¹¹

In 1895, Bunkerr took out an ad in the *New York Clipper* that included his photograph and billed himself as "the only person in the world doing sensational dancing in a monster den of living serpents."¹² Later that year, it was announced he would perform in Atlanta, and then Mexico. In October, his Egyptian King snake gave birth to thirty-three babies, but none survived Monmouth's cold weather.¹³

In the meantime, Bunkerr had opened a millinery store on the south side of the Public Square and billed himself as having "no equal as a trimmer" and being "recommended by the leading ladies of the city." He also advertised having the largest inventory in the state of masquerade costumes for the winter season.¹⁴ In 1897, he moved to new quarters at 106 East Broadway, which he advertised as "The Finest Store in Monmouth"¹⁵ and announced he would make a tour through Illinois and Iowa in a theatrical troupe under his own management.¹⁶ The following February, he appeared as a female impersonator in Burlington, Iowa, wearing a gown costing \$5,000, with a train 40 feet long.¹⁷

When illness and a financial judgement caused his store to close in July 1898, Bunkerr headed to Colorado Springs for the sake of his health. While there he advertised himself as a "wonderful fortune-teller." By September, he was back in Monmouth,¹⁸ and, selling his snakes to a Cincinnati museum in December, decided to focus his talents on dancing.¹⁹

In 1901, Bunkerr claimed to have patented a fire dance,²⁰ which he asserted was witnessed by 50,000 spectators the night of Monmouth's Fourth of July celebration. "The Great Bunkerr" opened his next tour in 1902, carrying 12 all-star acts, which included jugglers, acrobatic clowns, a contortionist and a barrel jumper.²¹ By November, he announced he was organizing a

¹⁰ Bunkerr's performance before the queen may have been a fabrication. His obituary in the *Monmouth Daily Review Atlas* states: ". . . it is said he appeared in London and, by command, presented his famous dances before the then ruling English monarch. . . ." Still, Victoria was purported to have loved attending dance and theatre performances and even attended a command performance of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in 1887 (William F. Cody Archive).

¹¹ *The Monmouth Daily Review* (Monmouth, Illinois) October 12, 1894.

¹² *New York Clipper*, August 24, 1895.

¹³ *Ibid.*, October 25, 1895.

¹⁴ *Monmouth City Directory for 1895-1896* (City Directory Steam Print, Monmouth, Illinois) July 1895.

¹⁵ *Warren County Democrat*, September 2, 1897.

¹⁶ *Republican-Atlas* (Monmouth, Illinois) September 24, 1897.

¹⁷ *Burlington Hawk Eye* (Burlington, Iowa) cited in *Warren County Democrat* (Monmouth, Illinois) February 5, 1898.

¹⁸ *Republican-Atlas*, July 29, 1898, and September 16, 1898.

¹⁹ *Warren County Democrat*, December 19, 1898.

²⁰ Advertisement in *New York Clipper*, July 13, 1901.

²¹ *New York Clipper*, January 18, 1902.

high-class vaudeville company with his brother George as advance man. It would include a dance illustrating the eruption of Mount Pelée.²²

In 1903, an Irish booking agent invited Bunkerr to tour South Africa and the British colonies,²³ but it is uncertain that he did so, as he was performing in Houston, Texas that winter.

Bunkerr, the Man Milliner
OFFERS HIS FIRST
MILLINERY RECEPTION
To the Ladies of Alexandria

**WEDNESDAY AND THURSDAY, MARCH
18TH AND 19TH**

A Special Reception and a Special Invitation to Every Gentle-
man in the City to Call and See This
Wonderful Display

300 TRIMMED HATS FROM \$1.00 TO \$15.00

And every Hat trimmed by a Man, with all the dainty, artistic
taste that will be so greatly admired by every lady in the city.
I ask that you see my work, my styles which, with my low prices,
I am sure to be recognized as **THE LEADER**

Merry Widow Sailors in large varieties. You will find the right styles and the
right prices at my Parlor.

**BUNKERR, THE MAN MILLINER, Full of the Newest Ideas; Up-to-
the-Minute. FOURTH AND DESOTO STREETS.**
Old Hats Made Over, Plumes Cleaned and Curled.

Bunkerr Foot Ease Cures All Sore Feet. 25c Package.

Zelldo Bunkerr, the World's Greatest Medium and Master Mind
Translator, Reveals the Past, Present and Future Correctly. No
Fake, but One of Nature's Wonderful Gifts.

Figure 5.4: A 1908 advertisement for Bunkerr's millinery shop in Alexandria, Louisiana, also advertised his foot ointment and his clairvoyant powers.

In 1904, he returned to Texas in a gypsy van equipped with a complete camping outfit and all the conveniences—an endeavor he said was designed to improve his health.²⁴ Ill health—never specifically divulged—would plague him through his remaining stage career.

A large ad in 1908 showed that Bunkerr had settled in Alexandria, Louisiana, and was billing himself as Zelldo Bunkerr—The Marvel,” a clairvoyant. The ad likely employed a degree of hyperbole, as it implied that Queen Victoria had bestowed upon him the Order of the Garter, and that he had read the palms of numerous celebrities of the day, including Mark Twain, Buckskin Frank Leslie, and Edward the Prince of Wales. The ad states that he was raised by Angeline, a daughter of Chief Seattle, who lived to be over one hundred years old and was one of the world's greatest mind readers.

But Bunkerr had not yet given up his millinery trade, either. He ran an ad in the Alexandria paper announcing a special reception, at which he would offer 300 trimmed hats from \$1.00 to \$15.00, decorated “with all the dainty, artistic taste that will be so greatly admired by every lady in the city.”²⁵

By 1909, Bunkerr had either suffered a recurring bout of poor health, or his business was on the ropes. He published several public notices in the Alexandria newspaper that he was going out of business and was offering his entire stock of elegant spring millinery at actual cost. Everything was to be sold by June 1.²⁶

In August, The Associated Press released a story from San Antonio, Texas, stating that an investigation had started “into the mysterious disappearance of Zelldo Warren Bunker, an impersonator known over all vaudeville circuits.” He had been last seen on Aug. 16 “in his shirt sleeves and carrying a pistol. He bid his friends here goodbye and left letters making disposition of his property. He is said to have been driven crazy and heart broken by some love affair.”²⁷

Whether or not that disappearance had been a ruse (perhaps to avoid creditors?), by the following April, Bunkerr was living with his sister Lesta Whaley in Joplin, Missouri, and working as

²² *Republican-Atlas*, November 1, 1902, and January 2, 1903.

²³ *Warren County Democrat*, September 24, 1903.

²⁴ *Republican-Atlas*, November 10, 1904.

²⁵ *The Town Talk* (Alexandria, Louisiana) April 6, 1909.

²⁶ *The Town Talk*, August 26, 1909.

²⁷ *The Brownsville Herald* (Brownsville, Texas), August 26, 1909.

a clairvoyant. Then, in July 1911, the Alexandria, Louisiana, paper published a notice that he had written to the city clerk there in regard to a license for conducting a palmist and clairvoyant business there. The paper noted that “Shortly after Mr. Bunkerr left this city three years ago news was received here that he had been killed. . . .”²⁸

It does not appear that Bunkerr ever returned to Louisiana. Instead, by February 1912, he had re-established himself in Monmouth, advertising as a clairvoyant palmist who also rented costumes and made over ladies’ old hats. His beloved family home at 332 North Main Street, in which his family had resided for more than half a century, had been sold following the death of his mother in 1907, so he took up quarters at 111 North First Street. In May, he moved his business to 415 North Main Street.²⁹

In 1913, Bunkerr took to the vaudeville stage again, headlining in Vancouver, B.C., as “the Great Bunkerr, the classic novelty dancer, featuring ‘The Dream of the Witch’ and the ‘Shower of Butterflies,’”³⁰ but by March 1914, he was back in Monmouth at a new location—208 East First Avenue.

In June, the *Monmouth Daily Atlas* carried an ad touting the “Extraordinary Arrival of New York’s most famous Clairvoyant and palmist,” Prof. R. Allen, offering “advice on all affairs of life, such as health, love, courtship, marriage, divorce, lawsuits, etc. Lost or stolen articles, locates oil wells, mines, hidden treasures.” Interestingly, Professor Allen’s readings were to be conducted at the address now occupied by Bunkerr.³¹ Whether this was a new Bunkerr persona, or perhaps a visiting friend, is a subject for speculation.

In August 1916, Bunkerr applied for a passport to visit Hawaii, China, Japan, Manila, the Philippines, South Africa, Australia, and Java. Ever eager to reinvent himself, he solemnly swore to the Bureau of Citizenship that he was born in 1873, after having declared on his 1894 passport that he was born in 1864.³² But he was well-practiced at deceiving the government. In previous censuses, he reported that his father was born in both New York and France. In the 1930 census, he would assert that his father had been born in India and his mother was an American Indian.

In January 1917, Monmouth’s other famous showman, magician Will “The Great Nicola” Nicol, returned from a trip to the Orient and reported having run into Bunkerr on a pier in Hong Kong. Bunkerr informed him that his company had just finished an engagement in Shanghai and was on its way to a carnival in Manila. While in China, Nicol said, “he trimmed a few hats for some of the vain Chinese and these were received so favorably that he was urged to remain and establish a millinery store in the city.”³³

After having talked for some time, Nicol took Bunkerr to the roof of a building where he had a large python in captivity. Although warned by Nicol that the snake was dangerous and that natives handling the snake typically pinned its head to the floor, Bunkerr nonchalantly opened the box, dragged the snake out and opened its mouth, giving Nicol some instructions about its care and feeding. The natives stood in awe at his abilities as a snake charmer.³⁴

²⁸ *The Town Talk*, July 28, 1911.

²⁹ *Republican-Atlas*, May 20, 1912.

³⁰ *The Daily Colonist* (Victoria, B.C.) October 19, 1913.

³¹ *The Monmouth Daily Atlas*, June 18, 1914.

³² U.S. Passport Applications, July 2, 1894, and August 16, 1916.

³³ *The Monmouth Daily Atlas*, February 1, 1917.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Bunkerr must have impressed the Great Nicola, for after returning to Monmouth in October 1917, he joined Nicola's company as the mind reader Prince Zelldo, who answered audience questions that had been written and sealed in envelopes. A 1918 review in a North Carolina newspaper said the act "was one of the best things in the show."³⁵ The advent of motion pictures, however, would soon dim the lights of vaudeville, and after the tour Bunkerr retired to Monmouth to run his millinery store.

The Illinois centennial celebration in 1918 would provide at least one more opportunity for Bunkerr to exhibit his dancing skills. On September 13, he was a special attraction at Weir's Fruit Farm near Gladstone, Ill. During the day, he told fortunes, with the proceeds donated to the Red Cross's war efforts. That night, he performed his famous Indian Dance of Death in a pow-wow assisted by about 100 actors dressed as Indians.³⁶

In 1922, still running his Monmouth millinery shop, Bunkerr announced an "Early Easter display of New York and Chicago pattern hats, just the same goods from the wholesale house as other millinery stores buy of, but I haven't got plate glass display windows, a lot of nice-looking expensive salesladies to pay." He offered five hundred hats from \$2 to \$10, which he could sell for half price.³⁷ Just after Christmas that year, despite nearing age 60, he entertained at a masquerade dance in Alexis, Illinois.³⁸

Perhaps the millinery business began to lose its customer base by the 1920s, for by 1925, Bunkerr had moved to Marshalltown, Iowa, where he lived with his brother Zack and advertised himself as a costumer. The following year found him listed in the San Diego city directory as Prince Zelldo, a medium. Then, in 1927, a listing for Prince Zelldo showed up in the San Antonio, Texas, city directory.³⁹

The 1930 federal census lists Zelldo Bunker, occupation of "needle work," living in Los Angeles, California. Although he was sixty-six, he gave his age as forty-three and also asserted he had been born in India. During this period of his life, Bunkerr worked as a costume designer and did spiritual readings for his numerous movie star friends, which in earlier days had included Rudolph Valentino.⁴⁰

As age began to take its toll, Bunkerr again moved in with his sister Lesta — his one surviving sibling—who had relocated from Joplin, Missouri, to Long Beach, Calif. There, he became a member of the Psychic Science Spiritualist Church. In 1936, he visited Monmouth one last time, staying for about a month.⁴¹

In early 1937, Bunkerr contracted double pneumonia at Long Beach and died January 29 at age seventy-eight. His ashes were buried in Los Angeles.⁴²

³⁵ *Winston-Salem Journal* (Winston-Salem, North Carolina) January 31, 1918.

³⁶ *The Monmouth Daily Atlas*, September 12, 1918.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, March 23, 1922.

³⁸ *The Monmouth Daily Atlas*, December 30, 1922.

³⁹ Marshalltown, Iowa (1925), San Diego, California (1926), and San Antonio (1927) City Directories.

⁴⁰ Warren Z. Bunker obituary, *Monmouth Daily Review-Atlas*, February 4, 1937.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*