

Beginnings

The winter of 1896–97 was a warm one in New York City, one of the warmest of the decade. The price of a ladies' heavyweight jacket was slashed from \$6.90 to \$3.97 in early January due to decreased demand for winter clothes. William McKinley had recently won the election of 1896, ushering in a new era that would shape the coming century. Brooklyn was still a separate city on the outskirts of a rapidly developing New York City. And at 289 89th Street in that suburb of Brooklyn, 29-year-old Rose Douras was at home expecting her fifth child.

Marion Davies spoke of her family history with pride. Both sides were prominent in New York City politics, contributing to efforts to better the city during a time of extreme corruption. Marion's maternal grandfather, Charles Reilly, had come to New York from his native Connecticut in young adulthood. He became active in New York politics, quickly rising to the upper echelons of the New York City Democratic Party. He helped to create the County Democracy, one of the few organizations to pose a threat to the Tammany Hall establishment, and was a well-known and much-beloved figure around the city. He married Mary Cushing, and the couple owned two blocks of Manhattan apartments from which they earned income.

His daughter Rose, Marion's mother, was a soft-spoken, caring woman who loved sunshine and solitude. She enjoyed sitting back and simply observing her surroundings, engaging friends in topics she found interesting, such as cooking and her family. When she had children, she gave herself completely to them and thought of little else. She and Marion developed a particularly close bond, and in return Marion was devoted to "Mama Rose."

Rose met Bernard J. Douras, a managing clerk at the law firm Vanderpoel, Green & Cuming, in the early 1880s and took an interest in him. The son of

immigrants Daniel and Catherine Douras, Bernard had gone to Columbia Law School and showed a promising future. Although his parents had come from Ireland, the unusual name of Douras is French Huguenot in origin, the result of a branch of a family that fled France to escape persecution by the Catholic majority. The Dourases had settled in County Tyrone and County Mayo in the north of the country, where they worked as laborers until the onslaught of the potato famine in 1845. Daniel and Catherine came to the United States through Liverpool and made their home in New York City, where Bernard was born and educated.

The Reillys enthusiastically approved of Rose's choice in a match, and Rose and Bernard married in 1884. Rose soon became pregnant with her first child and gave birth to a girl named Irene in 1885. Nicknamed "Reine" (pronounced to rhyme with "Queenie"), she was docile, proper, and eager to please. Ethel, born in 1887, was significantly more spirited with a penchant for shocking people. She was a force of nature and delighted in letting loose with various off-color expressions such as "Oh, my ass for a banjo string!" Although she was devoted to all her siblings, Marion would later whisper to friends that Ethel was secretly her favorite sister.

The Dourases' third child, Charles, was born in October 1888. Childhood photos show him with the same lithe body that Marion had, the same big, expressive eyes, and, according to family legend, the same spirited and affectionate demeanor. Named after Rose's father, Charles was the long-awaited boy and the darling of his parents. His sweet nature and charming stutter allowed him to get away with almost anything. Charles's unrelenting energy and constant troublemaking put his parents in a quandary regarding what to do with him. Rose and Bernard, by this time known by the nicknames "Mama Rose" and "Papa Ben," ultimately did little to curb his behavior, and Charles ran wild.

The fourth child, Rose, was born in 1895. Nicknamed "Rosie" as a child, she was stunningly pretty, with dark brown hair, a cherubic mouth, and a long, regal neck. Even at a young age, it was clear that Rosie had a magnificent singing voice and a prodigious talent for musical performance and composition. She started violin lessons at five years old with a local music teacher, and soon was giving concerts in the area. Throughout her life, she composed elaborate symphonies and other musical works that were performed publicly and well received by critics. However, it was also discovered that Rosie was having problems with her legs and, according to her own explanation, she was

diagnosed as a toddler with a congenital hip dislocation. For the rest of her life, she walked with a limp or with the aid of a cane.

In the spring of 1896, Rose was pregnant again and on January 3, 1897, at 6:00 in the morning, the Dourases' fifth child was born in her parents' bedroom. The name on her birth certificate reads "Marion Douras," with no middle name. When Marion had her first communion, the name "Cecilia" was chosen for her, and it became her *de facto* middle name, despite her protests. "Can't I change my name?" she would beg her mother. "I don't like the name Cecilia. I like the name Violet instead." But her mother held firm, and whenever Marion couldn't avoid it, she was Marion Cecilia Douras.

From the very beginning, Marion was exceptionally loving and good-natured. Covered in freckles from head to toe, she had reddish brown hair and big blue eyes that sparkled with life. Affectionately nicknamed "Mardie" within the family, she charmed her parents and siblings with a winning combination of sweetness and mischief. According to biographer Fred Lawrence Guiles, adoring older brother Charles would cart Marion and Rosie around in his toy wagon, warning everyone, "D-d-don't touch my ba-ba-babies," as he rolled them proudly down the street, showing them off to anyone who would pay attention.

With the addition of their fifth child, the family was overwhelmed. Bernard tended to take cases he couldn't win because he believed in the cause. He devoted himself to overthrowing the corrupt political machine of Tammany Hall, at the expense of his practice. Rose began to wring her hands over money, and the fear that her husband was spreading himself too thin. But Marion was exceedingly loving toward her mother, and any stress Rose felt was inevitably relieved by her youngest daughter's devotion.

Marion remembered that her mother always smelled like gardenias and doted on her children. Recounting the proud tall tales her mother told about her babyhood, Marion remembered her mother telling people that she had stood up while still in the cradle. "How can a baby stand in bed?" Marion said, recalling the ridiculousness of the story. But the bond between mother and daughter was one of the most important of Marion's life. She described herself as having a "mother complex" as a child, never wanting to leave her mother's side, becoming distraught if she walked ahead of her or left her alone for a moment. "Don't run so fast!" Marion would implore her mother when they were shopping downtown. "Carry me, carry me, carry me!" This need for her mother's love was all-encompassing, to the point that for a long period

during her childhood, Marion was unable to sleep in her own bed. She would remember this insecurity as an adult. “I would crawl out [of bed] and put my arms around [my mother’s] neck—and now I know she must have thought: ‘Oh, what a pest this one is!’”

When Marion was a toddler, the Douras family moved to a home at 352 47th Street, where they stayed for several years. The family was short on money, but Rose and Ben made travel and excursions outside of New York a priority for the children. Whenever Ben had a moment away from work, they would go to Montclair, New Jersey, where Rose’s parents lived, or to Lake Saratoga near where Charles Reilly had a stable. Late in their marriage, Rose’s parents had decided to separate and maintained separate residences, with her father Charles spending much of his time at Lake Saratoga with his horses.

Marion disliked the family’s trips outside the city. In Montclair, she found her grandmother strict and unforgiving. A common disciplinary tactic at the Reilly house was being locked in the closet, which terrified Marion. As she was energetic and lively, Marion found herself locked there on many occasions while visiting her grandmother. At home, Rose disciplined her daughter for misbehavior, but Marion found her grandmother’s “closet treatment” the worst punishment she ever received. She begged her mother not to take her back to her grandmother’s house, and when bribes and coercion didn’t make Marion feel any better about going back to Montclair, Rose never made her return. At Lake Saratoga, Marion had a series of bad experiences and accidents with her grandfather’s horses. The most serious of these occurred at the age of 12, when Marion had a bad fall from one of the horses, landed on a pile of logs, and broke her tailbone. The healing process was long, and she emerged from it with a lifelong phobia of horses.

Despite her problems with her grandparents, Marion’s childhood was generally a happy one. She was a sunny child surrounded by the care of her parents and siblings, and she loved and was loved deeply. But tragedy rocked the Douras family when they went to Lake Saratoga to get away from the city over Labor Day weekend in 1900. A few days after their arrival, 11-year-old Charles decided to go rowing on the lake, while Marion and Rosie, aged three and five, stayed with their mother. Charles was gone all day, and by the time darkness fell, he still had not returned from the lake. Believing that he had lost track of time, the family went out to the lake to call for him. There was no response. The police were summoned, and when Charles still could not be located, the family began to fear the worst. The police poled the lake while continuing to call for Charles, to no avail, for two days. Finally,

on September 7, they found a body near the Boston and Maine Railroad bridge close to the north end of the lake. Charles's boat had capsized and he had drowned.

Charles's death was the beginning of a downward spiral for the Douras parents, and their relationship changed irreversibly. Overcome with emotion during the first Christmas season without Charles, Ben checked into the Clarendon Hotel on December 29, isolating himself from Rose and the rest of the family. Rose didn't know how to explain to her youngest daughter what had happened to her brother, and Marion was only aware that her brother was gone and her parents were despondent.

Rose and Ben spoke often of Charles during Marion's childhood, their stories of him keeping his memory alive in the minds of their children, who were too young to remember him. In the days before World War I, it was common practice to keep the memory of the deceased alive in the minds of survivors—a practice that changed with the mass wave of war deaths from World War I. But Marion and the rest of the family benefitted from this particular Victorian custom, as Charles remained in their minds symbolically long after he had died. When Rosie approached Marion in later years to make a documentary about their childhood together, she made a point to let her know that "I shall not forget Charles." For the rest of her life, however, Marion would have an agonizing fear of death, and coped poorly with the deaths of friends and loved ones. The deaths provoked extreme reactions that unnerved those around her, and as a result Marion was not often immediately informed of deaths, which only served to exacerbate her fear.

As Rose and Ben grew more distant over the course of the next several years, Ben's drinking escalated. One day, after receiving \$1,500 in payment (likely from a client), he returned home from a day at the pub, having spent a considerable amount of it on liquor. Rose was so angry she refused to speak to him, and the children determined it was time to interfere. If Papa Ben were allowed to keep the rest of the money, Reine figured, it would never be seen again. Reine devised a scheme to pick his pockets while family friend Marie Glendinning distracted Ben. Reine managed to free \$250 from her father's pocket, and gave the money to her mother.

While the Dourases were not religious to the same degree as many Catholic families of the era, their background and concerns with public perceptions were too important to allow for an official divorce or even an official separation, but they began to live apart much of the time. The children lived primarily at 47th Street with their mother while their father floated back and

forth between his new and old homes. Ben's influence in his children's lives diminished, but Marion remained close to him.

Watching her own parents grow indifferent toward each other shaped Marion's views on marriage, instilling in her a wariness and bitterness that would stay with her. During her years with William Randolph Hearst, when it became clear that she couldn't marry him, Marion doubled down on this thought, as if to convince herself of the futility of marriage. "I used to see these things when I was a kid, and I used to say, 'What is marriage? Just a wedding ring. It means nothing.'" This would inform her ultimate acceptance of her relationship with Hearst, at least outwardly. "I'd say, 'Forget it. I don't want it that way. We're fine, we have great companionship' ... and let it stay that way. Don't worry about it. It doesn't mean anything to me, I'm not the type to say, 'I want to be Mrs. So-and-so,' I was never that type." But was this something of which Marion was trying to convince herself, or something she truly thought? On the one hand, she often referenced how the marriages in her family never worked out, so she was sparing herself heartbreak by not marrying. On the other hand, throughout her relationship with Hearst, Marion retained the belief that she would somehow redeem herself by becoming a married woman, and this public denigration of marriage was a mask she frequently wore to hide her true feelings.

Around the time of Charles's death, Rose and Ben noticed that like her older brother, Marion was beginning to stutter. For the most part, her parents didn't call attention to Marion's increasingly halting speech, encouraging her to talk as she always did. But the effects of Marion's stutter soon began to make many aspects of life frustrating. The problem worsened under stress, and when she became frightened, Marion sometimes lost the ability to speak entirely. At varying times, her stutter was a mild inconvenience, a source of humor, and a huge detriment. It affected the course of her career and became a large part of her identity.

Marion recalled that very little intervention was done for her stutter as a child. Speech therapy was a relatively rare practice, mostly involving tactics such as putting marbles in a child's mouth for the child to talk around. Marion's parents did not do this with her. The only thing Marion recalled being told to do as a child was to breathe between words, which helped but was cumbersome. "I'm not going to go around going HOW [breath] DO [breath] YOU [breath] DO all the time," she said. So she had to find her own ways around her speech problems, which included, much of the time, substituting easier words for difficult ones. "Marion had great intelligence," remembered

nephew Charlie Lederer's wife, Anne Shirley, in later years. But many times, Anne noted, her struggle with words made it hard for others to see it, and sometimes for Marion herself to see it.

When her parents enrolled Marion in school at PS 93, she proved to be an extremely bright child and a talented athlete, excelling especially in basketball and eventually becoming the captain of her school's basketball team. But in the classroom, she was flustered and frustrated. She continued to be an affectionate child to her family, and had no trouble making friends, but the classroom was torture. In the days of being called up in front of the room to recite, teachers humiliated Marion, knowing she couldn't get through the recitation. Marion would freeze with fear in front of her classmates, inevitably beginning to stutter. The children laughed as she was ordered back to her seat, dejected. After a long day dealing with the cruelty of her classmates and teachers, Marion would cuddle up to her mother and ask to have her head rubbed, which relaxed her muscles and her spirits.

Marion also turned to the comfort of books during her school days and became a voracious reader. She lost herself in the world of classic literature, devouring the complete works of Charles Dickens as a young child. Throughout her life, she would maintain a loyalty to Dickens as her favorite author, possessing nearly all his works in her libraries full of Shakespeare, Thackeray, Shaw, and Molière. She took joy in collecting the books she loved, her enthusiasm often keeping her too busy to actually read them. "I'll read them all when I'm an old woman," she told an interviewer in 1919, while showing her the hundreds of books in her collection. It was a passion that she shared with Hearst, and their combined libraries rivaled the greatest in the world.

In addition to seeking refuge at her mother's side, Marion had a secondary outlet for her energy and frustration. She spent much of her time outside of school playing alongside the Irish immigrant children of the neighborhood. Marion became a regular, rough-and-tumble playmate and had an excellent ear, quickly picking up the children's accents that she used later as the basis for her Irish brogue in *Peg O' My Heart*. While both of her parents had been born in the United States, her interactions with these children gave her a sense of "being Irish," a heritage that many of her friends later associated with Marion.

The Dourases were firmly in the working class and Rose wanted better for her girls. In the era before women's suffrage, there were very few avenues for women to improve their station outside of marrying into wealth. According to writer Anita Loos, who knew the family from the New York theatri-

cal scene, the only way Rose saw for women to get ahead in life and lead a comfortable and financially secure existence was to become involved with a man who could provide for them financially. In what Loos called the “Gigi tradition,” the modes by which a woman could attract and please a man, Marion’s mother put little emphasis on the emotional entanglements of love. She pushed her daughters to accept the courtships of the older, wealthy men who came their way, regardless of whether there was love in the relationship. The ultimate goal was to marry those men and secure a comfortable life outside of Brooklyn.

Rose had been diligent about teaching her girls what she considered to be essential household skills, including cooking, washing, and sewing. Marion happily cooperated, and she took a special interest in needlework, for which she showed a natural gift. Before she reached her teens, Marion was a sewing prodigy, making her own clothes to pass the time, and knitting, crocheting, and embroidering tiny clothes for her dolls. As an adult, Marion kept up her needlework as a calming hobby, sewing many of her own clothes and becoming known among her friends for the elaborate and lavish dresses that she would make for them as gifts. In 1941, Marion would win a prize for three quilts that she entered into the Los Angeles County Fair.

Rose knew that Reine was a talented singer and actress, and she saw the chorus as a way for her eldest daughter to attract the attention of a wealthy man. Reine made her Broadway debut at the age of 16. She disliked the look of “Douras” on a marquee. Changing names in the theatrical profession was something of a rite of passage, if the performer had an unusual or difficult to pronounce name, and Reine decided to follow in the footsteps of such stars as Fanny Brice (born Fania Borach) and Al Jolson (born Asa Yoelson), changing her last name to make it more palatable to the public. When she saw a sign advertising a real estate agent by the name of “Davies,” Reine chose it as her surname. The rest of the sisters officially adopted Davies when they went into the theatrical profession. Although Marion enjoyed the sound of “Davies” alongside her first name, it felt foreign to her, and she rarely used it outside of work. Marion never legally changed her name, using Davies only professionally.

Reine soon moved to Chicago under the mentorship of George Lederer, a prominent theatrical impresario in that city. Aware of Lederer’s romantic intentions, Rose encouraged Reine to accept his advances to secure her financial stability. Ethel followed Reine to Chicago shortly thereafter. Rosie and Marion, still school age, stayed in New York with their mother, but in

1906, the three of them headed west to be near Reine and Ethel. Papa Ben stayed behind.

Marion spent the majority of the years between 1906 and 1910 in Chicago, with trips back to New York every few months with Rosie to see their father. It was during this time when Marion became enamored with dance. As she watched her sisters in the wings as they worked, Marion longed to be like them. Reine's connections with George Lederer meant that her shows were of the highest quality, and she starred alongside cowboy star Will Rogers and beloved vaudeville singer Sophie Tucker, known for her booming alto. Marion delighted in the intricate and colorful dance sequences in her sisters' shows, and she developed a particular enthusiasm for ballet. When asked what she would like to be when she grew up, Marion was adamant. "I would like to be a toe-dancer," she told her mother decisively. When Reine and Ethel were out of the house, Marion would try on their costumes and pretend to be a professional dancer like her older sisters.

Reine and George Lederer married in 1907, and George brought to the family his 11-year-old son, Maitland, from a previous marriage. Marion and Maitland were just one year apart in age, and they got along well. Marion was glad to have a friend in Chicago, coming to regard Maitland almost as a brother. Reine became pregnant herself shortly after the wedding, and in March 1909, gave birth to a girl named Josephine Rose Lederer. The baby was nicknamed "Pepi," a name that seemed to suit her bubbly personality. Marion was thrilled with her new niece and wrote to her mother's aunt Kate in her preteen cursive scrawl about how "lovely" new baby Josephine was. Marion was a natural caregiver, devoted to dolls and animals, and she was attentive and loving to her baby niece right from the beginning.

After four years in Chicago, Rose, Marion, and Rosie moved back to New York. Marion's stutter continued to plague her, and she compensated for her speech problems by clowning, invoking the ire of the teachers, who would continue to punish her by making her recite in front of the class. Marion knew that she was not living up to expectations, and longed to be more like Hazel Hart, a girl in her class whom she considered to be perfect. "She had all the things, all of the characteristics I didn't have," wrote Marion in an autobiographical newspaper column in 1925. Coddling as they could be with Marion as a young child, her parents felt that something had to be done to improve Marion's conduct as she approached adulthood. They hoped that enrolling her in Sacred Heart, a small convent school outside of the city, would give her the discipline that they could not. However well intentioned

their efforts, and however Marion felt that a convent school would make her more like Hazel Hart, her time there was miserable. She resented the nuns when they hit her on the knuckles for playing the piano without permission, and Marion used this treatment as an excuse to convince her mother to remove her from Sacred Heart.

Marion was growing frustrated with her reputation as a wild child, yet she felt that her efforts to improve met with failure. Marion's self-esteem suffered, and she longed to follow her sisters into the theatre as a dancer, where she wouldn't have to recite or endure the taunts of her schoolmates. Marion talked to her mother, who at first resisted the idea of Marion's going on the stage at the age of 15. She wanted the same for Marion that she had wanted for Reine, but was hesitant about her youngest daughter being the object of men's glances at such a young age. However, when Rose asked Marion what she wanted to do, her response was insistent and unfaltering. "I would like to be a dancer," Marion replied. Finally, Rose gave in to her desires. By the next year, at the age of 16, Marion was out of school and on the stage.