

## Charles Stuart Sager Bio

One of the early 1900s scows on the Upper Fraser was converted into a barber shop and bathhouse. It was operated by Charles Stuart Sager, who, the Fort George Herald reported on September 20, 1913, arrived at the Canyon with his gang plank and opened up business for ten days. The paper went on to say that Sager had had an interesting life: born in San Francisco, he'd been a bell hop at the Palace Hotel owned by Senator Sharon and valet to American Shakespearean actor Lawrence Barrett.<sup>i</sup> By the early 1900s, Sager was in Indianapolis, Chicago and New York<sup>ii</sup> writing and performing in plays (Colored Aristocracy, 1900; The Negro, 1900; Darkness and Dawn, 1901; The Man from Bam, 1906); he was stage manager at the Pekin Temple of Music in 1906. Thomas Bauman wrote in The Pekin: The Rise and Fall of Chicago's First Black-Owned Theatre, that Sager was a great find for the newly opened black theatre in Chicago:

A playwright and composer as well as actor, Sager had come to the Midwest from San Francisco around 1900 to mount production of his "great spectacular, panoramic and musical drama" The Negro at Kansas City, St. Paul, Minneapolis, St. Louis and Indianapolis. In April 1901 he produced another of his extravaganzas, Darkness and Dawn, at Institutional Church in Chicago with a cast of more than one hundred.

Bauman quoted an account by J. Ed. Green who reviewed Darkness and Dawn:

According to the Post, he "managed the first colored people's theatre in the city of Chicago, which was visited by the Russian Ambassador on the latter's visit to the Windy City years ago."

The Herald reported that Sager had moved his shop to 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave just off George Street in March 1915 and called it the Metropolitan Baths.<sup>iii</sup>

There were few blacks in town in its early years, but they were subject to disproportionate attention in the early 20s. In 1921, there was a move to rid the city of its "undesirable" elements, to wit the twenty-five to thirty black residents of what was then called N\* town. Most had come with the railroad, though some had extensive travels and were well accepted (barber and comedian Charles Sager). But a street fight between rival Chinese groups in April 1921 led to a motion while Mayor Wilson was away and acting

Mayor Barney Keegan was in the chair: the city clerk was instructed “to forward to the police commissioners a strong expression of the council’s desire to have the city cleared of undesirables, to have drunken drivers of motor cars, speeding, drunkenness, bootlegging, etc., wiped out, and further asking that all undesirables be ordered out of town, especially referring to “n\* town”. It went on to say that council did not believe the magistrate was supporting the local police, in that charges brought were constantly being dismissed. The cases were dealt with at the Supreme Court Assizes in June: Mah Gow was sentenced to a long jail term for the attempted murder of Lem Kee. Eight other charges relating to the April 12 “affray” were dealt with by fines of \$40 or three months in jail.<sup>iv</sup>

The controversy and buck-passing never amounted to much, but the reference to “the state of n\* town” sparked an open letter to council from Charles Sager. He respectfully lectured readers on racism: “Race prejudice is not so much a matter of startling deeds as of petty insinuations”:

The inference is that there is a certain part of Prince George known a “n\* town” where people of this particular group or race are gathering in such numbers as to warrant the board of Police Commissioners in taking action against them.

That they are vicious, immoral, of no certain occupation and consequently undesirable. No reservations are made; no discriminations. It is “the n\*” of the streets with “the n\*” of business.

This is the negro’s point of view, and it is a direct challenge to every self-respecting Negro in Prince George – in Canada. It is a vulgar appeal to insult and violence; it demoralizes, debases and promotes hate and envy – the very ground root of race prejudice.

The apology often made is, “it is not the color aimed at, but the conduct.” We sincerely wish this were the truth, but it is not the truth, and they who say it know it is not the truth.

By such unjust methods, and coming from those of whom you would least expect – the unkindest cut of all – we are forced to bear the full responsibility of the wicked and vicious members of our race, forced into the lowest of menial occupations and then despised for doing so.

Some will say that they use the word “n\*” with no malice or thought of prejudice, and as a description of the color of a people, being correlative with white, yellow, etc.

This will not hold. Black is the correlative of white, and “n\*” does not describe color, since all persons designated as “n\*s” are by no means black, even in Africa...

To call a Negro “n\*” is to belittle and destroy the last vestige of hope,

manhood and self-respect left in him, after two hundred years of the most cruel slavery on earth. We feel reasonable sure that under normal conditions thinking men would not close the door of ambition and opportunity in the face of any man on account of his color; and yet it is the very thing done, and the principal cause of race antagonism today.

Sager quoted H.G. Wells and US Civil War General Benjamin Butler in opposing racism and upholding the patriotism of black soldiers. He concluded by asking for nothing more than “a square deal; the equality of opportunity and of privilege from the powers that be, and the honest endeavor to cultivate interracial respect.”<sup>v</sup>

Sager was a stalwart member of the cultural scene in Prince George: he managed a minstrel show for the Methodist Ladies’ Aid that attracted 300 people in October 1914; he was a member of the Pierrot Troupe that travelled the central interior in the early 20s; and the Prince George Male Glee Club. He was a noted raconteur and comedian. His wife, Willa, died on November 20, 1926, and after the funeral at Knox Presbyterian Church, the Citizen noted that Willa “was an active worker in local charities and a large number of floral offerings testified to the esteem in which she was held throughout the city.”<sup>vi</sup> Charles continued barbering for the next four years, and added “The Princess Beauty Shop” shop for women in 1928,<sup>vii</sup> employing “an artistic, and formerly a popular Vancouver, Granville Street, beautician...”, Miss L. Green. However, Sager decided to return to his former home in Brooklyn at the end of 1929: he said he’d waited long enough for the PGE to get to Prince George, and, as the temperature was -38 when he left in early January, the cold tempered his regrets on leaving.<sup>viii</sup> He died in New York at the age of 89 in 1957.<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Fort George Herald, Sept. 20, 1913.

<sup>ii</sup> The Indianapolis News, April 21, 1900, p.12; The Colored American, Washington, July 21, 1900, p. 12; Chicago Tribune, April 19, 1910, p. 3; The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, New York, Monday April 7, 1902, p.5 – Darkness and Dawn was reported to be “a spectacular play depicting the rise of the negro race from slavery to freedom...”

<sup>iii</sup> Fort George Herald, Sept. 20, 1913, p. 4; and March 26, 1915, p. 5; PG Post, April 10, 1915, p.4.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., June 24, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., May 6, 1921, p. 4.

<sup>vi</sup> PG Citizen, November 25, 1926, p. 8. Willa is buried in the Prince George Municipal Cemetery, Block 3, plot 003. Thanks to Aaron Larson’s article in the Citizen on June 11, 2020, that drew my attention to Charles Sager and racism in PG.

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vii PG Citizen, September 13, 1928, p.3.

viii Ibid., December 19, 1929, p. 10; and January 9, 1930, p. 9.

ix Ancestry.com, Charles Stuart Sager death notice, January 9, 1957.