

## Mary Chase and the Rabbit

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

Mary Chase was born in Denver in 1906, growing up Irish Catholic in the working-class Baker neighborhood, not far from the railroad tracks, bound by Broadway and the Platte River, Fifth and Alameda. She authored *Harvey*, a Broadway play that became an Oscar-winning movie in 1950, starring Jimmy Stewart and Josephine Hull. Harvey was an imaginary 6-foot, 3-inch rabbit who accompanied Stewart's character, Elwood P. Dowd, about town and on his visits to Charley's Bar.

Together, Elwood, in his conviviality, and Harvey, in his conspicuous invisibility, became unbearable to Elwood's dear older sister, Veta. But in trying to check Elwood into Chumley's Rest, an asylum, Veta herself got tossed in the nuthouse while Elwood got away clean, Harvey beside him.

Mary Agnes McDonough Coyle was raised in the tradition of Irish myths told by her mother and four uncles. Harvey is a Pooka created from such folklore. She gained much, too, from Charlie, her brother, a natural comic with wit and physical expression, who went on to become a circus clown.

After two years of college she became a journalist at the Denver Times, staying on when it was rolled into the Rocky Mountain News. She wrote first for the society pages, soon became a feature writer, and then turned into something of a comic figure herself, "our Lil' Mary," in a series where Charlie Wunder drew the cartoons and Mary wrote the text.

In 1928 she married Robert Chase, a fellow journalist who eventually became managing editor of the Rocky. They had three sons. Interested in progressive politics, Mary helped found the Denver branch of the Newspaper Guild, and became an active union supporter known for joining picket lines in a fancy hat and black satin dress.

Mary left the newspaper in the 1930's to become a freelance writer. She had hung out as a teenager in Denver's thriving theater district, and soon found herself drawn to the industry. She wrote a play called "Me, Third" which opened as a hit in Denver, but flopped on Broadway in 1937.

Then Harvey came along. In Mary's words, "... one morning, I awoke at five o'clock and saw a psychiatrist walking across our bedroom floor followed by an enormous white rabbit and I knew I had it." She worked two years on Harvey, writing, and rewriting, nearly fifty times. Finally, her play opened on Broadway to rave reviews, running four and a half years.

Mary Chase won a Pulitzer Prize for Harvey, and an honorary doctorate from the University of Denver. The film was a hit. James Stewart, and Josephine Hull, who played Veta, were each nominated for Academy Awards, with Hull winning both the Oscar and a Golden Globe.

The irrepressible, inimitable, lovable Elwood P. Dowd character represents a bit of everybody in his agreeable bond with Harvey. "I've wrestled with reality for 35 years, Doctor," he testified at the asylum, "and I'm happy to state I finally won out over it."

