

Ferber Edna

C6 Wednesday, April 17, 1968 THE WASHINGTON POST

Novelist Edna Ferber Dies at 81

By Phil Casey

Special to The Washington Post

Edna Ferber, the prolific, prize-winning author of numerous short stories, best-selling novels and money-making plays, died yesterday at her home, 730 Park ave., New York. She was 81.

One of two daughters of a Hungarian Jewish immigrant, Miss Ferber had a long and commercially successful literary career. It began back in 1911, when she was 24. She was still writing and publishing in her 70s.

The novel that brought her fame and remains her best-known work, "So Big," was published in 1924. She was 37 at the time, and won a Pulitzer Prize.

It quickly sold 300,000 copies and continued to sell for years. It was, for a time, either suggested or required reading in some high schools and colleges.

Another novel brought her even greater fame and riches when it was adapted into a musical play by Oscar

Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern. "Show Boat" was a great success as a musical and has been revived several times. Three motion pictures were made from it and it ran for many years as a weekly radio show. The novel itself had a big commercial success, selling several hundred thousand copies.

Miss Ferber was born in Kalamazoo, Mich., and spent most of her youth in Appleton, Wis., where her father, who later became blind, ran a dry goods store. The family was poor and she went to work as a \$3-a-week reporter when she graduated from high school.

She left Appleton to work for the Milwaukee Journal, which paid her \$15 a week. After four years, she returned to Appleton, broke and sick, and started writing fiction. She was 22.

Two years later, her first novel, "Dawn O'Hara," was accepted by a publisher. It sold 10,000 copies and from then on her short stories

and novels found ready and great acceptance.

Some of her most successful short stories dealt with a character new to fiction — a traveling saleswoman. She wrote about 30 of these stories telling the adventures of this fictional saleswoman, Emma McChesney. Ethel Barrymore starred in the play, "Our Mrs. McChesney," adapted by Miss Ferber and George V. Hobart from the stories.

Among her many novels were "Cimarron," "Saratoga Trunk," "Giant" and "Ice Palace," all of them financially successful.

Practically everything she turned her hand to seemed destined for financial success. She collaborated with playwright George S. Kaufman on a series of hit plays that were later made into motion pictures. They included "The Royal Family," "Dinner at Eight" and "Stage Door."

In 1939, when she was in her early 50s and was still to write several more popular novels and a book of

short stories, she published her autobiography, "A Peculiar Treasure."

Of this, she said, "The soul-baring school of autobiography is more embarrassing for the reader than the writer . . . This then isn't a story of my life, written because I am fatuous enough to think that anyone is interested. It is really the story of an American Jewish family in the past half-century, and as such is really a story about America which I know and love."

Miss Ferber visited Washington in 1940. She stayed one day and seemed to be appalled.

"Nobody here seems to have any fun," she said. "I have been asking people all day long, 'What do you do?' And they say, 'We work all the time.' You can't live like that!

"I really think something should be done about it. Capitals ought to be gay. You always associate the word 'gay' with capitals, don't you?"

And in 1953, she came back from a European trip and scolded New York. The streets were filthy and the buildings dingy, she said, and something ought to be done about it. Nobody argued with her.

Years before that, she achieved a long and apparently burning ambition—she acted on a stage, in public. In the summer of 1940, she played the role of Fanny Cavendish in "The Royal Family" at the Maplewood, N.J., summer theater.

At a rehearsal of the play that summer, she told a reporter that her name originally had been Edward Ferber, because her mother was somehow under the impression that she had given birth to a boy. When she discovered her mistake, she simply shortened the name to Edna.

Miss Ferber didn't mind growing older. "I don't envy youth," she told the reporter. "The young have too many problems."