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## Curtain to rise on family's story

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Frank and Lillian Gilbreth with 11 of their 12 children sometime in the 1920s.

When "Cheaper by the Dozen" opens Friday night at the Omaha Community Playhouse, three generations of an Omaha family will be excited to be there.

That's their family's story being told onstage.

"Cheaper by the Dozen," a book about the life of a family with 12 children, became a best seller in 1948. A hit movie version, starring Clifton Webb and Myrna Loy as parents Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, followed in 1950. The Gilbreths were industrial engineers, efficiency experts who studied repetitive motion. The movie finds humor in the efficient way Frank ran his home and his large family.

Irene Gilbreth, 91, widow of Frank and Lillian's son Dan, will be at the playhouse Friday, along with her daughter, Peggy Nipper, 68, and grandson, Zach Nipper, 35. A fourth generation, great-granddaughter, Claire Nipper, 3, is too young to attend.

Though the family home, as the book records, is in Montclair, N.J., Peggy is the reason for the Omaha branch. Her husband, Henry, is an associate professor of pathology and assistant dean for admissions for Creighton University's medical school. They moved here in 1986. When Peggy's mother got older, she moved from the East Coast to Omaha to be near her daughter.

Zach, a Grammy-winning graphic artist, does album covers for Saddle Creek Records. His brother, Gregory, now lives in California.

The family can't wait to see the play.

"The Gilbreth children liked the book very much," Irene said during an interview in her cozy living room at Crown Point Retirement Community, near 82nd Street and West Center Road. That's not surprising, since Frank Jr. and his sister Ernestine wrote it. But they didn't like the movie much, she said.

"It's not that the movie was not well done, but they didn't like the publicity," Irene said. "All our friends thought we were making a mint. But they didn't have all the residuals back then that they have today."

In the movie, Clifton Webb portrays Frank as a starchy, old-fashioned dictator.

"Clifton Webb was nothing like my grandfather, in appearance or personality," Peggy Nipper said. "If you read the book first, the movie never seems right."

Some of the movie's jokes about Frank Sr. being an efficiency extremist are true, Peggy said. At the family vacation home on Nantucket, she recalled, the whitewashed walls and ceilings were covered with educational materials. Frank Sr. posted bathroom walls with changing messages in Morse Code, so that moments of "unavoidable delay" would not be wasted.

Photos of constellations and planets were displayed low, so even little kids could absorb them. And everyone had chores. The youngsters dusted things close to the floor such as banisters, since that's what they could reach easily.

“My father never complained about his upbringing,” Nipper said, “perhaps because his father drummed it into all his children that they were ‘tough pioneer stock.’ No actual basis in fact for that label. Well, he was a character.”

Nipper said the movie portrays oldest daughter Anne, played by Jeanne Crain, as something of a rebel, “but she wasn’t, really. Ernestine was more of one. They went against Grandfather and got their hair bobbed. They said they had to do that for the younger girls in the family so they wouldn’t be left in the Victorian age.”

Though Frank Sr. died of a heart attack in 1924, when Dan was just 6, Irene and Peggy knew Lillian well. She died in 1972 at the age of 93. All the grandchildren referred to her as Grandear, Peggy said. Only one of the original Gilbreth dozen, Fred, remains living.

The Gilbreths were fond of nicknames, Irene said. Dan’s was Talky. He called his wife Junior, saying her mother was Bossy Senior and she was Bossy Junior. One of Dan’s brothers heard him refer to his wife as Rena. Soon the brother-in law dubbed Irene “Lena the laughing hyena.”

A sequel book and movie to “Cheaper by the Dozen,” both titled “Belles on Their Toes,” dealt with family life after Frank Sr.’s death. They were popular as well.

None of them has anything to do with a 2003 movie titled “Cheaper by the Dozen,” a broad comedy starring Steve Martin and Bonnie Hunt. The only thing that movie family has in common with the Gilbreths’ is that both have 12 children.

When more than 100 children turned out to audition for the playhouse cast, publicist Betsye Paragas speculated they might have been thinking of the 2003 movie. But this story is set in the 1920s, like the original book and movie.

The title comes from one of Frank Sr.’s favorite jokes. If his car full of kids stopped at a red light, a pedestrian often would ask, “Mister, how come you got so many kids?” Gilbreth would respond, just as the light turned green, “Well, they come cheaper by the dozen, you know,” and the car would roar off.

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