

Who Was Sydney Taylor?

By June Cummins, Associate Professor, Department of English and Comparative Literature, San Diego State University, excerpted from *The All-of-a-Kind Family Companion* by AJL

The Family

At the turn of the last century, the Brenner family emigrated to the United States, as so many Jewish families did. Four years after they arrived, their third daughter, Sarah Brenner, was born on October 30, 1904. Later, Sarah changed her name to Sydney, but her four sisters, Ella, Henrietta, Charlotte, and Gertrude, kept their first names, and Sydney immortalized these names by giving them to their character counterparts in her *All-of-a-Kind Family* books. Three brothers were subsequently born. As of 2004, only the youngest brother, Jerry survives.

As a grown woman, Sydney remembered the early days of her family's life on the Lower East Side. Although they were poor, like most Jewish immigrants, they had many happy times. Just like the girls in the books, Sydney and her sisters were "five little girls [who] shared one bedroom—and never minded bedtime. Snuggled in our beds we would talk and giggle and plan tomorrow's fun and mischief." (*Something About The Author*)

The Story

When Sydney had her own child, Jo, she told her stories of her childhood on the Lower East Side. Sydney felt Jo was lonely as an only child and wanted to share her past with her. "When Jo was little . . . I would sit beside her bed at night and try to make up for the lack of a big family by telling her about my own. Jo loved the stories about how papa and mama worked and how the five little girls helped out. She was delighted with the tales of our good times together and the enjoyment of simple pleasures. She loved the stories so much that I decided to write them all down especially for her. The manuscript went into a big box and stayed there." (*More Books by More People*)

The Book

One summer when Sydney was away working as the drama counselor at Camp Cejwin, her husband Ralph decided to submit the manuscript to a contest sponsored by Follett. Sydney had no idea of his action until she received a letter in the mail. "No one was more surprised than I when I received a letter from Mrs. Meeks, the Children's Book Editor of Wilcox & Follett, telling me she wanted to publish *All-of-a-Kind Family*. I didn't know what she was talking about. I told my husband and the whole story came out. Then Mr. Follett telephoned me to say that *All-of-a-Kind Family* had won the Follett [Award]." (*Something About The Author*)

The Series

After the success of the first *All-of-a-Kind Family* book, Sydney went on to write four more for the series (*More All-of-a-Kind Family*, *All-of-a-Kind Family Uptown*, *All-of-a-Kind Family Downtown*, and *Ella of All-of-a-Kind Family*), as well as several other books for children. She toured schools and libraries all over the country, talking to children about her work. She also continued to work at Camp Cejwin and was there for over thirty years.

The Legacy

Sydney died of cancer on February 12, 1978. Although some of her books are over fifty years old, they are still beloved by many—both old and young (and in between)—today. The *All-of-a-Kind Family* books were re-released in paperback just a few years ago and continue to sell well. Linking up her past with her daughter's present, Sydney made the Lower East Side at the turn of the last century come vividly alive for thousands of readers.