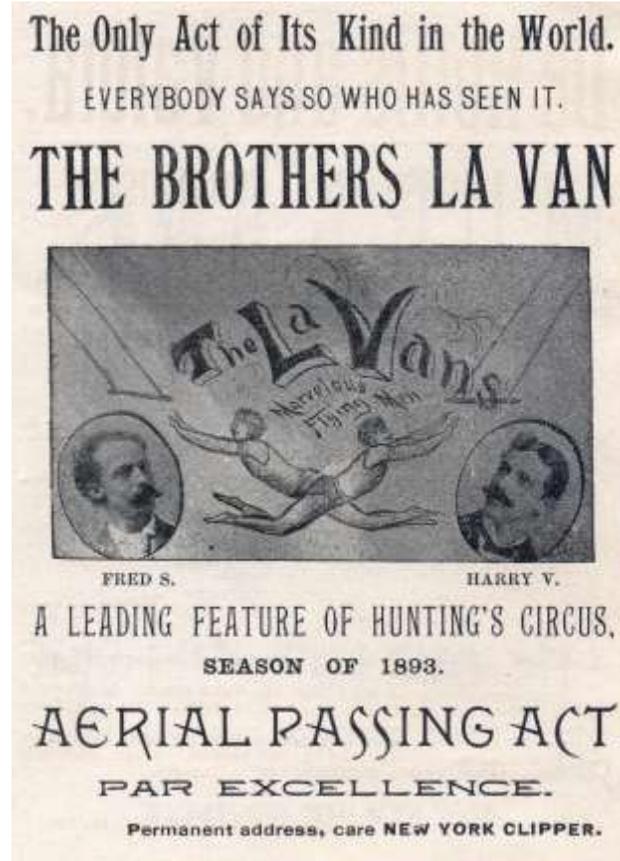


Bloomington once ‘capital of the aerial kingdom’



Fred and Harry Green are seen here in an 1893 "Brothers La Van" poster. (Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin)

For nearly a century, Bloomington-Normal served as winter training grounds for trapeze artists and aerial acrobats from across the country, and it was said that you couldn't visit a circus anywhere without bumping into a performer from the Twin Cities.

It all began in the 1870s with Fred and Howard Green, two imaginative—and happily reckless—brothers who used a family barn to duplicate acrobatic and aerial tricks they had seen when one or another circus had passed through town.

Their father, Bloomington confectioner John Lester Green, frowned upon the goings on in his barn, though he never put a complete stop to the amateur daredevilry. The Greens lived at the intersection of McClun Street and Croxton Avenue, which today would be just south of the Thai House on Morrissey Drive.

As for a sufficiently exotic stage name, the Greens went with “La Van Brothers” or sometimes “Brothers La Van,” (in its later years the act was known as “The Flying La Vans”). The origin of La Van remains a mystery, though their mother’s maiden name was

Van Alstine, and there were other similarly sounding acts, such as the Lavantine Brothers.

Fred and Howard Green began performing as the La Van Brothers in 1877 or thereabouts, though Howard suffered a career-ending collarbone injury in 1880 during a performance in Indianapolis. He then studied law at Illinois Wesleyan University, and eventually settled in Great Falls, Mont.

Fred Green then joined two aerial acrobats and they toured both sides of the Atlantic as the “Three Russian Athletes” and later as the “Royal Russian Athletes” (though they were neither Russian nor royalty). At this same time, Fred’s younger brother Harry was breaking into the aerialist / acrobat business, and when Fred returned from a European tour in 1888 he and his 22-year-old brother resurrected the La Van Brothers.

Although best known as a circus act, the La Vans and many other performers from the era also appeared regularly on the vaudeville circuit, as well as fairs, carnivals and the like.

Fred Green, who never married, walked away from the big top spotlight in 1896, passing away on June 14, 1897, one month after opening a cigar business in Chicago. Meanwhile, Harry had married fellow aerialist Amy Bower. For Harry, it was literally marriage at first sight. “I’ve never been one to dawdle, so I proposed right off,” he recalled. “She said she didn’t believe in whirlwind courtships, so I had to wait for seven days.”

The Flying La Vans were a top-flight aerial act with a national reputation. In 1899, for instance, they shared a bill with Harry Houdini at the Orpheum in Kansas City. During the first two decades of the 20th century, the La Vans contracted with some dozen different circuses, ranging from Barnum and Bailey in North America to Santos and Artigas in Cuba.

By this time Bloomington had earned a well-deserved reputation as a training ground for aerialist, and several acts with local connections went on to have considerable success, including the Concellos, Fishers, LeMars, Valentinos / Valentines and Wards. Bloomington, declared *The Pantagraph*, was the “capital of the aerial kingdom.”

The centers for wintertime aerialists included the old YMCA in downtown Bloomington, the Ward barn on Emerson Street (later the site of the Grand Hotel restaurant), and the Valentine practice barn on Grove Street in Normal. And a stretch of Colton Avenue was known as “Trapeze Terrace” because so many aerialists made it their off-season home. In 1937, to cite one representative year, there were no less than 18 aerialist acts working in Bloomington-Normal.

That same year, 1937, a 70-year-old Harry hung up his leotard, and he went on to spend his last 13 years as a booking agent in the New Orleans area, passing away on March 8, 1952.

French pioneer aerialist Jules Léotard (yes, that's where the word "leotard" comes from!) has long been recognized as the subject of the popular song "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze." More than a half century ago, aerialist great Clyde Noble had his doubts. Noble, a former La Van and Flying Fisher, wasn't sure as to the identity of the real-life "daring young man," though he was quite certain that "he must have been from Bloomington."

Fred and Harry La Van are two of eight characters featured in the annual Evergreen Cemetery Discovery Walk. Weekend performances for this popular program are October 5-6 and October 12-13, 11 am and 2 pm each day. For more information, contact the Museum at 309-827-0428.

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