



(Harry Green)

FRED GREEN (1858-1897) and HARRY GREEN (1867-1952) - THE FLYING LaVANS

The circus is coming to town! These were wonderful and typical words of excitement in most small American towns in the late 1800s and first half of the 20th century. Thanks to three young men, Fred, Howard, and Harry Green, Bloomington would become part of this “golden age” of the big top.

The brothers were all born in Bloomington, three of the seven children of John and Harriet Green. Fred was born on March 2, 1858 and Harry was born on February 3, 1867. The Greens owned J.L. Green and Company, a successful candy manufacturer which sold a wide variety of candies wholesale and retail. John Green hoped his sons would follow him in the candy business, but they had fallen in love with the trapeze and used their physical abilities to train in aerial “flying.” They built a makeshift rig out of old hoe handles in a barn at the back of the family property (at the corner of McClun and Croxton Streets) and here taught themselves the skills of trapeze artists. The hay in the loft cushioned their falls as they practiced their tricks and timing.

In 1877 Fred and Howard formed an act, the “La Van Brothers” and joined the circus. The brothers formed the first flying troupe to originate from Bloomington and helped establish Bloomington’s reputation as a “leading city for aerial acts.” As Fred and Howard traveled around the country, they promoted Bloomington as a desirable location for trapeze artists to spend the winter. At that time, circuses performed chiefly in tents, which meant the warm months only. Thanks to the Greens, other aerial artists soon came to call Bloomington home during the off season. These included the “Flying Wards,” Eddie Ward and his sister Jenny, whose barn located off Emerson Street would become a popular practice site. There were so many aerialists living near the practice barn, that a section of Colton Ave. where they lived was nicknamed “Trapeze Terrace.” For a time in the early 1900s, it was said that 90% of all trapeze acts were booked out of Bloomington.

Howard's circus career was cut short in 1880 when he injured his collarbone and was forced to retire from the life of an acrobat. He was only 15 at the time. He later went on to study law in South Dakota, and later moved to Montana.

After Howard left, Fred joined with fellow aerial acrobats, Fredericks and Gloss to form a new act call "The Three Russian Athletes," though none of the three were Russian. Like the La Van name, the group chose a name similar to other successful acts of the time. During its eight years together, the act performed in most major cities of the United States and Europe. They worked in Madison Square Garden in New York with Barnum and Bailey Circus as the opening act. Their final performance was in the Hippodrome in Paris in 1888.

In the meantime, younger brother Harry Green was growing up, and like his older brothers, yearning to be a "flyer." He, too, taught himself on the old rigging in the family barn. When his father discovered what Harry was doing, he destroyed the rigging. But Harry, determined to be an aerial artist, ran away from home at the age of sixteen and began a trapeze career that would last until he was seventy years old. When Fred returned from Europe, the two Greens revived the "La Van Brothers."

Over the next years, Fred and Harry traveled with many circuses and events all over the country. Their routines were called "marvelous," "sensational," "only one of its kind," and "the world's greatest." The two performed together until Fred was forced to retire due to ill health in March of 1896. He died just a year later on June 14, 1897. He was remembered as a "quiet man" and "popular in his profession." He is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

The same year Fred retired (1896), Harry married Amy (Anna) Bowers after a seven day courtship. On their fiftieth anniversary, Amy recalled "When I saw Harry swooping through the air, I got so flustered I fell off the trapeze." He said, "I proposed right off, but she said she didn't believe in whirlwind courtships, so I had to wait seven days."

Harry and Amy formed a new act called "The Flying La Vans." Over the years, the troupe included a variety of artists and worked with a number of circuses and events using several variations of the La Van name. The troupe was widely known for its innovative and daring routines.

As the years went by, Harry became known by the nickname "Pops," "Pappy," or "Pap." He was a model and mentor for a whole new generation of aerialists. He particularly became a tutor for young acrobats here in Bloomington in his work with the annual YMCA circus. At that time, the YMCA was located at 200 E. Washington Street. It became a center for practicing circus performers early in the 1900s. They put up permanent trapeze rigging and organized winter circus performances. This tradition continues today in the Gamma Phi Circus fraternity at Illinois State University, the oldest collegiate circus in the United States.

Harry retired from performing in 1937 at the age of seventy. A natural teacher, he remained active in the circus community training young aerialists. He died in New Orleans on March 8, 1952. Amy followed less than a year later, passing away on January 5, 1953. Both are buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: How did the Green family influence the communities in which they lived?