

“The Flying La Vans,” were first known by the name the “La Van Brothers” or the “Brothers La Van.” They were the first of many Bloomington born-and-bred aerial acts that formed during the ‘Golden Age’ of the circus in the U.S. in the late 1800s and continued to perform into the early twentieth century. Originally, the troupe was organized by brothers Fred and Howard Green (Greene) in 1877. Later the group include the younger brother Harry following Howard’s retirement. The La Van act, in all of its incarnations, commands a pivotal place in the history of the practice and development of the art of trapeze in the United States.

FRED GREEN (1858-1897), son of John Lester Green and Harriet A. (Van Alstine) Green, was born in Bloomington, IL on March 2, 1858. Fred was one of seven children (the oldest of four sons). Like his younger brothers, Fred had a “penchant for athletics” as a child that continued to thrive in his teen years and beyond.¹ Fred and his younger brother Howard (1867-1952) chose to dedicate this prowess to the study of the trapeze.² Despite their father’s known disfavor and desire that his sons would continue the family confectionary business, Fred and Howard formed the “La Van Brothers” around 1878.”³

It is difficult to determine the exact nature of the brothers’ aerial act or exactly when the brothers first performed. For example, contrary to select sources local historian and circus enthusiast Steve Gossard proposes that the original La Van Brothers act was first a stationary bar act and not a trapeze act.⁴ Similarly, though some sources claim that the La Vans were the first to

¹ “Fred Green is Dead; Famous Bloomington Athlete Expires in the Prime of Life,” *The Pantagraph* (June 15, 1897).

² Opened in 1854, J.L. Green and Co. was renowned among candy connoisseurs in the Bloomington area. Located on the so-called “Liberty Block” at 118 South Main Street since 1871, the company was noted for its diverse selection of candies, both homemade and wholesale, as well as for its ability to fill large orders in a fast and efficient manner. According to an article published in the *Pantagraph* in 1871, the company used “only the best materials,” took the “greatest care in packing goods for safe transportation,” and regularly employed twelve to thirteen workers at a time. “Bloomington Candy,” *The Weekly Pantagraph* (December 8, 1871). The firm manufactured a variety of candies ranging from stick candy, to creams and liqueur-filled chocolates, to lozenges, while also providing its customers with a selection of fruit, nuts, and tobacco products. “Manufactories and Wholesale Houses of Bloomington—J.L. Green & Co.,” *The Weekly Pantagraph* (July 11, 1873). Ownership of the company changed hands several times after J.L. Green sold it in 1877. In 1893, the candy company became its best known incarnation, Beich’s, when Paul F. Beich purchased the company.

³ The name La Van, obviously not reflective of the performers’ actual surname, is rumored to have been some form of an amalgam inspired by their mother’s maiden name Van Alstine. At the time that the two brothers were developing an act of their own, there were numerous acts already performing with names similar to theirs, including the Lavantine Brothers and the Levanions. The two brothers likely adopted this name because it was marketable and was consistent with the aesthetic previously established by fellow practicing artists. However, unlike many of the other acts of the day that utilized the familial moniker, Fred and Howard (and later Fred and Harry) were indeed brothers. Steve Gossard, “The Flying La Vans of Bloomington, Illinois,” *Bandwagon* 54, no. 4 (July-August 2012), 2-3.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Gossard reasons that the act likely began as a stationary bar act due to reports that the Greens trained themselves on a makeshift rig that they fashioned out of old hoe handles in a barn located on their father’s property at the intersection of McClun and Croxton (present-day vicinity would be within approximately one block of the Thai House on Morrissey Dr.). The hay in the loft served to cushion the fall of the Green brothers should they miss a trick while practicing. Such a set-up, though potentially beneficial in introducing the young men to some of the skills required in aerial performance, would not have been conducive to mastering the techniques of the flying trapeze.

introduce the passing act, or double-flying bar act, to the United States, in actuality the Spanish Rizarelli Brothers are known to have performed this version of the flying trapeze in 1868—a full ten years before the La Vans began performing.⁵ As described by Gossard, the double-flying bar act “consisted of two trapeze and two pedestal boards. The flyers swung off from the pedestal boards at opposite ends of the rigging, [performed] tricks in the air, and exchanged trapeze bars in the process.” The double-flying bar act was a precursor to the flying return act.⁶

In regards to the exact date on which the La Vans began performing, Gossard acknowledges in his compiled research that the earliest professional mention of the Green brothers’ act was an 1878 trade advertisement put out by the Pullman and Hamilton Show. That being said, in order for the La Vans to have attracted the attention of the Pullman and Hamilton Show to merit a listing in an advertisement in 1878, it is likely that Fred and Howard were performing in some capacity prior to that point—thus explaining why sources may be correct in listing 1877 as the year in which the brothers’ made their performance debut.⁷

No matter the exact date on which Fred and Howard began performing, it can generally be agreed that the act was fairly short-lived due to an injury that Howard sustained to his collarbone in 1880 while performing in Indianapolis for the Thayer circus. The injury ultimately forced the younger Green brother into early retirement at the age of fifteen.⁸ In lieu of continuing his career as an acrobat, Howard went on to establish a successful legal career. After receiving his law certificate from Illinois Wesleyan University, he moved to Great Falls, Montana where he was an attorney and later became a judge.⁹

In the year’s preceding Howard’s retirement however the two brothers—being the first flying troupe to originate from Bloomington—ran a successful circuit of state and countrywide venues that truly helped establish the reputation of Bloomington, IL as a “leading city for aerial acts.”¹⁰ Such venues included the Van Amburgh Circus Co. (1879) and James L. Thayer’s Great Show (1880).¹¹ While traveling around the country, Fred and Howard aimed to promote the city

Additionally, in 2018, new research has come to light (provided by the staff of the Milner Library Special Collections, Circus and Allied Arts Collection) that Fred, Howard, and Harry Green were members of the first dedicated gymnasium in Bloomington (established by I.P. Fell in 1875 above the offices of the *Bloomington Leader*). This gymnasium touted having a trapeze as an available apparatus. According to an 1876 article in *The Pantagraph* about a performance at the gymnasium, the three brothers performed “feats no in vogue among the professionals,” which included the horizontal bars and tumbling. Having an easily accessible practice space, their skills developed exceedingly well; Email correspondence between Candace Summers and Mark Schmitt, June 5, 2018; “Muscle,” *The Pantagraph*, February 25, 1876, 4.

⁵ Ibid. 2.

⁶ Steve Gossard, “Life in a Circus Town: Walt Graybeal’s Bloomington,” *Bandwagon* (November-December 1989), 35.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Steve Gossard, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance: The Evolution of Trapeze* (2012), 192.

⁹ Ibid.; “Bloomington Flyers Hold World Record,” *The Pantagraph* (July 22, 1928); Maureen Brunsdale & Mark Schmitt. *The Bloomington-Normal Circus Legacy: The Golden Age of Aerialists*, (Charleston: The History Press, 2013), 20.

¹⁰ Mike Wedding, “Now You Know... The Flying LaVans,” *The McLean County Community News* (September 9-15, 1992), 18.

¹¹ Gossard, “The Flying La Vans,” 4.

as a desirable location to winter for trapeze artists.¹² Compared to Chicago and St. Louis, Bloomington had a lower cost of living but also provided easy access to travel to larger cities via the local train service.¹³

Many acts, including that of Eddie Ward and his sister Jenny—“The Flying Wards”—would come to call Bloomington home during the off season.¹⁴ Due in large part to the general skill and success of the Green family in the art of the trapeze, Bloomington is said to have contained “more attaches of the circus and vaudeville circuit than any other city of its size in the United States,” with an estimated ninety percent of all trapeze acts that performed in the early 1900s at one time booked from the city.¹⁵ For a time, a stretch of Colton Avenue was known as “Trapeze Terrace” due to the large number of circus performers choosing to reside in close proximity to the Ward Barn on Emerson Street. In 1937 there were at least eighteen different aerial troupes “making Bloomington their home.”¹⁶

Following his brother’s retirement, Fred continued his professional work with fellow aerial acrobats Fredericks and Gloss. Together the three formed the act “The Three Russian Athletes.” Though none of the three were Russian, the name “The Three Russian Athletes” was likely borrowed from other popular contemporary acts in much the same manner as the name La Van was derived.¹⁷ The act was known for their performance of a trick that they called “Roman Ladders,” an act for which Fred was the top mounter. However, the claim that Fred, Fredericks, and Gloss were the first to perform this feat in the United States is seemingly unfounded.¹⁸ According to Gossard’s research, balancing ladder acts were seen in the U.S. as early as 1845.¹⁹

During their eight years together, the Russian Athletes performed with circuses and shows across the country and overseas, including cities such as Boston, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati,

¹² “Young’s Yarns,” (July 26, 1959).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Bloomington, Cradle of Aerial Acts, Is World’s Greatest Center for Circus ‘Flyers’,” *The Daily Pantagraph* (April 19, 1937).

Eddie Ward provided the circus community with an indispensable asset when he established the Ward Barn at 1201 East Emerson Street as a training facility for wintering circus performers. This air dome was the “largest of its kind in existence,” and is said to have been the only structure “erected exclusively for rehearsal of circus aerial acts.” The Ward Barn was fully outfitted with proper rigging, heat, and a safety net installed below the trapeze to protect performers in case someone were to fall while practicing a stunt. “Bloomington Circus People Ready to Start the Season,” *The Daily Pantagraph* (April 2, 1921). Even following Ward’s death in 1929, aerial artists continued to use the barn as a training facility until 1936. Gene Morgan, “Men and Women o’ the Flying Trapeze Get Ready for Season at the ‘Big Top’ Capital—Bloomington,” *Chicago Daily News* (March 23, 1935), Gossard, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance*, 196.

¹⁵ “Bloomington Circus People Ready to Start the Season,” *The Daily Pantagraph* (April 2, 1921); “Young’s Yarns,” (July 26, 1959); Morgan, “Men and Women o’ the Flying Trapeze,” *Chicago Daily News* (March 23, 1935).

As reported by the *Pantagraph*, by 1937 roughly two-hundred circus performers had been known to winter in Bloomington in the recent years. “Bloomington, Cradle of Aerial Acts, Is World’s Greatest Center for Circus ‘Flyers’,” *The Daily Pantagraph* (April 19, 1937).

¹⁶ “Bloomington, Cradle of Aerial Acts, Is World’s Greatest Center for Circus ‘Flyers’,” *The Daily Pantagraph* (April 19, 1937).

¹⁷ Gossard, “The Flying La Vans,” 5.

¹⁸ According to Fred’s obituary, “the top work” was the “daring part of the act.” “Fred Green is Dead,” *The Pantagraph* (June 15, 1897). As implied by the name, “Roman Ladder” routines involved multiple acrobats performing various holds, poses, and balancing acts with specially constructed ladders.

¹⁹ Gossard, “The Flying La Vans,” 5.

Indianapolis, and Chicago. For three weeks in March of 1884, and again in March 1885, the act worked the opening of the Barnum and Bailey Circus in Madison Square Garden in New York City.²⁰ In 1887, the act—by now called the “Royal Russian Athletes”—made its way abroad to perform at various venues in London, Glasgow, Paris, and Berlin in a tour of the European continent that lasted at least three years, maybe as long as six (1882 to 1886).²¹ Fred was performing in London when his mother Harriet died on November 18, 1887. At this time, Fred’s younger brother Harry had since pursued his own career in the circus after first training himself on a makeshift training bar fashioned out of old hoe handles in the barn located on their father’s property. Harry reported that upon discovering the rudimentary training facility located in his barn, his father J.L. dismantled the rig and forbade his son from ever practicing again.²² Harry subsequently ran away from home to join with either the Cooper-Bailey’s World’s Greatest Show or with the Sells Brothers Circus between 1883 and 1885.²³ Harry was performing with Barnett’s Circus at the time of their mother’s death.²⁴

When Fred returned home from Europe in March of 1888 following the Russian Athletes’ final performance at the Hippodrome in Paris, he and Harry organized a new act as early as April of that year under the revived name the “La Van Brothers,”—occasionally referred to as the “Brothers LaVan Aerialists.”²⁵ Beginning in 1889, the record shows a consistent line up of countrywide shows and events being worked by the next generation La Van Brothers. The Adam Forepaugh Route Book of 1892 describes Fred and Harry as “phenomenal triple horizontal bar experts . . . unrivaled [in] ease, grace and skill.”²⁶ On numerous occasions the La Van act was described as the only one of its kind in the world, garnering further words of praise in the form of such proclamations as “marvelous,” “sensational,” and “the world’s greatest.”²⁷ Throughout the course of their career together, the two brothers La Van signed with numerous circuses and shows and intermittently incorporated a number of other performers into their act. Charles Noble of “The Fisher Brothers,” for example, broke in with Fred and Harry in 1890 before he moved on to perform with Ed Foreman under the name “La Van and La Mar” in 1891.²⁸ To provide one example of the intense schedule that Fred and Harry sought to maintain, simply within the year 1889 the La Van Brothers signed with the Rose Hill Burlesque Co.,

²⁰ Ibid., 6.

²¹ The troupe adopted the name “The Royal Russian Athletes” in 1883. Ibid., 6-7; “Fred Green is Dead,” *The Pantagraph* (June 15, 1897); “Bloomington Flyers Hold World Record,” *The Pantagraph* (July 22, 1928).

²² Gossard, “Life in a Circus Town,” *Bandwagon* (November-December 1989), 37.

²³ Morgan, “Men and Women o’ the Flying Trapeze,” *Chicago Daily News* (March 23, 1935); Gossard, “The Flying La Vans,” 8.

²⁴ Gossard, “The Flying La Vans,” 6.

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

Reports also mention that, after the Russian Athletes disbanded, Fred temporarily worked alongside Harry Van Auken—“the greatest of all bar performers.” “Fred Green is Dead,” *The Pantagraph* (June 15, 1897).

²⁶ Gossard, “The Flying La Vans,” 9.

²⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

²⁸ Gossard, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance*, 192.

Heffron's Great Eastern Circus, the Ringling Bros., Van Amburgh's United Monster Circus, and Universal World's Exposition Circus, among others.²⁹

Fred and Harry performed together until Fred retired due to ill health in March of 1896.³⁰ After retiring from the trapeze following a three month engagement with Orris's Circus in Mexico City, Fred briefly went to work for his father in the hotel business in Peoria.³¹ Coming to find the work "distasteful," however, Fred quickly returned to Bloomington.³² Soon thereafter, in May of 1897, Fred opened a cigar business in Chicago. Less than one month after opening the business, Fred died on June 14, 1897. The obituary published in the *Pantagraph* states that Fred died of uremic poisoning that resulted from kidney disease.³³ In a source compiled by Gossard, Fred is said to have died from complications relating to asthma.³⁴ Fred was described as a man of "quiet, reserved disposition," who made friends easily.³⁵ Fred never married. He was "popular in the profession," and thus his death was certainly noted by fellow members of the circus community.³⁶ Fred is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

HARRY GREEN (1867-1952), like his brother Fred, was born in Bloomington on February 3, 1867. Harry was the sixth child born to John Lester and Harriet Ann (Van Alstine) Green.³⁷ As mentioned previously, Harry became interested in the art of the trapeze at an early age and dedicated himself to a study of the craft while his two older brothers were performing in Europe. After running away from home with the circus around the age of 16 (after his father discovered, and subsequently destroyed, the makeshift rigging that the Green brothers had erected out of hoe handles in the family's barn), Harry did not stop performing his acrobatic tricks until well into his seventies.³⁸ According to an article published in the *Pantagraph* in 1921, the Flying La Vans are "believed to hold the world's record for consecutive appearances in the arena of white tents."³⁹ The far-reaching popularity of the troupe is made clear by the wide selection of complimentary remarks that have been recorded concerning the professionalism of the performers and the sheer entertainment value of the act. The apparent impressiveness of the Flying LaVans' act can partially be attributed to Harry's implementation of a "double wide rigging" that allowed for more acrobats to execute tricks simultaneously while also increasing the overall difficulty of the tricks being executed.⁴⁰ Gossard summarizes a description of the particularities of the La Van rigging saying, "the dimensions of the La Van flying act rigging was a distance of twenty-four feet between the crane bars with a drop of only six inches from the

²⁹ Ibid., 8.

³⁰ Gossard, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance* (2012), 192.

³¹ "Fred Green is Dead," *The Pantagraph* (June 15, 1897).

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Gossard "The Flying La Vans," 11.

³⁵ "Fred Green is Dead," *The Pantagraph* (June 15, 1897).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ McLean County Births, McLean County (Illinois) Clerk 1860-1899, Book Spec. 5, 282.

³⁸ Gossard, "Life in a Circus Town," *Bandwagon* (November-December 1989), 37.

³⁹ "Bloomington Flyers Hold World Record," *The Pantagraph* (July 22, 1928).

⁴⁰ Gossard, "Life in a Circus Town," *Bandwagon* (November-December 1989), 37.

flybar to the catchbar. This was a very short drop from the flybar to the hands of the catcher, compared to other acts that could be as much as twenty-four inches. A shorter drop gave the flyer much less time to complete his tricks.”⁴¹

In 1896, the same year that his brother Fred retired, Harry married Amy (Anna) Bowers after a mere seven-day acquaintance.⁴² In an article commemorating the couple’s fiftieth wedding anniversary, Amy is quoted as saying, “When I saw Harry swooping through the air I got so flustered I fell off the trapeze.”⁴³ Commenting on their brief courtship, Harry remarked, “I proposed right off, but she said she didn’t believe in whirlwind courtships, so I had to wait seven days.”⁴⁴ The record of Harry and Amy’s residences in Bloomington is assumedly incomplete due to the couple’s frequent travels. Harry and Amy are only listed twice in the Bloomington city directories from 1897 to 1937. A selection of their addresses include: 204 Davis Avenue (1919), 510 E. Taylor (1922), and an apartment that was located on East Jefferson Street (1930s).⁴⁵

Together with his wife, Harry organized an act under the name “The Flying La Vans.” Over the years, the Flying La Vans was composed of a variety of members. For instance, in 1921, the troupe included members Harry and Amy, Frank Shepherd, George Ochaner, W. A. Doner, and Arnold Reiger.⁴⁶ By 1922 however, the troupe consisted of members Neil Callahan, Marshall Brown, and Harold Cassanova in addition to Harry and Amy.⁴⁷ Rarely did the members of a particular circus act appear to remain consistent for more than a couple of years. Performers seem to have been in constant flux depending on where and when work was available. In conjunction with his management of the Flying La Vans, Harry also performed with other aerial acts early in his lengthy career including “La Van and Weitzel,” and “La Van and Videlia.”⁴⁸ It was during this time that Harry also partnered with one of his more recognized protégés, Los Angeles native turned Chicagoan Tom Kitchen.⁴⁹

The example of Kitchen, as well as a number of other aerial artists (including Eddie Ward) who were introduced to the trade by Harry Green serves well to demonstrate the particular

⁴¹ Gossard, “The Flying La Vans,” 16. The continuing trend of increasing the width of the trapeze rigging, thus increasing the capacity for more flyers in the air at one time, is demonstrated by the featured act of the 1936 YMCA Circus in Bloomington. In this particular performance, the rigging was ‘four wide’—meaning there were four catchers and a grand total of sixteen performers. According to Gossard, the act was the “largest...of its kind ever assembled.” Gossard, “Life in a Circus Town,” 39.

⁴² Amy (Bowers) Green was born in Philadelphia, PA on August 17, 1871. Amy performed with her husband off and on for over forty years under the stage name Mille Amy. She died at Brokaw Hospital in Bloomington on January 5, 1953 at the age of eighty-one, less than one year following the death of her husband Harry. She is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington. The pallbearers at her funeral included fellow notable professional aerialists Harry LaMar, Clyde Noble (brother of Charles Noble), and George Valentine. Gossard, “Life in a Circus Town,” *Bandwagon* (November-December 1989), 37; “LaVan, Amy,” *Billboard Magazine* (January 17, 1953); “Green Funeral,” *The Pantagraph* (January 7, 1953).

⁴³ “The Float Through the Years with the Greatest of Ease: Flying LaVans Observe Their Gold Wedding,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* (March 18, 1946).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Gossard, “Life in a Circus Town,” 37; Bloomington-Normal City Directory 1919 and 1922.

⁴⁶ “Bloomington Circus People Ready to Start the Season,” *The Daily Pantagraph* (April 2, 1921).

⁴⁷ Gossard, “The Flying La Vans,” 15.

⁴⁸ Gossard, “The Flying La Vans,” 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid.; Gossard, “Life in a Circus Town,” *Bandwagon* (November-December 1989), 37.

legacy of the youngest La Van—that of a teacher and a mentor. Harry’s personal success as a trapeze artist is undeniable, though arguably the largest impact that Harry made on the circus community was not a result of his own ability to perform, but instead due to his ability to pass on his knowledge to further generations of those interested in the art to which he and his brothers dedicated their lives.

Known by many in the profession by the nickname “Pops,” “Pappy,” or “Pap,” Harry had a reputation as a leader of, and model for, the next generation of aerialists. This reputation was established partly due to his involvement with the annual YMCA circus—the preparation for which required the training and organization of dozens of local athletes. Said to have “experimented with virtually every sort of aerial performance over the years,” Harry was more than well versed in the nuances of trapeze.⁵⁰ It was this familiarity and intimate knowledge of the art that allowed Harry to properly foster the skills and passions of the younger aerial acrobats with whom he came in contact. Included among these younger acrobats was Walt Graybeal. Graybeal moved to Bloomington with his family at the age of nine and quickly became a frequent visitor to the YMCA so that he could observe the professional trapeze artists in rehearsal while also working to perfect his own contortions.⁵¹

The YMCA, then located 200 E. Washington Street, became a center for practicing circus performers early in the 1900s.⁵² The facility was outfitted with a permanent trapeze rigging system typical for the performance of a “flying return act.” In the words of Gossard, in a “flying return act” a “flyer” or “leaper” would swing on a trapeze from their starting position on a pedestal board. The flyer would then be caught by a “catcher” who had simultaneously swung down from another trapeze—a “catchbar” or “catch trap.”⁵³ The flyer then returned after turning a trick to the catcher.⁵⁴ According to the reminiscences of Graybeal, the rigging for the trapeze ran the entire length of the “Y.” There was a net that was “folded out for the flying act” that sometimes proved problematic as the rigging at the gym was lower than usual—sitting approximately twenty-five feet in the air compared to the standard forty.⁵⁵ Some of the taller

⁵⁰ Ibid., 12.

Throughout the course of his career, Harry had performed acts ranging from the stationary (horizontal) bars, the double trapeze, single and double flying bar acts, catching acts, and flying return acts. Gossard, “The Flying La Vans, Appendix 1: Definitions of various aerial performances,” 18. Also among the tricks that Harry experimented with is included the “five-people double trapeze act,” an act that Harry is said to have originated. “Harry LaVan, Vet Aerialist, Dies in La,” *Billboard Magazine* (March 15, 1952).

⁵¹ Gossard, “Life in a Circus Town,” *Bandwagon* (November-December 1989), 36-37.

Graybeal worked closely with Harry from 1932 to 1933, though the two performers were at opposite ends of their careers when they met. When Graybeal ‘joined out’ with the Flying La Vans at the age of seventeen, Harry was sixty-three years old. Harry had quit flying about two years earlier, yet he nevertheless retained the physical fitness needed to teach Graybeal how to perform the ‘crab double’—a “unique trick” that can be thought of in terms of a “backward double somersault.”

⁵² 1911 Bloomington Normal City Directory; Gossard, “Life in a Circus Town,” *Bandwagon* (November-December 1989), 35.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 36.

performers, including Graybeal himself, would occasionally ‘drag toes in the net.’⁵⁶ Graybeal (measuring in at five-feet, ten-inches) was comparatively tall for a typical flyer.⁵⁷

Notable Bloomingtonian and physical education director of the YMCA between 1905 and 1917, Lloyd E. Eyer, was responsible for organizing four winter circus performances at the “Y” between the years 1909 and 1915.⁵⁸ After an eight-year hiatus from 1915 to 1923, and a temporary change of location in 1924 (the Illinois Wesleyan University gymnasium), the “Y” showcased an annual circus performance until 1943.⁵⁹ In return for their willingness to participate in performances in the spring, the acrobats were encouraged to use the facilities at the “Y” to train during the winter months. According to Gossard, much of the talent that performed in the shows at the Y consisted of young aerialists simply looking for an opportunity to make their debut in the profession. The annual YMCA circus performances thus proved beneficial to both the civic and professional communities.⁶⁰ A prime example of the YMCA’s impact on the local circus community is the survival of the Gamma Phi Circus fraternity at Illinois State University. Founded in 1929, it is the oldest collegiate circus in the United States. Though the fraternity struggled in the 1920s due to minimal interest in the organization at the national level, Clifford “Pop” Horton of the ISU physical education department was able to keep it running locally through participation in the YMCA circus performances.⁶¹

From 1900 to 1921 the Flying La Vans contracted with at least ten separate circuses: the John Robinson Circus (1900-1902), the Norris & Rowe Circus (1903-1904), the Campbell Bros. Shows (1905), the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Bros. Circus (1906-1907), the Barnum and Bailey Circus (1908), the Paines Fireworks Co. (1909-1910, 1913-1915), the Herber Bros. Circus and Wild West Show (1912), the Great American Fireworks Co. (1916), the Santos and Artigas Circus in Cuba (1917-1918), and the Howe’s Bros. Circus (1921).⁶² The troupe opened with the Howe’s Bros. in May of 1921 but by winter of that year Harry found himself temporarily incapacitated. He dislocated his shoulder while practicing at the Ward barn on Emerson Street.⁶³ Due to his injury Harry did not perform again until the start of the 1923 season, though he was always listed as a member of the act.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Though Graybeal was apparently tall for a flyer, an individual was not assured to be, or not to be, a talented flyer based solely on their body type. Based on Graybeal’s physical description of Harry in an interview with Gossard, Gossard surmises that Harry was “about five foot, six inches tall, a nice looking fellow, but with an unusual build.” Graybeal mentioned that Harry was “all belly” with “heavy hips.” Though not relevant to a discussion of the impact that one’s physical stature had on a person’s success as a trapeze artist, Graybeal also noted that Harry was bald, but sported a moustache that Graybeal remembers him waxing and rolling the ends in toilet paper before he retired for the evening. Ibid., 37.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Gossard, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance*, 201.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Gossard, “The Flying La Vans,” 12-15.

⁶³ Fellow aerialist Eddie Ward provided the circus community with an indispensable asset when he established the Ward Barn at 1201 East Emerson Street as a training facility for wintering circus performers. This air dome was the “largest of its kind in existence,” and is said to have been the only structure “erected exclusively for rehearsal of circus aerial acts.” The Ward Barn was fully outfitted with proper rigging, heat, and a safety net installed below the

While mostly working the parks and fairs circuit in the 1920s, late in the decade Harry converted the troupe's stationary bar act and passing act into a flying return act.⁶⁵ In light of the stock market crash, Harry and Amy had no choice but to continue performing into the 1930s after Harry lost his entire life's savings when the economy collapsed.⁶⁶ The 1933 season was the last season that the Flying La Vans were booked with a major circus (the Russel Bros. Circus), though the troupe continued to work parks and fairs into the late thirties.

Harry retired from performing in 1937 at the age of seventy. As was noted previously, he remained active in the circus community for a few more years by guiding and training the next generation of performers. He moved to New Orleans, LA in 1940 to spend his last thirteen years as a booking agent for Pontchartrain Beach and other Louisiana-area fairs.⁶⁷ According to a write-up in *Billboard Magazine* following his death, Harry apparently could not avoid his natural propensity for teaching as he reportedly continued his tutorship in the art of the trapeze at the New Orleans Athletic Club.⁶⁸ Harry died in New Orleans on March 8, 1952. Harry was survived by his wife Amy. Amy died on January 5, 1953 in Bloomington at Brokaw Hospital within a year of her husband's passing. The couple had no children. Both he and Amy are buried in the Green family plot in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington. The pallbearers at Amy's funeral included fellow notable professional aerialists Harry LaMar, Clyde Noble, and George Valentine.⁶⁹

The legacy of the entire La Van family is indicated by the subsequent growth of interest in the art of the trapeze that appeared to always follow in the wake of the respective Green brothers. Fair managers and park owners across the country frequently attributed the overall success of their events to the attraction and allure of the "Six Flying LaVans." One such manager, E.R. Kelsev of Toledo Beach, wrote in August 1919 that, "I am very glad to testify to the drawing qualities of the act of the Flying LaVans. Of course it is not necessary to say anything about the worth of the act, for everyone who knows anything about circus or park business knows that *it is the banner act of its kind.*"⁷⁰

For a more in depth examination of the art of the trapeze and the history of the circus in Bloomington, Illinois, please refer to the following published works: "The Flying La Vans of Bloomington, Illinois," *Bandwagon* 54, no. 4 (July-August 2012) and *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance: The Evolution of Trapeze* (2012) by Steve Gossard; and *The Bloomington-Normal Circus Legacy: The Golden Age of Aerialists* by Maureen Brunsdale and Mark Schmitt

trapeze to protect performers in case someone were to fall while practicing a stunt. "Bloomington Circus People Ready to Start the Season," *The Daily Pantagraph* (April 2, 1921).

⁶⁴ Gossard, "The Flying La Vans," 15.

⁶⁵ Gossard, "Life in a Circus Town," *Bandwagon* (November-December 1989), 37; Gossard, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance*, 192.

⁶⁶ Gossard, "The Flying La Vans," 16.

⁶⁷ "Harry LaVan, Vet Aerialist, Dies in La," *Billboard Magazine* (March 15, 1952).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ "LaVan, Amy," *Billboard Magazine* (January 17, 1953); "Green Funeral," *The Pantagraph* (January 7, 1953).

⁷⁰ Emphasis added. "What They All Say of the Flying LaVans."

By: Hannah Johnson, 2013