

# WABASH VALLEY

## PROFILES

*A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.*

### Winnifred Harper Cooley

**T**he only child of a famous woman suffragist, Terre Haute native Winnifred Harper Cooley carved a conspicuous niche for herself in the world of celebrities.

Author, journalist, editor, world traveler, lecturer, drama critic, radio personality and toastmistress, Cooley was known by 1940 as “the female Walter Winchell.” For 17 years she presided over the New York Dinner-Forum, hosting nearly 400 banquets featuring celebrities from every walk of life: royalty, writers, orators, movie stars and mobsters. Her final book, *I Knew Them When!*, published in 1940, reminisces about her associations with hundreds of luminaries, many before they had achieved fame.



Not surprisingly, Cooley began her memoirs in Terre Haute, where she was born October 2, 1874. Her father was flamboyant attorney Thomas Harper. Her mother was Ida Husted Harper, local newspaper editor who became America’s leading suffrage journalist. The family lived at 672 Oak Street. Winnifred’s childhood friends included miniature artist Amalia Kussner, actress Alice Fischer, composer/bandleader Edwin Franko Goldman, New York attorney Mayer Goldman, Terre Haute Mayor Donn Roberts, author Booth Tarkington and his sister Haute Tarkington Jamison. All became nationally prominent. Her parents were close friends with Congressman Richard W. Thompson, Senator Daniel W. Voorhees and the Debs family. Mutual origins were the catalyst that allowed her to meet author Theodore Dreiser, songwriter Paul Dresser and Eugene V. Debs.

After her parents divorced when she was 12 years old, Winnifred was sent to Indianapolis to attend Mary Wright Sewall’s trailblazing Girls Classical School. Tom Harper then paid for his daughter’s education at Stanford University, where she met fellow student “Bert” Hoover, the future president of the United States. After college she wed minister George Eliot Cooley and the couple resided in eight different cities over the next 20 years. Winnifred worked for the *New York World*, the *Philadelphia North American & Public Ledger*, the *Minneapolis Tribune*, the *New York Sun* and McClure’s Syndicate. In 1904 — while her mother was working on the *History of Woman Suffrage* — Winnifred published her first book, *The New Womanhood*, recently chosen by the Library of Congress as “one of the most important books” in its National American Women Suffrage Collection. Her essay, “The Young Suffragists,” featured in a 1913 issue of *Harper’s Monthly*, shockingly advocated a “single standard of morality” for both men and women and the decriminalization of prostitution.

Before she organized the Dinner-Forum in Manhattan, she was assistant editor of *Pure Food Magazine* for seven years and lectured for the New York Department of Education. She maintained contact with several school chums, particularly Susan W. Ball of Terre Haute’s *Saturday Spectator*. After World War II, Cooley retired to her estate in White Plains, NY, where she died October 20, 1967, 18 days after her 93rd birthday.

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