

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

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

William C. Coup



In the early 1850s, a teenage printer's apprentice from Martin County became bored with his rural surroundings and set off to experience the glitter and fortune of Terre Haute. This journey became the turning point in the life of the man who would make P.T. Barnum an American circus legend.

William Cameron Coup took up the printing trade in 1849, soon after his mother died. His father was a tavern keeper in Mt. Pleasant. When he and a friend arrived in Vigo County, Coup soon learned that printers in Terre Haute were too adept and apprentices were not needed. Around 1853, he discovered an exciting alternative — Mabies' Grand Olympian Arena and U.S. Circus, the largest of several early touring shows. Begging the Mabies for a job, young Coup became a "mud-packer" and "all-around boy."

By the time Ed and Jere Mabie sold the circus in 1865, W.C. Coup was known as an exemplary side show manager. Between 1866 and 1869, he managed the Yankee Robinson Circus and, at his wife's insistence, retired to livestock breeding in Delavan, Wis., then the nation's winter circus headquarters.

Former clown Dan Castello suggested a show business alliance with Phineas T. Barnum, promoter extraordinaire. His alliance with Coup changed Barnum's future. In exchange for Coup's energy, reliability and experience, Barnum furnished his name and money. With Barnum's financial backing, Coup created "The Greatest Show on Earth" and established the mobile three-ring "big top" circus still associated with Barnum's name today. On April 10, 1871, Coup launched "P.T. Barnum's Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Circus and Hippodrome" in Brooklyn. Using a big top support pole system he innovated and a specially designed end-loading rail system, Coup was able to present a spectacle at sites 100 miles apart overnight. He persuaded railroads to offer discount excursions from small towns to the show site. Because he allowed Coup freedom to do as he pleased, Barnum reaped great profits.

Under Coup's direction, "P.T. Barnum's Great Roman Hippodrome" opened at the future site of Madison Square Garden in 1874. Elephants, camels, ostriches, llamas, horses, chariot races, high wire acts and acrobatics were presented simultaneously, attracting the largest crowd assembled in New York.

When Barnum leased his Traveling Fair to a show business rogue, Coup severed all business ties. In 1876, Coup and another partner opened the New York Aquarium and later organized "The Equescriculum," "The New United Monster Shows" and touring Wild West shows, frequently returning to western Indiana to see old friends. A train wreck near Cairo, Ill., nearly crushed him financially. The Chicago Museum and "The Enchanted Rolling Palaces" were his final ventures.

Circus legend Bill Coup died in Jacksonville, Fla., March 4, 1895. His autobiography *Sawdust and Spangles* is essential reading for circus buffs.

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