

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

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

Paul Dresser



Except for Stephen Foster, no 19th century songwriter had a greater impact on American popular music than Terre Haute native Paul Dresser.

Born April 22, 1858, “on the banks of the Wabash,” Dresser was the fourth of Johann Paul and Sarah (Schanab) Dreiser’s 13 children. The three oldest died soon after the family moved to Terre Haute in 1853 where the elder Dreiser, a devout Catholic, worked at Ellis Woolen Mill.

The family moved when the elder Dreiser was selected foreman of the Sullivan Wool Manufactory in 1863. The seven years in Sullivan County were eventful. After the mill burned and was rebuilt, Mr. Dreiser suffered a head injury. Chauncey Rose acquired the business but closed it in 1870

after severe storm damage, prompting the Dreisers to return to Terre Haute. Esteemed novelist Theodore, the Dreisers’ 12th child, was born here in 1871.

Before changing his surname to “Dresser,” Johann Paul Dreiser Jr. attended St. Bonaventure Lyceum in Terre Haute and St. Meinrad’s Academy. He fled St. Meinrad’s at 16 to go on tour in medicine shows. Between 1879 and 1881, after Sarah and the younger boys relocated to Vincennes, Paul lived with his father and sisters at 205 N. 13th Street.

Meanwhile, Dresser composed songs and wrote monologues, joined Thatcher, Primrose & West minstrel troupe and moved to Evansville. “Wide Wings,” his first published ballad, was released by an Evansville music house in 1884. Two years later, firms on New York’s “Tin Pan Alley” were distributing his work.

Lovable and obese (eventually weighing nearly 300 pounds), Dresser earned renown in 1886 with “The Letter That Never Came” followed by sentimental ballads, “The Outcast Unknown,” “The Convict and the Bird” and “The Pardon Came Too Late.”

“Just Tell Them That You Saw Me” was a huge triumph, only one of nine hits Dresser wrote in 1895. During the Gay Nineties, Dresser was the nation’s most celebrated and affluent composer. The folk classic, “On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away” (1899) is best recalled, becoming Indiana’s state song in 1913.

Generous with friends and family to the point of self-destruction, Dresser fell upon hard times in 1904 after selling his interest in Howley, Havilland & Dresser, a sheet music publishing firm. Though he continued to write songs, he could not afford to promote them.

Ill and heartbroken, Dresser died at his sister Emma’s home in Brooklyn on Jan. 29, 1906, at age 48, just before “My Gal Sal” became his biggest seller ever. The song was dedicated to Annie Brace, better known as Sallie Walker, an Evansville brothel madame. The 1942 movie *My Gal Sal*, loosely based on Dresser’s life, starred Victor Mature and Rita Hayworth.

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