

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

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

Uriah R. Jeffers

When the Vigo County Agricultural Association was reorganized in 1877, the board turned to Uriah “U.R.” Jeffers for guidance as its superintendent.

It was an extraordinary choice. Before he died July 1, 1897, at age 66, Jeffers had transformed the fairgrounds at Brown and Wabash avenues into a national horse racing hub and was recognized as “father of Terre Haute’s Four-Cornered Track.” Except for misfortunes during the Civil War, virtually everything the resourceful Jeffers did during his rags-to-riches existence was fruitful.

Born in Steuben County, N.Y., in 1831, Jeffers was brought to Clark County, Ill., before he was two years old. Relocating to Terre Haute as a teen, he operated a taxi for Matthew Stewart’s North Second Street hotel. Before Jeffers was 20, he exhibited a flair for horsemanship, steering a four-horse team in circles around a pole while keeping the wheel hub against the post.

Soon after marrying Lydia Weatherholt on April 7, 1853, he drove the area’s first two-story canvas-top horse-drawn “notions wagon” in partnership with Augustus Claussen and Francis Bichowsky. In 1862, he retired from the wholesale notions business to join the 79th Indiana Volunteers as a sutler (provisions officer). Captured at Chapel Hill, Ky., and Chickamauga, Ga., during the war, he lost substantial goods during the second imprisonment.

Upon release from confinement in 1864, the likeable Jeffers and Henry Miller founded a dry goods firm on Wabash Ave. between Sixth and Seventh streets. Miller sold out in 1868 and Elisha Havens ultimately became Jeffers’ partner. Though the business thrived, Jeffers sold his interest to Havens in 1874, retaining the building in which Havens & Geddes became Indiana’s largest wholesale dry goods business. In 1892 Havens & Geddes erected a huge facility on Fifth Street, between Wabash and Cherry, the site of its disastrous fire Dec. 19, 1898.

In 1880 Jeffers acquired and soon expanded the Vigo Woolen Mill at Tenth and Wabash. Meanwhile, he subdivided the family’s estate in the 500 block of South Seventh Street. As Vigo County Agricultural Association president in 1887, he engaged surveyor-engineer George R. Grimes to design the unusual one-mile horse racing facility. It secured global renown Oct. 11, 1889 when Axtell set a world stallion record. As more marks were set, Jeffers’ services were coveted as a race course adviser. A course in Detroit, among others, was built under his direction.

The great-grandparents of First Financial Corporation President and CEO Don Smith, Uriah and Lydia had seven children. George, Fannie Belle and Charles died in infancy. Daughter Helen, a gifted soprano, was known as “The Hoosier Jenny Lind” before her untimely death at 33 on Sept. 12, 1889. Elizabeth (Lizzie), two years younger, toured as an actress and singer before marrying Robert J. Smith. Frances (Frankie), later Mrs. Walter Duenweg, was a talented contralto. Bruce Jeffers managed the St. Nicholas Hotel before becoming associated with Princeton Mining which developed Kings Mine in Princeton, Ind. Lydia Jeffers died June 10, 1893, and is buried in the family plot at Woodlawn Cemetery.



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