

## Celebrity life of 'Baby' Bliss mired in tragedy

One of the more beloved local figures from Bloomington's rich past is Baby Bliss, the city's resident "fat man" who more than a century ago gained considerable fame here and abroad popularizing the bicycle.

Described as a "veritable mountain of flesh" and someone "overburdened with a surplus of avoirdupois" (an archaic term for bodily heft), Bliss was said to have weighed in excess of 500 pounds much of his adult life, and at one point tipped the scales at 565 pounds.

Beloved or not, the life of this gentle giant was marked by tragedy. Bliss became a celebrity by drawing attention to his weight, often in less than edifying—if not humiliating—ways. He also struggled with mental illness, spending time institutionalized in a series of state hospitals.

Leonard H. "Baby" Bliss was born May 4, 1865 in Blue Mound Township, a rural stretch of McLean County east of Normal. He weighed 10 or 12 pounds at birth (accounts vary), and his parents, Elijah and Lucy Harmon Bliss, were "ordinarily proportioned," both in height and weight. His brother too was of average size.

By the age of 11, though, Leonard (the nickname "Baby" would come later, courtesy of Pantagraph editor William McCambridge) was 6 feet tall and weighed between 180 and 190 pounds. At 17 he reached his full height, 6 feet 4 inches, and weighed 280 pounds. Two years later, at the age 19, he topped 350 pounds.

Bliss' parents moved to Bloomington in 1884 and he spent most of his adult life in the city. In 1890, "Baby," already a well-known local figure given his disproportionate size, was hired as a traveling salesman for Chisholm-Gray Co., a Bloomington commission house. In this role he sold a specially made cigar by Fred Smith of Bloomington called "Our Baby," with Bliss' own likeness appearing on each box.

That spring, in late April 1890, Bliss suffered one of his reoccurring mental breakdowns. Judge Colostin Myers ordered him sent to the Illinois Eastern Hospital for the Insane in Kankakee (renamed the Kankakee State Hospital in 1910). "Mr. Bliss is known and liked by all, men, women and children ... and it is hoped by his friends that his insanity may be of short duration," noted The Pantagraph.

However, less than three years later, he was back at the Kankakee hospital. Dissipation, a condition caused by intemperate living, especially heavy drinking, was said to be the cause of this latest bout of insanity. Later speculation held that his "mental derangement" was brought on by digestive problems.

Although Bliss neither traveled with a circus nor appeared in a circus sideshow, he participated in his share of humiliating stunts and contests common to 19th and early 20th

century American society which was both fascinated and repulsed by “freaks” of nature in human form.

In late July 1893, for instance, a 450-pound Bliss and the 40-pound African-American dwarf John Curtis faced each other in a foot race at the old east side fairgrounds, which encompassed an area that today is bounded by Country Club Place, Mercer and Oakland avenues, and Vale Street. The winner got \$5 and the runner-up a watermelon.

Bliss’ big break came in 1895 when he began working for a Chicago firm that produced a well-engineered, high-end bicycle called the American. The company taught Bliss to master the two-wheeled contraptions, which were all the rage in the late 19th century, and then use his prowess as a supersized cyclist to sell their product. The sales pitch was obvious: If Baby Bliss can ride an American bicycle ... you can too!

Bliss sometimes appeared with Jimmy “Midget” Michael, the Welsh world cycling champion who stood 5 feet 1 1/2 inches.

During the spring 1896 cycling season Bliss was an attraction at exhibitions in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit and elsewhere. In June of that year he traveled to Europe, demonstrating American model bicycles to crowds in London, Glasgow, Belfast, Stockholm, Berlin, Vienna and elsewhere.

Unfortunately, by late summer 1897 the American bicycle company had gone belly up and Bliss was out of a job.

Sometime afterward he began appearing at county and state fairs, amusement parks and the like, billing himself as “The Heaviest Man in the World.” In this role his promotional material falsely claimed he weighed an improbable 740 pounds.

In late March 1910, near the end of a two-month stay at Peoria State Hospital in Bartonville after another breakdown, Baby Bliss signed a contract to become “captain” of the Waterloo, Ia.-based Fat Men’s Amusement Co. baseball club.

This misguided venture represents Bliss’ last official appearances as a celebrity fat man. The club failed to draw crowds of sufficient size to pay expenses, and before summer’s end the team folded. By September Bliss was one of a dozen players suing management for back pay.

When he wasn’t on the road, Bliss lived at his parent’s place on the 1200 block of East Clay Street (now Oakland Avenue).

Leonard “Baby” Bliss’ death at the age of 46 was a tragic one. In early January 1912, after he had gone missing several days during a sharp cold snap, a neighbor decided to check on the house. Bliss’ father had died more than a decade earlier and his ailing and aged mother was at Brokaw Hospital, so he was living alone at the time. There, from the

kitchen window, the neighbor could see Bliss, sitting in his specially made oversized blue chair next to a gas stove, “his head titled back, cold in death.”

Police officers were called to the scene and after gaining entry they found Bliss frozen solid and the smell of natural gas in the air. Bliss, dressed in a flannel night robe, had been dead for a day or two.

Although there were whispers of suicide, those that knew him best disputed such talk. Instead, despite all apparent evidence, there was general consensus that he had awakened a night or two earlier with the intention of warming himself by the stove, and while preparing to do so must have accidentally knocked open two of the stove’s jets and was soon overcome by gas.

On Jan. 5, McLean County Coroner James Hare held an inquest over Bliss’ thawed body. After hearing the evidence, the coroner’s jury returned a verdict of death from accidental asphyxiation.

Despite temperatures that were said to dip nearly 20 degrees below zero, some 300 people attended Bliss’ funeral service. Among those in attendance was Edward S. Marcus, a rival “fat man” bicyclist from Chicago.

The casket, shipped from Chicago, was the largest ever received by a local undertaker. The story of the casket and its extraordinary dimensions appeared in newspapers across the nation.

Even in death, Bliss couldn’t escape the lurid and leering public.