

## **Circus train wreck takes life of local aerialist Jennie Ward**

This week marks the 100th anniversary of the horrific Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus train wreck, one of the deadliest in U.S. history. On June 22, 1918, outside of Hammond, Ind., a Michigan Central Railroad locomotive pulling empty Pullman passenger cars barreled into the back end of an idling circus train, killing more than 80 performers, trainers, roustabouts, and other “comrades of the big top.”

The dead included Jennie Ward of the Flying Wards, one of the more successful aerialist troupes to emerge from the circus hotbed of Bloomington. Bessie Katrenke, a newcomer to the Wards, also perished in the collision. Survivors from the troupe included Jennie’s husband, Alec Todd, her brother Eddie Ward, and Eddie’s wife Marian.

By the early 20th century, Bloomington had earned a national reputation as a training ground for aerialist, with well-known acts including the La Vans, Concellos, Fishers, LeMars and Valentinos / Valentines. Bloomington, in fact, was once dubbed the “Trapeze Capital of the World.”

The Wards, unlike some of the aerialist troupes with local connections, were Bloomington born and raised. The Ward barn on Emerson Street (later the site of the Grand Hotel restaurant) was built in 1915 expressly to train aerialists and acrobats.

In the late spring and summer of 1918, the Wards were “flying” for Hagenbeck-Wallace, one of the larger and more popular circuses of its day. In the early morning hours of June 22, 1918, a Central Michigan engineer operating an unoccupied passenger train had fallen asleep in his cab, and in doing so failed to heed the warnings from at least one automatic signal and a circus train flagman.

The Central Michigan locomotive and its steel-frame Pullman passenger cars barreled into and circus train, crumpling or “telescoping” four older, flimsier wooden coaches. The circus train cars were lit with oil or gas lamps, which quickly turned the wreckage into a fiery charnel house.

The final death toll is usually listed at 86 souls, though accounts vary. Some 200 others were injured.

The Chicago press hailed Eddie Ward of Bloomington as a hero. He was thrown clear of wreck, and once he regained his bearings, he pulled his wife Mayme and then sister Jennie Ward from the burning debris. Mayme survived, but Jennie was likely already dead. According to one account, her back had been broken in the collision, meaning her death was likely instantaneous.

Meanwhile, Eddie returned to the mangled wreckage. “Choked and blinded with the fumes of burning wood and human flesh he worked like a demon at the scene of the holocaust,” recounted the Chicago News in the rather lurid prose common for the time.

One of those saved by Ward was Lon Moore, a veteran clown. “My arms were pinioned to my sides and something lay across my throat and something else across my head. I guess I was about gone,” recounted the showman. “I looked up through a little hole in the roof and there was someone clawing at it with his bare hands to make it bigger.” It was Eddie Ward.

At one point, Ward is said to have suffered burns attempting to rescue four women. “I saw the flames creep on them and heard their maddening cries,” recounted the Bloomington aerialist the day after the wreck from St. Margaret’s Hospital in Hammond. “They ring in my ears in this quiet hospital ward. They will always ring in my ears.”

Eugene and Mary Enos, two aerialist acrobats from Bloomington not associated with the Flying Wards, were also trapped in the wreckage. Eddie Ward pulled Mary from the wreck, and Mary in turn pulled her husband Gene to safety.

“There was no water to be had—the wounded lay around naked and shrieking for help and water,” added Ward. “The screams from the burning coaches soon ceased, however.”

In the days after the wreck circus folk, friends and relatives grappled with the nearly unbearable task of identifying the corpses, most “charred and mangled beyond recognition.”

Less than one week later, the majority of the dead, many of whom remained unidentified, were interred in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Chicago suburb of Forest Park. Their final resting place was a large section purchased by the Showman’s League of America, an association of carnival performers. Today, the “Showmen’s Rest” plot is ringed by five elephant statues, their trunks lowered in a touching pachydermal gesture of mourning.

Jennie Ward’s earthly remains arrived back in Bloomington on June 25, aboard a Chicago & Alton Railroad train. The Ward’s East Emerson Street home and practice barn, “which ordinarily was the scene of pleasure and where happiness reigned, is enshrouded with gloom” observed The Pantagraph. Alec Todd said he had no memories of the accident. “He is grief stricken over the death of his wife and burst into tears when he spoke of her,” noted a reporter.

Ward’s funeral service was held at First Christian Church, Bloomington, and included the choir singing “Beautiful Isle of Somewhere.” She was laid to rest June 26 at Park Hill Cemetery on Bloomington’s west side.

Yet despite the enormous pain and suffering, a “show must go on” ethos reigned among circus performers—physical and psychological trauma be damned. “The surviving members of the Flying Wards,” reported the July 3 Pantagraph, “are expecting to patch up the act as much as is possible and continue the season’s work.” Accordingly, the remaining aerialists, including Eddie and Mayme Ward and Alec Todd, left Bloomington on July 8 to rejoin the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus somewhere in South Dakota or Minnesota, a short two weeks and two days after the wreck.

Clearly, the traumatized performers had insufficient time to heal. “The members are as yet badly ‘crippled up’ and have not recovered from the injuries nor from the nervous shock,” noted a sympathetic Pantagraph a few days before the troupe’s departure.

Milner Library, Illinois State University, houses the world-class Circus and Allied Arts Collection. That treasure trove of material includes books, films, scrapbooks, a Ringling archive, photographs, correspondence and artifacts like posters and even the fly-bar from the Ward Barn on Emerson Street. These things, along with the rich history of ISU’s Gamma Phi Circus, speak to the invaluable role the Twin Cities play in keeping circus traditions alive.

In April, Normal and ISU hosted the Circus Fans Association of America’s annual convention. Maureen Brunsdale, head of Special Collections at Milner, reported that during the convention a descendant of Eddie Ward presented a postcard by Jennie written shortly before the wreck revealing that she was expecting a child at the time of her death.