

Clyde Van Noble (1881-1955)

There is an old song that tells of “the daring young man on the flying **trapeze**.” That young man could very well have been Clyde Van Noble. As an **aerialist**, he dazzled audiences throughout the United States and Europe. Later in life, he was also a jeweler whose store on the square in downtown Bloomington was a good place to shop.

Clyde was born in Bloomington on August 30, 1881, the youngest of 11 children. His father James was a **plasterer** by trade, but also served as a deputy sheriff for McLean County, and later **constable** for the City of Bloomington. The family lived at 604 Taylor Street, and Clyde attended Emerson School (originally called the Fourth Ward School). As a boy, Clyde was a newspaper carrier for the *Bloomington Leader*, one of the city’s newspapers. In 1896, he won a prize for bringing in a large number of new **subscribers** during a subscription drive. According to the paper’s records, the prize was a “splendid suit of underwear.”

A year after his graduation from Emerson School, Clyde headed north to Chicago to train in the arts of **engraving** and jewelry making. Upon his return to Bloomington, he began working for Frank Parritt, the owner and operator of Parritt Jewelry. On the night of “The Great Bloomington Fire” of 1900, he succeeded in rescuing a large portion of Parritt’s most valuable jewelry. *The Pantagraph* reported that Parritt rewarded Clyde with a “beautiful gold watch and chain...as a token for faithful work done during the night of the fire.” Parritt opened a new store on Washington Street, and Clyde continued to work there until 1904, when he left to join the circus.

Many well-known aerialists and circus performers were born and raised in Bloomington. And many more called Bloomington home during the winter months, when they used barns, gyms, and theaters around the community to train for upcoming seasons. Charles, Clyde’s older brother, had already left Illinois and his job as a **telegraph** operator to become a trapeze artist. According to *The Pantagraph*, Clyde had been training for some time and “was remarkably well developed” as an aerialist when he began performing with the Ringling Brothers Circus. When he joined his brother’s troupe, the troupe became known as the Five Flying Famous Fishers.

While performing with the Ringling Brothers Circus in 1908, Clyde met his future wife, Emily Vecchi. Emily was a professional singer and dancer who had been performing since the age of six. When she was 14, she joined the Kaufmann Bicycle Troupe. She quickly became the star of the show, becoming known as “the world’s most accomplished lady bicyclist.” The circus was not an easy place for Clyde and Emily to get to know each other. The circus had very strict rules about when and where young performers could interact. Whenever the young couple was together, they were closely chaperoned. Clyde, however, found ways to let Emily know of his for her feelings. On several occasions, he snuck candy to her as they passed each other on their way in and out of the big tent for performances. But after two years, Emily and the Kaufmann Troupe left Ringling Brothers to travel in Europe.

For the next few years, Clyde and the Flying Fishers traveled with various circuses around the United States. Then in January 1908, Clyde’s brother Charles died unexpectedly. The brothers had returned to Bloomington to spend the winter months with their mother in their family home on Taylor Street. During their stay, they made plans to **lease** the (old) Bloomington Coliseum to practice for the upcoming season. It was during this time that Charles fell ill and died of heart disease. Clyde then took control of the troupe and readied the Flying Fishers for the opening of the season at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

Clyde and Emily kept their relationship going through letters during these years, and while Emily was performing in Germany, Clyde sent her an engagement ring through the mail. They were married on November 10, 1908 in New York City. The following year the Flying Fishers began performing on the **vaudeville** circuit. Then for a couple of years, Clyde organized a bicycle act featuring Emily and her two sisters called the La Petite Emile Troupe. They continued to return to Bloomington each winter where Clyde appeared in the annual YMCA circus on several occasions. In 1912, Emily’s sisters returned to England. Clyde then reorganized the Flying Fishers and became a leading trapeze artist again. The troupe opened in Minneapolis, then traveled to the Empire Theatre in London. By the end of their eight-week

booking in London, Clyde had contracted five years of **bookings** throughout Europe. But this plan was cut short by the outbreak of the Great War (today known as World War I) in 1914. Clyde, Emily and the rest of the troop returned to the United States on the last ocean liner to leave Europe before the war began. Clyde and Emily continued to perform in vaudeville until 1918 when they retired to Bloomington.

Clyde returned to his original occupation as a jeweler. He went to work for Homuth's Jewelry Store, which was located at the same address as Parritt's store had been. A year later, he became the manager of the jewelry department at the new Newmarket Department Store, which opened in December of 1919 on North Center Street. The jewelry department sold everything from solid gold bracelets, to scarf pins and **brooches**, cuff links, men's belts, ivory **toilet** sets, perfume bottles, and silver and plated flatware. Emily helped Clyde as a sales worker in the jewelry department, which he managed for almost 18 years. When the Newmarket was sold in 1938, Clyde opened his own store at 111 N. Center Street. He advertised his diamonds as "unconditionally guaranteed perfect, of fine color and full brilliancy."

Besides being a successful merchant and businessman, Clyde was very involved in the civic and social life of the community. He was a member of the Young Men's Club. He served on the entertainment committee, and was elected president of the group in 1932. He served as "make-up man" for various church and social groups when they put on performances, such as the **American Passion Play**. With Emily, Clyde helped organize the Community Players Theatre, a local theatre group which is still active today. He served as president of the group from 1933 through 1936, acted as director, makeup man, and actor in various productions.

In 1938, Clyde was elected to the board of directors of the McLean County chapter of the American Red Cross. He held various offices in the organization until late 1943, when he became chairman of the McLean County chapter. This was a **crucial** time for the organization since it was the middle of World War II. One of his most important jobs was making sure McLean County met its fundraising goals to support the war effort. Clyde urged citizens not to wait for someone to knock on their door to contribute. "People should realize the urgency of the need and take the **initiative** in getting their contributions to the Red Cross," he stated in *The Pantagraph*. He was also chairman of the **United Nations** clothing drive towards the end of the war in 1945. Over 38,000 pounds of clothing were collected in McLean County and sent to people in countries **devastated** by the war.

Clyde belonged to several **Masonic** organizations. He and Emily were members of the First Church of Christ, Scientist, and members of the McLean County Country Club. He and Emily also loved to play golf.

Clyde also remained a loyal and constant member of the circus community. Throughout the rest of his life, Clyde gave many talks to local groups about his time with the circus and the circus industry in general. He worked to help the local circus industry **thrive**, particularly working to find better winter quarters for aerialists to practice in and to encourage more circus performers to come to Bloomington. In his last few years, he wrote several articles and **memoirs** about aerialist performers from the area and about his life in the circus.

On Monday, May 2, 1955, Clyde suffered a severe heart attack at his home. He died later the next day at the Mennonite Hospital. His memorial service was held at Beck Memorial Home on Grove Street. He is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: What skills or personal qualities did Clyde have that enabled him to be successful both in the circus and the jewelry business? Compare and contrast the two occupations.