

THE CIRCUS & ELEPHANT HILL



There's an area on the very northwest edge of Connersville that has been known as Elephant Hill since the late 1800s. It all began with an ill tempered elephant and a little boy with an ambition.

The circus (or menagerie, as it was called) was started and first owned by Isaac Van Amburgh, a man who had come from very meager means in New York. There's a legend that says his mother, on the night before his birth in 1808, dreamed that she was in a room where various parts of a lion were cooking in huge pots, and she ate them, one by one. At the end of the dream, she ate the head of the lion. The dream frightened her badly, and she thought it meant that her child would be in danger, so she kept a close watch on him. As it turned out, that probably wasn't a bad idea. It seems that, as a child, Isaac read the story of Daniel in the Bible, and decided he would be a lion tamer.

Isaac wasn't the average little boy. While other children played games, he studied animals. He would feed mice and rats and train them to do tricks.

At nineteen, Isaac left home and found work cleaning cages at the Zoological Institute of New York. This sounds like a zoo, but it was really a traveling menagerie. The owner recognized Isaac's

talent for training animals, and, by 1821, Van Amburgh's Menagerie had its beginning, and Isaac became the first lion tamer in the United States.

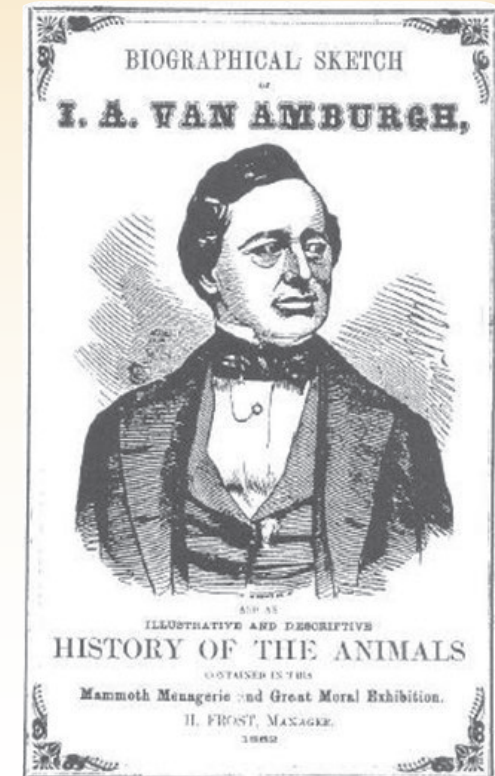


Isaac is said to have had such a way with animals that he would go into a cage with several large cats at one time, often lying down with them. His feats included putting his head in a lion's mouth and putting a lamb next to a lion with no harm to the lamb. However, churches of the day preached against the circuses. As we've seen recently, there was criticism of the way animals were treated, and it was widely known that Van Amburgh subdued his animals through the use of beatings and withholding food.



About that time, also in New York, James and Sophia (Kelly) Frost were starting their family. James died in 1836, and Sophia brought her children to Fayette County, Indiana, in 1839, to be near her family who had settled here. One of those children was Hyatt, born in 1827. He and his brother Eli (born 1831) became interested in the circus while children in New York when they helped care for Old Bet, the first elephant brought to America.

Both brothers would later work for the Van Amburgh show, Eli as a ticket taker and handyman, and Hyatt as the general manager. Although we haven't traced the lineage, we believe that they were cousins of Franklin Hyatt who was also born in New York and lived in Fayette County. He was manager for the Barnum and Bailey Circus.



During the late 1830s and into the 1840s, the entire show was shipped to Europe. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert attended the show frequently. The Queen even had a portrait of Van Amburgh painted and hung in the Royal Academy. Oddly, back in the states, this special attention from royalty cost Isaac followers among common folk and “upper crust” alike.

After a number of years, Isaac Van Amburgh retired. He died in Philadelphia in 1865, and Hyatt Frost took over the show. Hyatt later joined P. T. Barnum as a partner in a show in New York, but that concern was destroyed by fire in 1868, and the partnership was dissolved.



An article in an 1881 Connersville newspaper tells of the Van Amburgh Menagerie getting ready to go on the road after spending the winter in Fayette County. By this time, it was more than a menagerie of animals. The acts included several clown troupes, William Larue and his celebrated family of acrobats and gymnasts, and Madame Rivers and Madame Sebastian equestriennes, as well as one hundred and eighty horses, a dozen or more camels, and the largest performing elephant in the world. The circus train included sixty-five wagons carrying one hundred sixty people, and the show required five acres to be fully displayed.

The Van Amburgh show continued to travel throughout the United States, but it was difficult for smaller circuses to compete with bigger shows like Barnum and Bailey, and the assets were sold in 1884, apparently bought, primarily, by Ringling Brothers.

Hyatt Frost returned to New York and died there in 1885.

Eli Frost remained in Fayette County. He was a farmer and had only traveled with the circus sporadically. He raised his family here and died in 1916. One of his children was Connersville attorney Hyatt Frost (1860-1938) who also served as the city's mayor from 1894 to 1898.

Now that we have the background of the show and the people, we can move on to the story of Tippo. Tippo, an Asian elephant, was brought to America about 1840. He was ten feet tall and weighed ten thousand pounds. His keeper was a man named Frank Nash.

Nash decided to retire around 1867, and another handler took over. Tippo was accustomed to Nash and wanted no part of the new fellow. There's an account of it taking three hours to subdue him through shackling his legs and stabbing him with pitchforks after he was approached by Nash's replacement. That happened while he was quartered here where the circus spent the winter months.

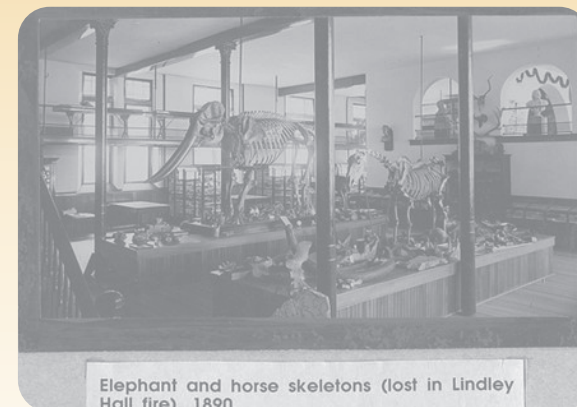
There's another account of the circus crossing a river after an appearance in New York. The giant elephant had never seen a barge, and the men on the barge weren't expecting to see an elephant ahead of them in the river. Being unable to avoid a collision, the men all jumped into the river. The barge hit Tippo.

Tippo attacked the barge which ran

aground and was smashed to pieces, but the elephant emerged without a scratch.

The final account of Tippo in Connersville is the news of his death, reported to have been due to a heart ailment. It was 1871, and Frank Nash had come out of retirement. The giant beast died suddenly at about sixty years of age. He was dismembered and buried in a hill on the farm of Charles Frost, a brother of Eli and Hyatt.

In 1877, Tippo's skeleton was retrieved and reassembled at Earlham College in Richmond. A fire destroyed his remains in 1924.



Even though Tippo has been gone from the earth all these many years, Elephant Hill is still known by the name.

Sophia Kelly Frost is buried in City Cemetery, and many of her descendants are still living in Fayette and surrounding counties.

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