The Story of My Encounters with the Historical Giants of Miami County, Indiana

A Creative Project (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Creative Project

The purpose of my creative project evolves from my work as an intern at The Miami County Museum in Peru, Indiana. I was selected to write, edit, and produce five videos to be played alongside their coordinating permanent displays. The video scripts were limited to local subjects: the circus, the 1913 flood, the railroad, the Miami Indians (specifically Little Turtle and Frances Slocum), and Cole Porter. Each one gives a short history and their importance to the community. These videos will be used to educate Peru and its visitors about Miami County's rich historical heritage.
The Story of My Encounters with the Historical Giants of Miami County, Indiana

In the summer of 1997, I accepted an internship at the Miami County Museum in Peru, IN. My assignment was to create, write, edit, and produce scripts for a series of five historical videos. I would be doing all the research and writing, plus choosing all the footage, photos and background music, while a professional person would be hired to do the actual filming. The museum has approximately a hundred visitors a week, and it was hoped that the new videos would help to increase this number. These videos were also important for the museum to update their displays and would considerably help the Miami County Museum compete with the technology of museums around the state.

This was an amazing opportunity for me since I was majoring in Pre professional English: Professional Writing) and minoring in history. It was the perfect combination to utilize my knowledge and abilities in both areas. I enthusiastically began the assignment and realized quickly that it was not going to be easy.

Every day I waded through an enormous amount of research materials. Each script was to be approximately three to five minutes in length, but the research for each script literally took weeks. I consulted books, local newspaper articles, the Internet and even held interviews with members of the local community. It was difficult work, but this project was as important to me as it was to the museum.

The Board of Directors had been eagerly awaiting someone with the proper credentials to take on such a task for their museum. They wanted an intern from Ball State who could write well and knew the local history. Luckily, I fit that description
perfectly.

I had grown up in the area and so was quite aware of its “historical giants,” in fact, I was intrigued with them. As a child I would endlessly read and flip through my father’s local history books. I also remember the many wonderful trips to the museum where I later would work as an intern. My father would take both my sister and me to this place of magic almost every week it seemed like. I would stare wide-eyed at the full sized airplane which hung from the ceiling as if it were in mid-flight, the many old button-up shoes in the cobbler shop display, the ostrich egg, the giant turtle (which, incidentally, was made into turtle soup), the two-headed calf, and more items than I could count. Long dark hallways filled with relics of the past--it was where my love for history began.

So, since the museum had given me wonderful childhood memories, I wanted to give something back to it and the community. I wanted to do the best work possible. I owed them a lot and I meant to repay the debt.

I. The Miami County Circus

During the summer I managed to finish my first script on the Miami County Circus. This was the longest and most detailed of my works since Peru was known for being “The Circus City of the World.” I had lived near Peru all my life and had virtually no idea how much of an impact the circuses of long ago had had on the community. The script was over five minutes in length and gave a history of the circuses and famous performers who made their home in Peru, Indiana.
Circus Script

"Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages," etc. (Ringmaster's opening speech). Those words of the ringmaster are ones we have come to treasure and love in this great town. It was such a thrill for the people of Peru when the circus trains finally made it back to town. It was like a dream rolling into town with its famous performers, ferocious animals, wonderful clowns, brightly painted wagons and huge tents. It was like magic before our very eyes tantalizing us with its world of wonders.

The circus has been a big part of Miami County's history for a long time now. Benjamin E. Wallace, Peru's first circus founder also known as the "Circus King," brought his circus here in 1884. Its first grand performance was on Saturday, April 26, of that same year. The name of his show was "Wallace and Company's Great World Menagerie, Grand International Mardi Gras, Highway Holiday Hidalgo, and Alliance of Novelties."

Ben continued to expand his circus every year and soon found his quarters cramped. In 1892, he purchased the beautiful home and farm of Miami Indian Gabriel Godfroy. The winter quarters were located on the west bank of the Mississinewa River, two and a half miles east of Peru. He added to the property an elephant barn, a barn for smaller animals, a paint shop, a ring barn, numerous storage sheds and a huge
horse barn. As his show continued to grow, he also added all the farms along State Road 124 from the Wayne Street Bridge to the winter quarters.

In 1907, after much legal work, the Carl Hagenbeck Circus, title and equipment, became the property of Wallace. It proved to be a very smart business deal providing Wallace with an important title, a large herd of performing animals—including a polar bear act, and some excellent wagons. It now seemed as if nothing could go wrong, but tragedy would soon strike.

In 1913, the Mississinewa River rose so quickly and unexpectedly that there was little anyone could do, especially for the animals at the winter quarters. Most of the horses were on higher ground and relatively out of danger, but the elephants were not as lucky. When the water got to be around five feet high, the elephants were turned loose, in hopes that they could save themselves. Nellie, one of the larger elephants, ended up saving a trainer from drowning when the water got too high, by carrying him back to the house and out of danger. Nellie then returned to the barn to lead the rest of the elephants out. They went to the house and broke the windows and the doors trying to get in and escape the water, but unfortunately were too large to enter. All the trainer could do was watch as eight of the prized elephants perished in the flood. Twenty-one lions and tigers and eight performing horses also drowned and much damage was done to the property. The Circus'
estimated losses reached $150,000.

The flood caused Wallace to suffer greatly financially and otherwise. The physical and emotional strain was too much for the aging Wallace, so he sold his show in May while it was out on the road. The title, as well as the equipment, was sold to a syndicate, but Ben retained all land, including the winter quarters. The land was rented to other circuses who made their home in Peru.

During the 1920's Peru was now the home of three circus shows--The Hagenbeck-Wallace, The Sells-Floto, and The John Robinson. Peru was now being shown on the maps as the "Circus City."

One famous performer of the Sells-Floto Circus that the town of Peru grew to love was the cowboy and movie star, Tom Mix. While staying in Peru, Mix wore his cowboy attire on the streets and always had a smile and a wave for everyone. He stayed in the Bearss Hotel where he reportedly shot out the lights of the chandelier whenever he got bored. He befriended many Peru residents, especially the children who frequently came to see him. He stayed with the circus from 1929 until 1932 and then returned to the big screen.

Yet another famous performer in the Sells-Floto Circus was the lion and tiger tamer, Terrel Jacobs. His shows contained spectacular tricks and stunts that delighted and captivated his audiences.

Clyde Beatty, a Peruvian, was another famous animal trainer. He
performed for many circuses, including Hagenbeck-Wallace, Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey, Cole Brothers, and then started his own. He trained lions, tigers, three kinds of bears, leopards, and several other kinds of animals. His thrilling shows sometimes consisted of more than forty animals in one caged arena. He worked only with a small chair, a whip, and a revolver loaded with blank cartridges.

Unfortunately, the 1938 recession killed off these smaller shows we grew to love, but the vast memories of their performers, animals, and spectacular shows will ever be forgotten. Fortunately, the circus still lives on in this town, with amateur and professional shows every summer proving that it is and always will be the “Circus City.”

This script concluded my exhausting summer internship; however, I was later informed on August 25 that the Board of the Miami County Historical Society had voted for me to continue the project. They also agreed to give me a thousand-dollar grant to finish my work. They thought that since it was my project (I had turned their vision into a reality), I should definitely be the one to finish it. I was greatly honored and readily agreed. I then began what has been one of the most trying, but also most rewarding, two semesters in my college career.

For the last few months I have been going home on the weekends whenever possible to research and work on the last four scripts. Imagine spending almost one hundred and eighty hours on one script and then finding that I had four more scripts to
research and write during the 1997-98 Academic year, while taking five other English classes each semester. At times I was a little panicked, to say the least. Each weekend I have been busy working to meet my ultimate goal of graduation and the completion of this greatest work of all--my Honors Project (sure, no pressure). So, I continued on.

II. The 1913 Flood

The next script I completed was on the 1913 flood. I decided that since I had such success with the first video that I should expand my creativity and add more details to the actual video production. I decided that there should be lightning and rain sounds throughout the video. I thought this would add to the script, making it more interesting than the usual filler of background music.

This script was quite a bit shorter than the other, but it did not involve less research. I consulted numerous books and local newspaper accounts of the tragedy, in fact, I scoured the museum archives for any information that I could find. The outcome of all this work was the following script:

_Flood Script_

_(Lightning bolt cracks then violent rain sounds. Keep it loud at beginning, then quiet it to background noise throughout the reading of the entire script)_.

_Early Sunday, March 23, 1913, rain poured down upon the small town of Peru and continued unmercifully for more than 36_
hours. The Wabash River steadily began rising early Monday morning, but no one became alarmed until 8'oclock that evening. The electric light station sounded their fire alarm whistle to warn the public that the river had overflown its banks. Before midnight they were forced to close due to the rising flood waters, and the city submerged into darkness.

By Tuesday morning, all of South Peru, Eastern Peru as far west as Wabash street, all of Elmwood and North Peru, were flooded, and on Broadway the water had reached above Second Street. The water continued to rise at an alarming rate, and by 11 o'clock the Broadway Bridge washed out, causing even more turmoil in the south end of town. The flood finally reached its peak early Wednesday morning and began receding, allowing rescuers to begin their heroic work. A relief committee was immediately set up at the Court House, Dukes Hospital, Masonic Temple, and the High School. The dry buildings became a refuge to the vast numbers who had lost their homes.

Tragically, 11 people perished in the flood. Businesses reported losses that ranged from $25,000 and up. The Hagenbeck and Wallace Circus alone sustained $150,000 worth of damage to their winter quarters and animals.

The damage to the city was astonishing, costing over $2 million. For a time Peru was completely shut off from the rest of the world.
Interurban traffic was at a standstill, the cars sitting idle on their flooded tracks. The relief trains could only get within a mile or two before the rescue boats had to make the rest of the long trip. Rumors circulated all over the state that Peru had been wiped off the map, something that obviously wasn't true. The city rallied together to help each other rebuilding their lives and their precious town.

III. The Railroads of Miami County

The next script was on the Railroads of Miami County. This became one of my favorite and most enjoyable scripts to work on. There was a substantial collection of railroad memorabilia in the museum and it had been donated by Otis Marks, a volunteer at the museum and a retired brakeman of the C&O Railroad. I had the pleasure of interviewing Otis, capturing over three hours of local railroad history on tape. The knowledge I gained from him was far more valuable than anything written in a book. He brought in pieces of his own personal memorabilia that he has collected over the years: mountains of photos and even cassette tapes of different running trains. I learned all about how a train works, and the many different men it took to keep it running. He told wonderful old stories of the times he had in the thirty eight years he worked on the railroad. They ranged from hilarious to tragic--a lifetime of memories that still evoke great joy and haunt him simultaneously.

Although I researched extensively and collected numerous details for this script, my
supervisor decided that this should be one of our more "generic" scripts. I kept it simple, not giving too many local details, thereby, making it general indeed. I was to name the main railroads of our county and then just give very, very brief information about everything else.

Railroad Script

(Train whistle sounds)

In the spring of 1854, the Lake Erie & Western Railroad rolled into Peru bringing with it a brand new era. The city was now connected with Indianapolis allowing abundant passage and trade. The railroad would expand and grow in Miami County, allowing Peru to flourish right along with it.

The railroad was so important because it connected the rest of the country to small town Peru. Through the future lines of the Wabash; Eel River, Peru & Detroit; Chicago, Indian & Eastern as well as the Chesapeake & Ohio and Nickel Plate railroads, Peru became a bustling railroad city. It was now possible for farmers to transport their crops, merchants to sell their goods, and passengers to travel places they'd only dreamed about. It became a new way of life.

On July 27, 1901, Interurban lines were also added to the city. These were electric trains that carried passengers through the city
and neighboring communities. Unlike the regular rails, the Interurbans, such as the Winona, made stops in every city.

The railroad was essential in helping Peru become what it is today. People marveled as it brought the famous and colorful Hagenbeck-Wallace circus every year and were thankful when it brought the much needed supplies after the disastrous flood of 1913. Peru owes much of its history to the railroad. It was a great era we won't likely forget.

I would have liked to have inserted train footage at the beginning and end, but none was available. I would have also liked for Otis to yell "All Aboard" at the beginning, but due to time constraints, it just was not possible. This is just one of the many problems I have encountered in this project.

IV. The Frances Slocum/Little Turtle Story

The last two scripts, like the others, required an enormous amount of research, and have had considerable problems with them. Writing the scripts was not the problem, but finding photos and putting together the video has been more than trying. The Frances Slocum/Little Turtle script proved to be very difficult due to the fact that there are no photos of them. They were alive in the 1700's, photographs are just not available. There is only one portrait of each of them in existence. This does not make for a visually interesting video.

I've been working with my supervisor to combat this problem. We have collected as
many filler photos as possible, but there are still not enough to run the entire script. We have contacted other museums around the state to help us with this problem. We have found some photos from the Tippecanoe Valley Museum, but they will not give us full copyright privileges. We have to get separate permission for each photo, which is extremely time consuming. My script has set idle for many weeks now, the words not coming to life like I had intended.

There is yet another problem with the Frances Slocum/Little Turtle video. I am desperate to find traditional Miami Indian music. I want it to be played softly throughout the video while the script is being read. I have been working with their office, but we are not sure that any such thing exists. It is frustrating that my job is essentially over, and I can’t do anything more—yet my script is still just lying there lifeless. It is up to the administrators now.

The Frances Slocum/Little Turtle script was written with the intent to not only show it to our adult audiences, but also to the children that visit. I chose the two Miami Indians that most people from our area are familiar with and wrote up a brief history. These short histories will educate the young and old alike with the founding peoples of their community.

Frances Slocum and Little Turtle Script

The Miami Indians have an incredible rich history filled with stories that have touched and awed all that have heard them. Two of their most famous stories being that of the great war chief, Little Turtle, and Frances
Slocum, the white rose of the Miamis.

The Miami Nation of Indians was one of the largest and most powerful tribes east of the Mississippi. Under one of their greatest chiefs, Little Turtle, they claimed all of Indiana, the western part of Ohio and the eastern part of Illinois as their own.

Little Turtle was a brilliant war chief, overwhelming American armies who had come to destroy them. In fact, he showed the American armies their greatest defeat ever by the hands of Indians. No other Indian ever won more victories over the whites than Little Turtle.

He was as good a peace maker and statesmen as he was a warrior. When he was offered a treaty by the American government, he was the last chief to sign it, but said he would never break it. He never did.

Little Turtle spent the last seventeen years of his life promoting peace among his people. He taught them about agriculture, when it was obvious that they couldn't survive merely as hunters anymore. He also introduced them to life-saving vaccines and pleaded with them to give up whiskey, becoming America's first prohibitionist.

This Miami Indian, once an enemy, became the personal friend of many leading men of the nation, such as Presidents George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. He was greatly respected by all and at his funeral in July 1812, he was buried with all the honors due a great chief.
Another famous story of the Miamis occurred several years later...

On the morning of November 2, 1778, at the age of five, Frances Slocum was abducted from her home in Pennsylvania by three Delaware Indians. She was taken to their village and was soon aware that she would not be returning to her family. She was treated kindly by her adoptive parents and grew up quite contentedly in the ways of her new people. She was now known as Maconaquah, which meant Little Bear Woman. She married a chief from the Miami Indian Tribe named Shepoconah, and had four children.

Her real family never gave up hope of finding her, and their hopes and prayers were finally answered. After almost 70 years of searching, they were shocked and thrilled to find an account of her life and whereabouts in an old newspaper article. Her remaining brothers and sisters quickly traveled to Indiana to visit their long lost sister. They tried to persuade her to return to Pennsylvania with them, but she refused, stating that she was indeed already home. She died known as the White Rose of the Miamis on March 9, 1847.

V. Cole Porter from Peru

The last script was on Cole Porter, a famous songwriter and composer from the 1920's through the 1950's. I was awe struck to do work on such a famous person, especially knowing that he was from my hometown area. I sifted through many, many
books and local papers and even found thousands of web sites about his interesting life. It gives one a lot of hope when someone from a small town (especially your own) makes it big. It gives a person hope for one's own future. It truly inspires a person to live one's dreams.

The museum has many of Cole Porter's personal items, including his Grammy, family photos, the couch that was especially made for him after his tragic horseback riding accident, and even his 1955 restored shiny black Fleetwood Cadillac, parked in the middle of the museum floor.

These items gave me great insight to what kind of person he was. He had a huge impact on society in this town and around the world. These few articles showed the grandeur and status that he had within the community. They were small pieces of his life that I could see, and touch, and hold. These were more precious than any account in a book, and really told me a lot more.

So, after about a month or so of research, I wrote my final script. Cole Porter is obviously huge in this town, so my script was longer and more detailed. I did not want to include very many events that had happened outside of Peru because most everyone knows about those. I want local childhood stories, things that Cole did when he was growing up in the area. I want the people of Peru and everyone who visits here to know how the community influenced him. I want them to know who Cole Porter was when he was just Cole Porter, Peru, Indiana, resident--a young boy with dreams of the big city.
(Music begins in background)

On June 9, 1891, music was born in the small bustling town of Peru, Indiana, under the name of Cole Porter. He would begin his life at 102 East Third Street, but his talent would carry him all over the world. Cole became one of the most successful songwriters of his time, writing such beloved standards as “Love for Sale,” and “Night and Day,” as well as scoring several stage, motion picture and television productions until his death in 1964.

As a child, Cole’s parents, Samuel Fenwick and Kate Porter, wanted the best for their son. His mother would go to extreme limits to ensure that Cole would have all the social and material advantages possible. She meant for him to become a musician, so at the age of six he was already engaged in piano lessons, which included two hours of daily practice. Although Kate was satisfied with Cole’s local piano instructors, she could not find a suitable violin teacher. So he was put aboard a train that would carry him to Marion, Indiana’s Conservatory of Music, some thirty miles away to learn an instrument he openly detested and gave up in college.

At the age of ten, Cole took up composing. In 1901, he wrote a one-song operetta called “The Song of the Birds.” Several months later he wrote what is considered his first song, “The Bobolink Waltz.”
His mother was ecstatic and hurried off to Chicago where she had the song published and printed into a hundred copies which she distributed amongst her friends.

Because of Kate's strict rules regarding his musical education, fun was not a major part of his preadolescent years. In fact, he once told a journalist that his mother's insistence that he practice the piano for two hours a day had ruined his childhood, but when he was asked if he regretted this, Cole replied, "Frankly, no." Privately, he was not so sure.

Even though he didn't have a normal childhood, he still managed to create some positive lasting memories of his time in Peru. He played many pranks with his friend, Tom Hendricks, whose father owned Hendrick's Blue Drugstore. Once when Tom's father was out of the store, they decided to play with the expensive cigars. Then, when his father unexpectedly returned, they decided to bury the cigars in the ice cream to escape being caught. Luckily, Tom's father never said a word about it. Another time he and his friend, Desdemona Bearss, dressed up like a farm couple and went door to door peddling apples from his father's orchard, speaking in exaggerated country accents. Cole would also speak of his fond memories of the summertime, spending time at Lake Maxinkuckee and the Great Wallace Circus quarters.

At the age of thirteen, Cole left Peru when his mother announced she
was sending him to Worcester Academy in Massachusetts. He then would go on to Yale, where he wrote two of their most famous football songs, "Bull Dog," and "Bingo, Eli Yale." Afterwards, he would also attend Harvard Law School for a short time, but quickly transferred to the music program. He eventually finished his education in 1921 at the Schola Cantorum in Paris.

During World War I, Cole joined the French Foreign Legion and later became involved with the American Embassy in Paris. While attending a wedding breakfast, Cole met Linda Lee Thomas, an elegant divorcee who became his wife in December of 1919. She would be at his side when his fame grew.

In the late 1920's, Cole would start his career as one of the most highly regarded musicians of his day, a reign that lasted well into the 1950's. He contributed many songs to famous musical productions on stage and film which included such famous performers as Fred Astaire, Ethel Merman, and Louis Armstrong. He would eventually write an astonishing 1500 or more songs during his career. He had become more than the musician his mother always intended him to be: the small boy from Peru, Indiana, had become a legend.

This script, like the Frances Slocum/Little Turtle script, lays idle in the museum. It is also awaiting the rights of copyright from a New York museum for two pieces of music to be played in the background of the video, and several photos of Cole Porter's
childhood that they have all rights too. This is a very time-consuming process, so it could be months before I see the finished project playing next to his permanent display on the first floor of the Miami County Museum.

Although, it was hard work and there were more than a handful of problems, this creative project has taught me a lot about writing and about me. I had to completely change my style of writing and learn how to write in a conversational style that both adults and children could understand. I had never written scripts before, and I quickly found out that this was going to be more than just an internship/creative project. It was going to be a new kind of learning experience, one that would enhance my critical thinking and professional writing skills like no class I have ever had.

I had always written words, but I never had to make them come to life in a video. I found that I had to write in a very different style than I was used to. Instead of making my words the canvas, I had to strip my words to a bare minimum and add interesting visuals to hold the audience's attention. At the beginning, I almost felt cheated. My words had always grabbed center stage, and now they had to share the limelight with numbing black and white memories. Needless-to-say, I got over this little tantrum quite quickly. I became enthralled with the pictures, dating all the way back to the 1880's. I guess that minor in history really did mean something to me. During this internship/creative project, I indeed would find out a lot of things about researching and writing, and about myself as a person.

Through this project, I have gained a new style of writing and invaluable experience in the work force. It has expanded my talents as a writer, and as a person. It has
become something to be proud of, something to achieve, something to respect and love. It has become who I am to myself.
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