

# Circus freak entertained the crowds at fair

*"No attraction of any Monroe County Fair ever created more interest than did a man who called himself 'Beno.' Relive It by C. Earle East."*

Bloomingtonians had seen their share of "freaks" brought to town by various carnivals and circuses, but the man known professionally as "Beno" was perhaps the most spectacular.

He came in 1898 to appear during a fair put on by the Bloomington Fair Association and had a reputation to back up his claims. He has been on exhibition at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, among other places.

Beno was very much aware of skeptics. For that reason he volunteered to give a demonstration for some local physicians. They were Drs. W.L. Whitted, L.T. Lowder, J.F. Potts and C.E. Harris.

The "tests" were extraordinary. Beno was found to have drastically different blood pressures in his arms, the one being a normal rate and the other 120. This he attributed to mind over matter. In other words, he could will his pressure to rise for demonstration purposes.

Next, he drew a red-hot needle across his



## Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

tongue. Noted *The (Bloomington) World* of Sept. 27, 1898, "You could hear the heat sizzle on the man's tongue, but he never flinched while doing it and said it did not hurt him."

Beno had another feat with the needle. He thrust it into his side just over his heart. The newspaper reporter later wrote that "The needle was pulled out, and the place did not bleed much."

Well, if the doctors were not sufficiently impressed, Beno had two other feats up his sleeve to impress them. He drank strychnine, belladonna and Paris Green, all of them failing to make him sick. In fact, he sat calmly smoking his pipe while the doctors watched for any signs of physical reaction

to the drugs.

*The World* described his final demonstration. "Beno's crowning test was with the shoemaker's awl and hatchet. Beno stood on a chair and watched for his shadow on the wall, and raising his hands high above his head, he watched the shadow and commenced to drive the awl into what would be brains on any other human being. The awl was driven half an inch into the top of the man's head."

Beno was not entirely finished. After he tied one end of a piece of cloth around the awl, he secured the other end to a chair and lifted it off the floor.

Continued the newspaper, "This was too much for most of the spectators, and even some of the doctors left." One of the physicians did return and comment that he was satisfied the performer could do anything. It was Dr. Whitted who pulled the awl out of Beno's skull.

The man created a sensation at the fairgrounds when he had himself buried. With tongue in cheek C. Earle East wrote, "After having been buried alive for several hours in a pine box, Beno was taken up, ap-

parently in better condition than some of the two hundred spectators who fell when a nearby stand collapsed. The tiredest person on the grounds may have been the man who with coat, had seemed to fan air down a pipe into the grave."

Who was this Beno? He said he had been born 25 years earlier in Pensacola, Fla., and discovered his complete lack of feeling in his body after diving into the water while swimming. He had "run a snag" into his head and lacked feeling ever since then.

East observed in his book that during an exhibition in Evansville perhaps Beno pressed his luck too far. "On November ninth of the year following his appearance in Bloomington, three awls had been driven into his skull. Usually twisting them around a little would permit their being pulled out. But all three broke off in the process and, according to dispatches from Evansville, it was necessary to take Beno to St. Louis for their attempted removal."

East tried to track the Beno story to its conclusion, but found that man had disappeared from the news after his emergency visit to St. Louis.

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