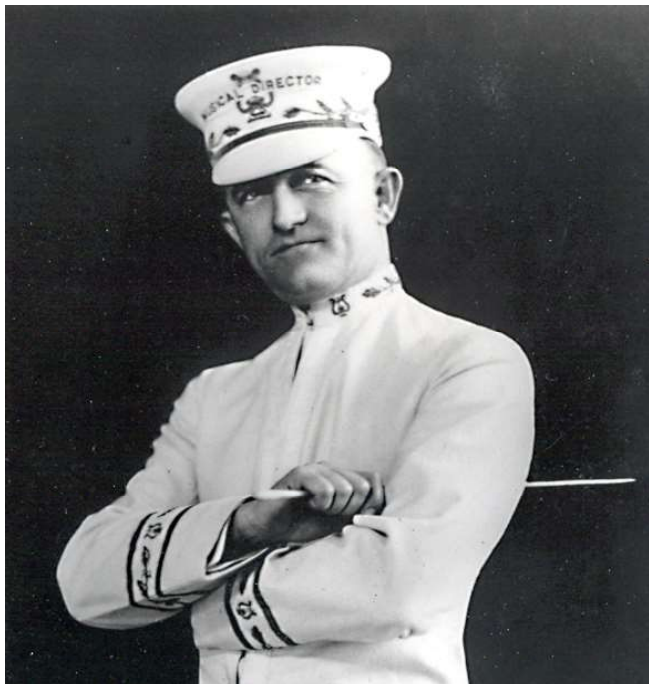


WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

Edward Woeckner (1882-1956), 1999 Inductee

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351



In January 1999, Windjammers Unlimited added Edward August Woeckner to its Windjammers Hall of Fame list. Woeckner's life under the Big Top spanned 38 years as a circus bandmaster and included conducting the bands of some of the premier circuses during his era.

"Eddie" was born in Erie, Pennsylvania on May 15, 1882, although his tombstone reflects it as 1883. His parents were Ernest Woeckner (1856-1932) and Elizabeth (Fluegel) Woeckner (1853-1924), and he was the second of their six children. In the Erie City Directories and the 1900 and 1910 Federal Census, Ernest listed his occupation as Musician, so young Eddie grew up with that influence.

Oddly, Edward signed his name with an extra "e" ... Woeckener ... even on draft registration cards and marriage licenses. However, in the circus press it was still spelled Woeckner. Nevertheless his tombstone has the extra "e".

Edward Woeckner's career as a Boss Windjammer began at age 28 when he took on the role of conducting the Al G. Barnes Wild Animal Circus for the 1910 Season. That continued until 1922. The Barnes Circus had an excellent reputation. Owner Al G. Barnes was known as the "Prince of Showmen", with shows featuring a street parade, top notch acts and what were generally acknowledged as the best

equestrian acts in the business. In Eddie Woeckner, Barnes felt he had the right man as bandmaster.

Eddie was a trouper of the old school, having the ability to gather the type of musicians who could "cut the mustard" in true circus fashion. He insisted band members show up for the performances on time and completely sober. If a musician showed up intoxicated, they were immediately fired. On one occasion, the famous snare drummer, Charlie Roberts, who had the reputation for never missing a cue, left the circus train at Sacramento, California, for a private celebration, perhaps intending to make up for a few he had missed. A few days later, when he rejoined the show for the evening performance in Auburn, CA, he appeared completely unconcerned and doing his best to avoid Eddie's glare. He began setting up his drums as if nothing had happened. However, that was short-lived, the "hammer" came down and he lost his position in the drum section.



Al G. Barnes Electric Bandwagon in 1916, with Eddie Woeckner as Bandmaster.
Photo courtesy of Charles Bennett, Jr.

Upon leaving the Barnes show in 1922, Woeckner became bandmaster of the John Robinson Big Shows for the 1923 and 1924 seasons. In a June 1924 review headlined "People Well Pleased with the John Robinson Circus", the *Logansport (IN) Pharos-Tribune* reported: "Other special features that followed were ... Ed. Woeckner and his military syncopators, a thirty-two piece band." That same month, the *Huntington (IN) Herald* headlined "She Sings to Beat the Band" to describe Julian Rogers "prima donna" performance during the show. They continued with "her voice can be heard loud and clear above the syncopating strains of the music of Ed. Woeckner's Military Syncopators."

In 1925, Woeckner was briefly with R.M. Harvey's London Hippodrome. That same year, however, he took over the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus band and remained with

that show through the 1935 season. *The Daily Reporter* of Greenfield, IN reported on April 23, 1925: "One of the extraordinary features of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus will be the concert band, directed by Edward Woeckner, said to be the most noted of all circus band leaders. You will have to hear Woeckner's men play to appreciate them."

In 1936, Woeckner returned to Barnes, which was now known as the Al G. Barnes & Sells-Floto Circus. After three seasons there he then moved to the Russell Brothers Circus for the 1940 - 1942 seasons. In an advertisement placed for his off-season band, he proclaimed it to be a "Band With Pep" and "different from other bands ... playing music from Opera to Jazz."

Surprisingly, one of the best-known things about Eddie was his penchant for occasionally playing a tin whistle as an accompaniment to his band. A reviewer of the day described him as follows: "Eddie Woeckner's twenty-six-piece uniformed concert band entered ring three for the thirty-minute preshow concert. They played a 'warm-up march' and another short tune directed by Eddie as he played his Frisco Song Whistle and wiggled his white clad backside."

Edward August Woeckner's life was not totally without trauma, however, and these tragedies certainly affected his personal life. The first of these occurred the night of October 15, 1915 while trouping with the Al G. Barnes Circus. In Greensburg, KS, he had an argument with his 18-year-old girlfriend, May Jackson, an equestrian rider with the circus. When she said she was going to do "something drastic", he only laughed and scolded her for her emotionalism. He kissed her goodnight and that was the last time he saw his sweetheart alive. The following morning, in Liberal, KS, she was found dead in her berth on the circus train. The medical examiner ruled "Suicide death by poison (carbolic acid)." As a result, on Sunday, October 17, 1915, the people of Liberal, KS witnessed their first, and only, circus funeral.



May Jackson tombstone in Liberal, KS. Note the hearts with the circus band and her favorite horse and circus tent.

The funeral procession led from the railroad yards to the Christian Church, and from there after the service to the cemetery. The plumed circus band led the procession, but without its bandmaster. The music played was the "Free As A Bird" funeral march. Following the band was May Jackson's chestnut gelding, saddled and bridled, but rider-

less. May's boots, reversed, were tied into the stirrups. The performers, handlers and other circus personnel followed. At the rear of the procession, "Abide With Me" was being played on the calliope. Following the burial, the circus people as a group walked back to the show grounds in silence, but knowing that with the next performance, the show must go on.

Those who knew Eddie said he never fully recovered from May's death, and indeed, he seemed thereafter to be searching, perhaps unsuccessfully, for May's replacement. On July 16, 1916 in Battle Creek, MI, Woeckner married Lucille Cozanore (b.1895), another performer with Barnes. They subsequently divorced. On April 13, 1923 in Peru, IN, he married Marian W. McCrea (b.1895). After three years they also divorced. Then in 1929, he married Jammie Lake (b.1895). He filed for divorce in 1930. Next, on May 10, 1934, Woeckner (as Woeckener) married Inez Chrisman (1904-1940), a famous equestrienne who had trouped with several circuses as part of the Wild West Acts.

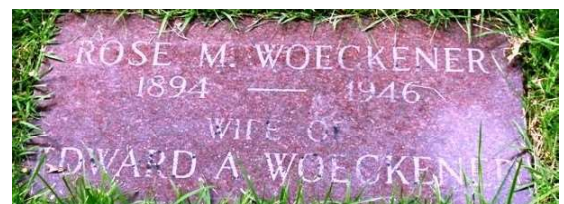
Edward and Inez lived three miles south of Peru, IN on Route 31. Around noon on November 12, 1940, while Woeckner was still with Russell Bros. Circus, Inez was struck by an automobile when she was crossing West Main Street in Peru. She died of a broken neck and fractured skull 50 minutes after the accident. Inez had been born in Mahaska County, IA and she was buried there next to her parents, James and Hattie, with a circus horse on her stone.

Woeckner then married No. 5, this time to Rose M Manick (1894-1946), the widow of Herbert Leroy Fleming (1896-1938).

Rose was a former circus aerialist who had performed with her first husband as The Flying Flemings. And then tragedy struck for a third time. In 1946, a trash fire got out of control outside the Woeckner home near Peru, IN. Woeckner was assisting the firemen when they discovered Rose's body laying against a wire fence, suffocated and burned. Rose was buried next to her first husband, Herbert, in Bloomington, IL, and her pallbearers were all circus notables.



Rose M. Manick Fleming Woeckner (Woeckener)





Eddie Woeckner's Circus Band with The Cole Brothers Circus in 1947

Winding down, Eddie Woeckner's career as a circus bandmaster concluded with a five-year stint with the Cole Brothers Circus (1943-1947). At the end of the 1947 Season and at age 65, Woeckner retired from the sawdust circuit. One of his last performances that year was related to his Elks affiliation. He

was a member of the Peru Elks Lodge No. 365. On December 22, 1947 the Nobleville Lodge of Elks arranged for the Great American Circus to give two performances for the benefit of the Elks Cancer Fund. The two-hour performance featured some of the finest acts and famous names from the various larger "railroad circuses." Eddie Woeckner, fresh off the season with the Cole Bros. Circus band, directed the local Elks band for those performances.

Eddie died in Peru, IN on January 21, 1956 at age 73.



Eddie Woeckner in Peru, Indiana on August 16, 1951