

TRIBUTE TO WILLIAM F. GOETZE (1861-1897)

By Charles Conrad, WJU #1525

William F. Goetze was a leading circus bandmaster in the 1880s and 1890s. Unfortunately, he died in his thirties, and thus his name is almost lost to history. The only known source for information on his childhood is his obituary, which states that he was born in Buxtehude, Germany and emigrated to America when he was 13.

From the many misspellings of his name, it appears that it was pronounced as "goots" as in boots. It is known that he lived in Johnstown, PA and in San Francisco, CA. He relocated to Indiana in 1882, dividing his time between Lawrenceburg, near Cincinnati in the southeastern part of the state, and Peru, located 60 miles north of Indianapolis. Peru was the home of Benjamin Wallace and his several circuses, and it has since become an important location of other shows and of circus history museums, notably, The International Circus Hall of Fame.

The first known circus connections for Goetze are from the 1882 season, first in a short stint as bandmaster with the Sells Brothers Circus early in the season, and then as a clarinetist with the John Robinson Circus. He then settled in Lawrenceburg, IN and became the bandmaster for the local band.

The next known circus connection for Goetze was with the Wallace & Co. Circus in 1886 (provided by Sverre Braathen's archives.) He was the Orchestra Director for the show in 1887, and he played clarinet in the big top band in 1888 when the show was renamed the Great Wallace Circus. In 1891 he became the Music Director of the Wallace & Co. International Railroad Circus, Menagerie and Museum. He played the clarinet while leading the 25-piece band, which was somewhat unusual. The instrumentation of the ensemble was flute (probably piccolo most of the time), Eb clarinet, 3 Bb clarinets, 6 cornets, 3 altos, 3 trombones, 2 euphoniums, 3 tubas and 2 drummers. There was an 8-piece side show band led by Ed Carlin, who played Eb cornet.

The route book (written by Goetze) mentions that one of the cornets "lost his embouchure" and was replaced – this means that he had damaged his lips and ability to play the cornet. This was likely not a rare occurrence in such a strenuous set of playing circumstances. The review in *The Billboard* stated "The mammoth reed and brass band under the direction of Prof. Gootz (sic) led the gorgeous pageant, discoursing the while most excellent music." He continued in the position in 1891.

In 1892, he served as bandmaster for the Cook & Whitby Circus, another show owned by Wallace and operated out of Peru. The band was called the Goetze Symphonic Band, and the equestrian director was Charles Sweeney, with whom Goetze was a business partner in Sweeney, Alvido,

Gorman & Goetze's Model Minstrels as early as May 1891 (*New York Clipper* May 30, 1891). The relationship between minstrelsy and circuses, especially among musicians, was a fluid one in the 1890s, and there are dozens of examples of musicians who moved between the two often.

The 1892 opening of the minstrel show was well-covered in the *New York Clipper*:

Part 1: "Work goes on, and manager C. H.

Sweeney is busy concentrating his forces. The rehearsals begin October 27. Prof. William F. Goetze is working on the music of the first part and the olio, and will be to the front with special music. The boys are all of one opinion, that is, that the parade coats and hats are out of sight. Prof. Goetze is arranging new music for the band, and as we all know the Professor's ability in this line, we are expecting something good."

Part 2: "Work is progressing and everyone is anxious for the seventh of November to roll around, that being the opening date. The first part costumes are all completed, as are the band and orchestra uniforms. The first part elevations and settings will be in keeping with the best on the road, and is a mass of silk and satin from top to bottom. The olio is strong, and a host of well balanced specialties (sic) will give pleasing variety to the bill, while the after-piece will be a belly-burster, indeed."

Part 3: The initial performance took place Nov. 7 at Quaker City, Ohio, the home of Manager Sweeney. At eight PM the curtain went up, and the gaze of an appreciative audience was fully gratified, for there was a conglomeration of refinement, enterprise, and originality, interwoven with tireless labor and hard cash. The costumes all new, and of the latest style, the music sparking and full of mirth and inspiration. The opening overture, arranged by Prof. Goetze, consisted of choruses and dances selected from 'The Queen's Lace Handkerchief.' The drapery of the first part and costumes were made of heavy grosgrained silk - hand painted. Telling us more than perhaps we needed to know, the story concludes, "George Glessener, cometist, took leave of absence for two weeks due to a carbuncle."



The Daily Democrat 4/12/1893

The 1892 season for the Model Minstrels ended on April 2, just about the time the Cook & Whitby Circus would be beginning its season. The June 25, 1892 *New York Clipper* lists the twenty-two circus band personnel, including clarinetist Chet Bronson. The September 17 edition of the same paper told the story of a presentation of a ring, gold watch chain and silver cup from the band to their director.

Goetze was the bandmaster for the Great Wallace Show in 1893, and Alvido and Sweeney were also with the entourage, so apparently they were able to manage the minstrel show without interfering with their circus duties. The minstrel performances would continue at least through 1894.

In January 1894, a new musical organization known as the Lawrenceburg Concert Orchestra, was formed in Goetze's hometown with Goetz on clarinet. The orchestra presented a number of winter concerts at "popular prices," according to *The Lawrenceburg Press*.

Goetze did turn over the bandmaster's duties to his assistant C. Z. Bronson for a short time while he was away. Sweeney was also a songwriter with his *Nobody's Business* becoming a hit with the show. [See Tribute to Chester Z. Bronson in May 2024 *Circus Fanfare*.]

Goetze's 1894 big top band was a 32-piece ensemble that again included Chet Bronson (who spent the previous year performing with the Sousa Band) as solo clarinetist. The instrumentation was 2 flutes (quite unusual), oboe, bassoon (also very unusual), 2 Eb clarinets, 4 Bb clarinets, 2 saxophones, 4 cornets, 3 french horns, 3 trombones, 3 baritones, 2 tubas, string bass (common at the time in concert bands but not in circus bands,) and two drummers. There was also a live rooster orchestra in the side show.

Goetze continued as the bandmaster of a 20 piece big top band in 1895, and added route book agent to his duties. On September 12 in San Francisco, he married Elvira Katherine Sansoni, known as the Female Samson, who was also with the show. The local newspaper stated "Music and Muscle Married."

The side show band was directed by CW Jones and William Sanger, a trombonist in the band, also played violin and led the orchestra. Goetze's situation in 1896 is unknown, as he is not listed in the routebook that season and the director of the Great Wallace Band was one of the leading circus conductors, William Merrick (WJU Hall of Fame 2005) [See article in July/August 2023 *Circus Fanfare*.]

The season of 1897 held great promise for Goetze and his band. His assistant conductor was again C. Z. Bronson, and such noteworthy players as solo cornet Al Sweet (WJU Hall of Fame 1982); Gardell Simons (1878-1945) one of the great trombonists of the era, and who would later play with John Philip Sousa and in the Philadelphia Orchestra; and cornet virtuoso Henry De Armitt.

The show's route included a September stop in Goetze's part-time hometown of Lawrenceburg, IN where a grand homecoming party was held.

Shortly thereafter, on November 9 in Yorkville, NC, Goetze died quite suddenly. The headline in the *Lawrenceburg Register* exclaimed, "PROF. GOETZE IS DEAD!" The story said that he had been sick for two or three days, but no dire illness was suspected. There must have been some confusion or rumors concerning his death, as his widow asked the newspaper to publish a letter from the attending physician stating that the cause of death was "*ureanic coma, the result of chronic interstitial nephritis. He was not afflicted with any infections or contagious disease.*" He was survived by his mother and two sisters in Germany, and by his widow, from whom he had filed for a divorce. The local newspaper said that "*their married life, however, was not satisfactory, and a divorce was applied for by the Professor. . . still pending, but which has been granted by a higher tribunal.*"

Goetze's funeral was performed by the Order of Knights of Pythias and the Liedertafel Society, and the Lawrenceburg Band and the Aurora Band played on the procession to the cemetery. A large floral arrangement with "Our Leader" inscribed came from the Great Wallace band. Assistant Director Chester Z. Bronson assumed the leadership of the ensemble. The newspaper account of the funeral concluded:

"So the Professor passes from the gay to the grave - from amidst the pomp and splendid array of tinsel and pageantry, with which he had mingled for years, to the silent great beyond. Prof. Goetze was a gentleman in all that the word implies - of a kind, quiet and unassuming disposition, he made friends of all with whom he became acquainted. He had a natural talent for music, and devoted much of his time to study and perfecting himself in the playing of difficult pieces and instruments. As a band organizer and leader he was without a superior, as is evident from the success that crowned his efforts in that direction. He will be sadly missed in this community where he had become a favorite."

Many circuses issued **ROUTE BOOKS**, both as a form of advertisement and as a keepsake for the members of the company. These books ranged from extremely elaborate, with many photos of cast members and candid scenes from the show and the back lot, to very simple cards listing the dates and cities on the season. The more elaborate route books often included a day-to-day description of interesting occurrences and unusual happenings, such as train accidents, fights with locals, visits by dignitaries, and weather problems. While they tend to exhibit the biases expected in an advertising pamphlet, route books are an invaluable source of information about personnel and events. Often the bandmaster was responsible for producing the annual Route Book.