Who Was the Original Happy Hooligan?

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A hobo named “Happy Hooligan” was one of the most popular and influential comic strip characters in American history. The strip, which debuted in March 1900 in the New York Journal, was the creation of Frederick Burr Opper, a pioneer of American newspaper comic strips. A recent MNHS acquisition of drawings, photos, and a costume associated with Fred J. Lowe, a Minneapolis entertainer on the vaudeville circuit, introduces another possibility: that a Minneapolis artist and illustrator named Oscar Bradley created the cheerful tramp with tattered clothing and a tin can on his head, and that Lowe, who sometimes billed himself as the “Original Happy Hooligan,” was the inspiration.¹

Lowe exhibited athletic ability at an early age. Born in England in November 1878, Lowe immigrated with his parents to the United States the following year. By May 1887 the eight-year-old was performing as part of an acrobat class at an amateur athletic competition held at the Minneapolis Gymnasium. Young men performed on the horizontal bars and flying rings, showcasing physical strength, acrobatic agility, and artistic movement. Lowe caught the attention of a writer for the Minneapolis Tribune, who noted, “Little Fred Lowe was ‘too cute for anything’ and easily the favorite of the audience.”²

This was not Lowe’s first mention in the press. He had made his debut a year earlier at the age of seven, partnering with an 11-year-old boy. The Minneapolis Sunday Tribune declared, “notwithstanding their age and lack of experience, they would put an old professional to shame. The whole company was convulsed with laughter at their antics which combined the child with the professional athlete.” The boys were students of Professor C. O. Duplessis, a Minneapolis gymnastics instructor who himself competed in indoor athletic entertainment and regularly featured his students.³
Little Fred Lowe went on to have quite the career as an acrobat and wire walker. His name appears in connection with acrobatic performances in numerous articles from Minnesota papers in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Performing under his own name and the moniker the “Original Happy Hooligan,” as well as part of “The Imperial Trio” and “Lowe & DeMarle,” Lowe appeared at vaudeville theaters, amusement parks, and small-town street fairs. In Red Wing he and his partner, Raymon, were promoted heavily for an upcoming fair: “They will perform the most difficult feats known, on high wire, two men walking at the same time on one wire, passing each other on the wire, etc. One of them will do his wonderful ‘Slide for Life’ act. He will slide down a wire, stretched from the top of the St. James hotel, to the opposite corner of the street, suspended in mid air, holding only by his teeth.”

A 1918 Minneapolis Tribune article reflects on other feats of daring attempted by Lowe that relate directly to the recently acquired materials. “Mr. Lowe will be remembered by hundreds of the earlier Minnesotans as the man who used to make balloon ascensions out at the Falls,” it said. “In June 1889, he walked across above the Minnehaha Falls on a wire and was also carried across on the back of Frank LaMondo, a well-known wire walker in those days.” Among the photographs donated to the Minnesota Historical Society is a cabinet card featuring LaMondo balancing precariously on a wire above Minnehaha Falls. A second cabinet card included with the donation features performers demonstrating balloon ascensions; Lowe’s likeness is superimposed on one of the balloons.

A popular attraction at carnivals and fairs, balloon ascensions brought crowds to the edges of their seats. A trapeze was suspended from the balloon, and acrobats would perform as the balloon rose. The performer
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would then parachute back to Earth. Unfortunately, balloon ascensions could be unpredictable, and it was not uncommon to read a grisly newspaper report recounting an acrobat falling from a great height or getting tangled in the parachute.

Though early press mentions highlight acrobatics, Lowe evolved his routine to combine thrills with comedic hilarity, better suited to a more intimate audience. He eventually gravitated to the vaudeville circuit. Later mentions are related to performances in theaters rather than outdoor carnivals. As part of the Imperial Trio, for example, Lowe performed in 1912 at the Empress in Duluth. The reviewer appreciated the nuances of the act, writing, “Their performance, while bordering on the hazardous contains a degree of artisticness [sic] which gives them a decided advantage over their competitors. Their feats are for the most part new and are accomplished with vim and precision which makes them doubly entertaining.” Lowe had also appeared as a solo act at the Empress a few days earlier, receiving another glowing review: “Not only is Lowe a wonder on the wire, but he is a comedian of note and his funny bumps and falls convulse the audience with laughter.” Owatonna’s People’s Press described Lowe’s act as “unsurpassed for grotesque comedy and marvelous originality.”

Despite the different names he used, Fred Lowe seemed to favor the “Original Happy Hooligan.” One newspaper account from 1918 credits the origin of the name to Lowe’s encounter with illustrator Oscar Bradley, who attended a masked ball at Minneapolis’s Normania Hall where Lowe was dressed as a tramp. Inspired by the costume, Bradley told Lowe he would send an illustration of him in costume. The account maintains that Bradley made the drawing famous in the New York World—an interesting claim given that the character of the Happy Hooligan is attributed to cartoonist Opper. One could speculate that the two cartoonists crossed paths and that Bradley may have shared his drawing of Lowe with Opper, who used it as the basis for a new cartoon strip.

We do know that after winning a scholarship from the Minneapolis School of Fine Art, Bradley arrived in New York in November 1899 to attend the Chase Art School. He had a difficult time adjusting, often being short on funds and subsisting on rye bread.
and water. When Bradley collapsed on the streets of New York, his plight made the local papers and was soon picked up by the Minneapolis Tribune in a May 1900 article headlined “Oscar Bradley’s Struggle To Live on 5 Cents a Day.” As a result of this unexpected publicity, he received enough funding to continue his studies. The “Happy Hooligan” cartoon debuted, as we have seen, in March 1900.8

Fred Lowe continued to use the “Original Happy Hooligan” moniker throughout his career, perhaps as a nod to Oscar Bradley. Bradley’s career as a cartoonist in New York was ultimately unsuccessful, and a few short years after his art school experience, in 1906, he was admitted to the state hospital in Rochester, Minnesota, suffering from chronic mania. His family attributed his behavioral changes to being struck in the head with a baseball, but it is not unreasonable to speculate that the stress and competitive nature of his chosen career path was perhaps too much for him, particularly if he did indeed see his “Happy Hooligan” drawing made famous by another artist.9

The name “Happy Hooligan” became a byword in American culture for decades and is familiar even today. In the early twentieth century the comic strip inspired a touring musical play and the nickname was adopted by everyone from a petty criminal in St. Paul to a town drunk in Stillwater. It is possible that Lowe added “Original” to distinguish himself from others who billed themselves as the “Happy Hooligan.” For example, after viewing a 1902 performance at the Bijou in Minneapolis, J. S. Lawrence...
wrote, “Happy Hooligan is more fortunate than his audiences for, while ‘Happy’ seems to have escaped the gloom which hangs over the piece bearing his name, his audience is less dexterous and cannot get away from the air of sadness which pervades the production.” There is no mention of a wire act in this poorly received affair, so it would be essential for Lowe to distinguish himself from other actors and their routines.10

Though he performed over several decades and garnered many positive reviews, Lowe did not often receive top billing, nor was he a full-time entertainer. It was increasingly difficult for local performers like Fred Lowe who did not possess the level of talent needed to be signed to the national Orpheum or Pantages circuits to make a living in vaudeville. Lowe supplemented his entertainment earnings by working as a press feeder for a printer, a job he held long after his vaudeville career ceased.

In 1903 he married Mary Sieh. The union produced a daughter, Florence, but the marriage was an unhappy one and the couple separated and later divorced. (Descendants of Lowe’s ex-wife’s sister donated the materials to MNHS.) The 1930 US Census records note that Lowe still worked for a printer and lived with his elderly mother in Minneapolis. He later moved to White Bear Lake and died on July 19, 1950, age 71, due to complications from pneumonia.

Notes

8. “Oscar Bradley’s Struggle to Live On 5 Cents a Day,” Minneapolis Tribune, May 10, 1900, 12.

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