

What Might Have Been

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You should mourn for him as music mourns for Mozart and Schubert and the sweet melodies they never wrote. – Max Parry eulogizing a friend, 1914

In 1943 Hoosier author Booth Tarkington wrote of a friend, “He was comer, a genuine one...Indianapolis seemed to have more sparkle while he lived there and those who knew him looked forward into the future with a livelier optimism because of his presence...” The friend Tarkington referred to was Maxwell Parry, son of prominent Indiana manufacturer, David. M. Parry. As an actor and playwright, Max made a name for himself in the theater in Indianapolis and in the East, and he seemed to have a promising career ahead of him. World War I, however, cut short such hopes.

I was first introduced to the long forgotten Max Parry during my research on the Golden Hill totem pole of Indianapolis. This magnificent mid-19th century 30-foot totem pole was one of 15 old poles collected by Alaska Governor John Brady in 1903 and displayed at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. At the conclusion of the fair, Brady sold it to a group of St. Louis businessmen who gifted it to Max’s father. He placed it on his Golden Hill estate that later became the neighborhood know by the same name. Brady raised most of the remaining poles at Sitka National Historical Park; the Golden Hill pole that finally rotted and fell in a storm in 1939 is the missing pole from this famous collection. A replica now stands inside the Eiteljorg museum.

Little by little in the course of my research on the totem pole, I came across mention of Maxwell as I read about the illustrious Parry family and found old newspaper accounts of various aspects of his life. Interviewing the few people old enough to remember both the totem pole and Max, I began to find myself

asking more and more questions about him. I was struck by a curious but subtle event that occurred with each of the three people I found who had memory of this man: When initially asked to relate their memories of Max, each paused with an unusual far-off look and a little smile before they responded. Each of these people in that brief moment manifested a commonality of emotion and memory. I knew then with what regard Maxwell Parry was held by those who knew him and what a special personality he must have been. Although it has been 95 years since his death, one may come to understand in this way the special essence of a man that people so much loved and admired.

Maxwell Oswald Parry, the second child and oldest son of David Maclean Parry and Hessie Daisy Maxwell Parry, was born at Rushville, Indiana, on 28 December 1886. Max's father was by then on the way to becoming one of the nation's most important industrialists. Owner of a shop in Rushville that manufactured two-wheeled utility carts for farmers, David M. Parry had just expanded his business by renting a facility in Indianapolis. By 1890 the Parry Manufacturing Company began making buggies, carriages, surreys, and phaetons, and with the incorporation of the Parry Auto Company in 1909, the Parry Automobile. Parry's organization became the largest of its kind in the world with branches in other American cities as well as in Europe and Latin America. He also founded and was President of the Overland Automobile Company which he later sold to John Willys. Fascinated with the ideas of Henry Ford, it is reported that he gave Ford his first financial assistance.

As the president of the National Association of Manufacturers and the president of the Industrial Association of America, David Parry led the national fight against Samuel Gompers and organized labor. He made a name for himself as a leading spokesman against trade unionism until his death in 1915. Nationally influential, respected, and politically active, it is said that he was central to the advancement of the political careers of Hoosiers including Vice President Charles Fairbanks and Senator Albert Beveridge. And it is said that he was more fully responsible for the nomination of his friend General Benjamin Harrison for the presidency of the United States than anyone else. However, he had no political aspirations of his own and declined offers to become Mayor of Indianapolis, a Member of

Congress, and to serve as an ambassador to several foreign countries. He was even be touted by the national press as a possible vice presidential running mate for Theodore Roosevelt in 1904.

David Parry was a widower with two young daughters when he married Hessie Daisy Maxwell, a member of the Indiana pioneer Maxwell family, in 1883. The Maxwell family numbered several individuals prominent in the early history of Indiana including physician and surgeon David Hervey Maxwell, a member of the Indiana Constitutional Convention, state senator and representative, and founder of Indiana University at Bloomington. The couple would have seven children. As David became a dynamic power in the industrial world, Hessie became a leading figure in the cultural, social, and civic life of Indianapolis. She befriended poet James Whitcomb Riley and was the first person to invite him to read his poems publicly.

Through Riley's association with Mrs. Parry, Max became close friends with Riley as well. They apparently drank together, at least on one occasion. According to a Parry family story, one evening Parry and Riley got drunk together. They were in a horse and buggy in downtown Indianapolis when they became lost trying to find Riley's house. A policeman stopped the pair for erratic driving, but instead of arresting them the policeman recognized Riley and escorted them safely home.

From his early years, Max was interested in art., literature, and especially drama. With his brothers, sisters, and neighborhood friends, he transformed a room on the third floor of the family's home at 1305 North Delaware Street in Indianapolis (the old Bates-McGowen House) into a theater. "In those days," his sister Lydia recalled in 1919, "it was always Wild West and thunder shows with plenty of red and green lights and shooting of blank cartridges."

In the years surrounding 1900, David Parry bought one hundred acres of land on the outskirts of Indianapolis and created his Golden Hill estate. It was located on the east side of the White River just south of Woodstock Country Club. On this tract he built a palatial mansion that had fifty rooms and was two cellars deep. The third floor contained a ballroom and Max's studio. After Max's death, the family discovered a secret room also on the third floor where they found many of

Max's watercolors, drawings, books, and writings. At Golden Hill the family lived a life of grandeur and opulence, entertaining many friends and such celebrities as Speaker of the House Joe Cannon, Senators Albert J. Beveridge and Vice President Charles Warren Fairbanks, Booth Tarkington, Meredith Nicholson, Theodore Dreiser, Maude Adams, and William Jennings Bryan.

Max Parry received his early education in the public schools of Indianapolis and at Culver Military Academy. In 1902, he went to France to enroll in the American College at Strasbourg, run by David K. Goss, former superintendent of the Indianapolis Public Schools. Returning to the United States in 1904, Max enrolled in the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut, and in 1905 he went to Yale University at New Haven, where he achieved distinction. He became a member of the Yale Dramatic Association and in four years played a number of parts, including Falstaff in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. Charles Frohman, the great theatrical producer, noticed the brilliance with which Max played his part. During his senior year, Max was elected class orator and served as president of the Yale Dramatic Association.

When he graduated from Yale in 1909, Parry received an offer for a position with Frohman's company, which this very gifted actor declined. Instead, he dreamed of becoming a playwright and took the famed course in playwriting offered by Professor George Pierce Baker at Harvard University. Playwright Eugene O'Neil was a student of Professor Baker just a few years before. Max received his master's degree from Harvard in 1912.

In the years preceding World War I, the little theater movement spread across America. The goal of the movement was to establish small, volunteer-based theatrical venues where experimental drama could flourish. Max Parry, along with Jennie Ray Ormsby, led a group of people to found the Little Theatre Society of Indiana (later renamed the Indianapolis Civic Theatre).

In the summer of 1914, Max became the interim chairman and spokesman for the fledgling organization, talking with local newspapers and making speeches in the Indianapolis area to stimulate interest, contributions, and membership. There was no better representative to relate the ideals and passion for the concept of

community theater as he explained, "The Little Theatre is no money making scheme, but rather an attempt to free the stage from commercialism. Playwrights should look on it as a place where they can test out their creations, aspiring actors should see in it a wonderful opportunity for self-development.... My own dream is that we can grow plays concerning Indiana life, as Lady Gregory's plays concern Irish life, stage them with novel and beautiful effects and act them with all sincerity. Then again, I see the little Theatre making countless experiments with new kinds of plays and scenic effects, achieving the most delightful results from the simplest means....."

Parry further noted, "The Little Theatre is a mutual society where people from every walk of life have gathered for conscious effort toward beauty and truth and self-expression. It calls on writers to show life as it really is, to tear down the walls that hide the great mysteries from us. It calls on artists to give their imaginations free wing and conjure up wonderful settings. It calls on the scientist and mechanic to make the artist's dream a reality. It calls on its actors to present their subject with simple sincerity, and send the spectator away rejoicing. That is what the Little Theatre should be, the dramatic workshop of our democracy."

The Little Theatre Society of Indiana held its first season in 1915. Max's contribution was a play titled *Dad: A Comedy of Hoosier Home Life*. It opened in the sculpture court of the John Herron Art Institute on 10 December. A reporter anticipated that the performance "will be memorable, as it will be the first time a distinctively Hoosier theater has produced, with Hoosier players, a play of Hoosier life by a Hoosier playwright." The main characters were members of the Breedlove family, whose head was an autocratic automobile manufacturer who was determined to rule his family with an iron fist. Artist William Forsyth, whose talent as a character actor had long been recognized, was scheduled to play the part of the father. Prior to opening night, however, Forsyth fell ill, so Max stepped in and played the part of Mr. Breedlove.

The local newspapers gave *Dad* rave reviews and described Parry as a "gifted actor." One review in an Indianapolis newspaper stated:

To the gratification of every one who believes that Indiana has within its borders the interpreters of its own scenes and problems, Mr. Parry's play proved to be a charming little comedy excellently acted—an unpretentious but amusing and entertaining story true to the Hoosier soil from which it sprang. Best of all, it is honest. The story is honestly simple and lifelike. Its sentiment is honest sentiment. Its characters are honestly drawn from the life right around us and do the stupid and foolish and eloquent things that all of us find each other doing each hour of our lives. Its humor is honest humor, seldom strained and nearly always proceeding from the little absurdities that lighten everyday life. Its language is honest – the simple, direct, half-refined, half-slangy speech of the average Hoosier family. And finally, it is honestly acted and produced, without any straining for effects and without attempting to prove the play more than it is – a faithful bit of human relationships rather naively told for the entertainment about whose lives it is written.....

Maxwell Parry heads his own cast with a surprisingly finished and eloquent piece of acting as Dad. Heretofore, he has found his most effective vein in broadly comic roles, but in the present play he reveals a power of characterization and an ability to sustain a difficult illusion that was totally unlooked for even by his staunchest admirers. Mr. Parry is born for the stage. Every minute he spends away from it is lost to himself and to the theater.

In the course of the next three months, *Dad* was played seven times in the Little Theatre Society of Indiana, and for years to come it was thought to be one of the most successful plays ever produced by the company. The play was revived by the Little Theater for the 1922-3 season and the performances dedicated to Max's memory.

Success, however, had not come immediately in the young playwright's career. Prior to *Dad*, Max wrote *The Flower of Assisi* and *The Real War* (a play about the conflict between Hamilton and Burr), but neither of these plays was ever staged. His first production was a playlet, titled *Boys o' Gettysburg*, written for the

nation's 1913 celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the famous Civil War battle. It was presented on 4-5 July by the Murat Stock Company of Indianapolis. One newspaper critic wrote, "There was hardly enough body to it to set it before the footlights." In his diary, Max noted, "'News' has review of show—not so very favorable."

Parry's first successful play was *The Lie Beautiful*, a three-act comedy. Max gave the play to Tarkington to read for his evaluation. Max wrote in red ink in his Diary, "A Red letter Day!" Tarkington flattered him beyond his expectations and gave him some suggestions for improvement. Charles Frohman read the play, thought it had merit, and forwarded it to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City. On 25 February 1915, the graduating class of the Academy performed *The Lie Beautiful* at the Empire Theatre, generally known as the "home" of Maude Adams and John Drew, at Broadway and 40th Street. Max's writing career seemed to be on its way.

In the years following the founding of the Little Theatre Society of Indiana, Parry expressed disillusionment over the fate of little theaters across the country. He expressed in a *Theatre Magazine* article that "the actual bitter truth is that the little theatres of this country, outside of New York, are grand commercial failures with starvation dead ahead and anyone who is aggravating a little theatre into existence with the idea of even paying expenses deserves a medal for perfect optimism." In spite of the bleak picture he painted, Max ended his article on a hopeful note: "The Little Theatre idea is right and it will live. The time has come when the people are going to take over the theatre and try out its tremendous possibilities. . . It would seem that the Golden Age of the drama is breaking upon us and we of the Little Theatres are privileged to be taking part in it." Despite difficulties, the little theater movement survived in Indianapolis and took root across America as well, setting the foundation for the community theaters of today.

Well known in theatrical circles, Max counted actors Otis Skinner and William Lockaye, among others, as friends. One of his most enduring friends was the great actress Maude Adams, who for several years was John Drew's leading lady. Max

first met Adams while at Yale when she gave a benefit performance of "What Every Woman Knows" for the Yale theatre building fund. They became warm friends and she occasionally visited Max at the Parry Golden Hill home.

Booth Tarkington once related a reminiscence about Max and Miss Adams: "He was a man of a thousand surprises—all of them agreeable. Working, beside a window one morning, I looked down and saw a cab stopping at the curb before my house. Max jumped out and gave his hand to a most lovely lady as she descended and I imagine that at that time - 1912 or 1913—she of all the ladies on earth was the one I had most wished to meet, and here was Max bringing her to see me. It was Maude Adams. She was such a recluse and led a life so completely retired, that among all my acquaintances I'd thought I numbered not one who knew her, but Max did. He was the very person who would."

Max Parry was a man of many talents in addition to his playwriting. He was an accomplished artist producing many watercolors, intricately drawn bookplates for relatives and friends, and artwork for advertisements for Indianapolis companies. From his diary it is known that he created illustrations for an edition of Riley's books. He wrote essays regularly for the Indianapolis newspapers, contributing articles on many subjects. Prior to World War I, Max reviewed plays for the *Indianapolis Star*, wrote a syndicated newspaper column on various subjects, especially astronomy, and during the war Max submitted frequent articles concerning his experiences as a combat aviator. He was not only a very respected actor at Yale, but also among the Indianapolis theater community and in 1916 with the Washington Square Players and the Stuart Walker Players in New York City.

Events in Europe were taking a grim turn. The Great War raged over the European continent, and on 6 April 1917 the United States declared war on Germany. Immediately, a great surge of American men joined the armed forces. Max Parry, after some initial difficulty because of his relatively older age of 30, enlisted for the Aviation Service, Signal Enlisted Reserve Corps, and reported for duty on 27 August. A friend once recounted that when Max left for duty "a host of friends and family came to the railroad station. After kissing members of his family and

the only girl he had ever courted, he ascended the steps to the troop train on the elevated tracks, leaned over the railing, waved farewells, blew kisses, thanked all who had come and shouted how good it would be to see them again when it's over, over there."

Max spent two months at the school of Military Aviation Aeronautics at Columbus, Ohio, then he and many other students were sent to Canada where they were attached to the Royal Flying Corps as cadets. At Camp Mohawk, near Toronto, and later at Camp Borden, farther north in Ontario, they received a rigorous training in aerial combat by experienced RFC fighter pilots who had returned from the western front. Toward the end of November, the American cadets were discharged from His Majesty's service and returned to American service. They were stationed at Taliaferro Field, No. 2, at Hicks, near Fort Worth, Texas, for a period of flying operations.

On 11 February 1918 Parry was discharged from the enlisted service to accept commission of second lieutenant in the United States Army. After a short stay in England, Max, now a member of the 147th Aero Squadron, arrived in late March at LeHavre and landed for the first time on French soil. In a letter to his mother he described the squadron's reception by the French people, who cheered loudly, sang songs, and blew whistles. Max and his colleagues proceeded to Issoudun where, at the U.S. Third Aviation Instruction School, they underwent another course, this time on how to handle the French planes, the Nieuport Scouts. It was here that Max first met Theodore Roosevelt's youngest son, Quentin, who was one of the flight instructors.

Max remarked in letters to his family about the pride he felt in being in the first trained group of American flyers to be engaged in combat over enemy lines. Max's 147th Aero Squadron with squadrons 95, 94, and 27 made up the elite First Pursuit Group. In addition to Quentin Roosevelt (95th), the First Pursuit Group also included Eddie Rickenbacker (94th), noted Indianapolis 500 driver and future owner of the Speedway. Although it is unknown exactly how well he knew these individuals, Max mentioned them by name in extant letters to his family. Since

Max was well known and admired by officers in many squadrons, it is likely they were friends and had great respect for each other.

The pilots of the 147th Aero Squadron, after completing their training, were stationed at the relatively quiet Toul front. Then toward the end of June, the squadron moved to the Chateau-Thierry front. They were now in the thick of combat. About this time, subtle comments began to appear in Max's letters to the family and articles sent to the Indianapolis newspapers. Max began to allude to fatalistic feelings about the dangers of aerial combat. He seemed to know in his heart that he would never return home.

In the evening of 2 July, the 147th Aero Squadron sent seven planes aloft. They were divided into two groups, and Max was in the lower one when they met twelve German planes. In the ensuing air battle, Max downed his first German airplane. He later described the encounter in a letter to his family and in an article written for the *Indianapolis Star*:

We'd been nosing around Deutschland for 'em day in and week out until it just seemed as if there wasn't no such bug. Then tout de suite on that memorable evening of July 2, we ran into a whole nest of them – ugly, red beaked ones with black crosses on their wings.

Seven of us were up on patrol, one bunch flying above the other. Clear sky with wonderful cloud banks, we flew....at about 15,000 feet chasing all kinds of suspicious plans, which as usual turned out to be friendly, though irritated. After an hour of these familiar disappointments, we were rather split up, ready to start for home wondering whether we'd have fresh bread or that questionable hard tack at mess – when Whoopla! There they were! Real honest-to-goodness Huns. Beaucoup of them.

Following O'Neil of the lower patrol, I made out two strangers against a cloud. I gawked up and down and everywhere in between and I swear that not another outsider was in sight.

In half a minute, as O'Neil closed in on his doomed Hun, I glanced upstairs and lo! A red-nosed Pfaltz was dangling there. Where it came from will

always be one of life's mysteries to me. It was so near that I waited for something explosive or uncomfortable to happen. Not a sound. He was evidently also watching the excitement ahead.

With circulation readjusted, I nosed up and let the guns rip away at his loathsome belly. He side slipped. I ducked and fired. He fell in a sloppy spin. I simply couldn't watch him anymore because above him was another black-crossed devil who seemed to have me in his eye, and I knew there was a soft cloud not far away.

When Parry returned to the base there was great excitement. Other planes were also returning, trumpeting their engines in celebration, and Max noted, "Crowds around our hangar. When I taxied in they surged around, shaking my hand, growing delirious." Max and his comrades of the 147th Aero Squadron had run into twelve members of Baron Manfred von Richthofen's (The Red Baron's) famous flying circus; half a dozen of Richthofen's circus never got home.

Days later, on 8 July, Max himself did not return from a mission deep into German territory.

In a letter to the Parry family, fellow flyer Ralph O'Neil related that he, Max, and William Brotherton started out on patrol. O'Neil said Max was in the lead when thirteen German planes were observed above them. The Americans gave chase for 20 kilometers. But eventually, low on fuel, they all turned for home except for Parry. Max climbed into the sun and maneuvered his machine so that he finally got above the German planes. The last O'Neil said he saw of Max was when he alone dived on the German planes, which were heading toward safety. Max was reported missing in action.

During the months that followed, the Parrys and their friends hoped and prayed that Max was alive and in a prison camp. The Indianapolis press ran frequent stories about his disappearance and his career as a playwright. When Max was not released from a prison camp after the armistice, the family realized he must have been killed. There was initial difficulty locating Parry's grave. The Parrys made a number of high level inquiries that were received by General Pershing

himself. Finally in March 1919, the Parrys finally received word from the American Military Mission in Berlin and the American Graves Registration Bureau that his grave was located in a German military cemetery at Vandeuil, north of Chateau-Thierry. There was great mutual respect and chivalry between German and allied flyers. Max was given a formal officer's burial by the Germans. The exact location of the grave was confirmed by friends of the Parry Family on a trip to France a few months later. At a later date, Max's body was taken from the German cemetery and laid to rest in the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery at Seringes-et-Nesles, near the town of Fere-en-Tardenois, in the department of Aisne, France.

Hessie Parry received word that two medals were to be awarded posthumously to her son, the French Croix de Guerre and the American Distinguished Service Cross. Records in the War Department, however, only credited Max with receiving the Croix de Guerre; the Parry family never received the Distinguished Service Cross from the United States government. In 1920 Max's younger brother Addison asked the War Department to investigate the matter, but no evidence of this recognition was ever found, and the matter was eventually dropped. However, a previously unknown memorandum to the War Department was found in the course of my research. In the memo, J. A. Healy, one of Max's fellow aviators, wrote that Max was considered one of the best pilots of the 147th Aero Squadron and had on several occasions distinguished himself in aerial combat over enemy lines. He added, "Lt. Parry is as much entitled to the Distinguished Service Cross as any officer who has received this decoration. To my knowledge, Major G. H. Bonnell, at the time the C.O. of the 147th Aero Squadron, recommended Lt. Parry for the Distinguished Service Cross, which recommendation was evidently mislaid."

With this memo and other written accounts of Max's final action by Lieutenants Ralph O'Neil and W.E. Brotherton, a renewed request was filed with the Secretary of the Army for this decoration with a congressional recommendation under the 1996 National Defense Authorization Act. In March 1997, nearly eighty years after Max Parry's death, the Army Decorations Board posthumously awarded him the Silver Star for his actions on 2 and 8 July 1918.

Sometime before the United States entered World War I, Max completed his last play, a musical pantomime called *Stingy*. It was based on a delightful story Mrs. Parry told her children when they were small. The main character in the story was Stingy, a miser. The action took place entirely in his pawn shop. Stuart Walker produced the play first in Chicago and later in New York, and it was received with instant popularity. It was so successful that it ran through 1918, during the time Max was on active service in France, and the following year. A New York critic said of it, "Its chief charm lay in the wonderfully artistic yet simple manner of its execution and was a beautiful pantomime full of spontaneous fun." The Little Theatre Society of Indiana produced *Stingy* in 1920, two years after Max's death.

Even when he was fighting in the war, Parry never forgot that he was a playwright. The papers returned to his family included drafts of plays he was working on at the time of his death.

Maxwell Parry, loved and revered by the Indianapolis community, received many tributes after his death. When the Little Theatre Society produced his plays, fine tributes were included in the bills; individuals spoke of his instinctive ability as an actor and playwright and described him as one of the most gifted and enthusiastic upholders of little theater ideals.

Booth Tarkington once wrote about Max, "I was always fond of him and delighted with him, found his gaiety and always intelligent spontaneity of perception and wit stimulating and brightening. I should say that this brightening of his, so to speak, was the quality I best remember. He cheered things up and when he arrived at a party, that party seemed to begin. I never saw him downcast, though of course there were times when he must have been that.....When the Richthofen Circus shot him down with Quentin Roosevelt, Indianapolis and Indiana lost a good and blithe spirit, and what was to have been, most surely, a distinguished career stopped short tragically".

Max's best friend, Walter Myers, recounted what was probably the last public tribute given to Max. He tells a story about Yale professor William Lyon Phelps, a teacher and good friend of Max, who was a favorite and frequent speaker at Indiana Yale alumni dinners. Speaking at an Indianapolis dinner sometime in the

1930s, Phelps related to the assembled an amusing story about a situation that occurred while he stayed at the Parry estate many years before. Myers writes that at the conclusion of Phelps's story:

Mrs. Parry laughed till tears ran down her cheeks.... Without introduction, Mrs. Parry stood up and said softly, "Professor Phelps that is one of the funniest things I ever listened to. How I wish my dear Max could have been here to hear it. You know, Max went to war, and he never will come back. He was so loyal to friends like you, so eager and ambitious to create characters of his own. He had a brilliant future—brilliant future—and whenever I think of him I recall those wonderful lines:

'Of all sad words of tongue or pen,

The saddest are these: It might have been.'

When she sat down, the diners were as seriously silent and solemn as they had just been hilarious. All bowed their heads out of respect for Max, stood for a moment of silence, and then thundered applause.

Maxwell Parry died a lifetime ago. The Little Theatre Society of Indiana, now known as the Indianapolis Civic Theatre, is the oldest continuously operating community theater in America. The Parrys' Golden Hill estate, which Max subdivided and developed in 1915, has become one of Indianapolis's beautiful historic neighborhoods. World War I has long since ended and the world is a much different place. The budding career of Maxwell Parry never had the chance to fully bloom. While his legacies continue, Max has faded from memory. The applause the playwright received that evening would be his last.