

Berwick's Master Horseman:

O. P. 'Port' Hart

By W. M. Baillie

“Port” Hart was unsurpassed as a handler of horses—at age 21 he drove a huge Allen’s Circus wagon topped by a large brass band and pulled by 40 (count ‘em) horses. His amazingly varied career included riding racehorses, driving circus wagons and stagecoaches, and managing an array of enterprises, including circus, hotel, farm, racecourse, stagecoach line, and ice company, along with a year as wagon master for the Union Army during the Civil War. All of these positions related to his ability as a horse handler. His fame peaked in Berwick and elsewhere when he was manager of his Great Moral National Circus in the late 1870s.

Perhaps the best introduction to Hart is this brief obituary that appeared in the *Wilkes-Barre Record of the Times* on October 23, 1892:

Orlando Porter Hart, for many years a resident of Berwick, ... died near noon Monday.... He was 65 years of age and known all over Luzerne and Columbia counties. In years gone by he made his mark with the late P. T. Barnum, Dan Rice, and Adam Forepaugh. He was a handler of horses in the days of wagon shows, and had no equal in that line. He drove the large chariots with 24 horses at the head. Many a child 30 years ago ... knew him only as “Port” Hart, a nick name he derived while in the show business for over a quarter of a century.

At one time he owned a show of his own for several seasons and later on the Berwick bus line running to and from the depot and hotels. For years he also drove a coach running between this city and Danville and here and Easton and return.

He had many good traits and his hobby was his fondness for children and his charity to the little ones who were poor. In fact he gave away all he ever made.

Port Hart was born about 1828 in Wilkes-Barre, a son of William M. Hart, who was a prominent early citizen of that city—he held several public offices in Luzerne County and was elected to the General Assembly. Port’s grandfather, Joseph Hart, had been the first sheriff of Luzerne County.

Port learned to manage horses as a boy, and at age 21 was a featured horseman for Allen’s Circus, guiding the 40-horse wagon. From then on he was connected with show business or a horse-related business for the rest of his life. When the Civil War came, Port was a contract Wagon Master for the Maryland Quartermaster in 1861-1862.

As his obituary noted, he drove a huge “chariot” or band wagon for P. T. Barnum’s traveling shows from 1862 to 1864. The wagon is shown in a corner of an 1850s poster for “P. T. Barnum’s Great Traveling Moral Exposition of the Wonder World”:



(Image courtesy of the Bridgeport, CT Public Library. On the poster, the chariot is drawn by three elephants, but Hart drove it with 24 horses. The “Exposition” was a menagerie and curiosity show and was billed as “Moral” because it didn’t have a “girly” show and thus was suitable for families.)

A decade later Hart was headlined with the New York State Circus in its standard newspaper ad:
The cavalcade entering Town in Grand Procession, will be preceded by the GOLDEN DRAGON CHARIOT The most magnificent specimen of Art and Elaborate Workmanship ever paraded before the public, splendidly caparisoned, and driven and controlled by O. P. HART, the Champion Whip, containing PROF. MAUTZ’S NEW YORK OPERA BAND
(*The Valley Spirit* of Chambersburg, August 9, 1871).

In 1876 Hart organized his own circus and toured for several seasons, mostly in Pennsylvania but also in the Midwest and South. A report about a later circus snidely predicted that “they would follow in the footsteps of old Port Hart and run a small show for little towns.” In fact, Hart’s circus was twice closed because it was attached by his creditors. Nonetheless, this “small” circus had several successful seasons. Its standard ad featured a half-dozen stars, of whom the last-named was

O. P. HART,
The Veteran a-d Polished Manager, whose long
experience and untiring efforts combined together
will as ever spare no pains to give entire satisfac-
tion to his many friends among the amusement-
loving public and press.

(*The Weekly Star* of Plymouth, PA, May 31, 1876).

Hart ended his show business career as “boss canvasman and master of transportation” for Booth & Collier’s acting troupe performing “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” This dramatization of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel was wildly popular in the 1880s, with hundreds of traveling companies performing in even very small towns across America.

In the 1850s Hart’s young family was one of the first four settler families in the new town of Shenandoah, laid out by a coal company in a wilderness valley to support their new mine. Hart built a house right at the central crossroads on the corner of Main and Centre Streets. He operated the United States Hotel on the adjacent corner and also operated a stagecoach line to

Maizeville and Frackville. He was a charter member of the board of directors of the Shenandoah Water & Gas Company and he ran for the state legislature.

Between stints in show business, Hart had many other careers. He ran a number of horse-drawn coach lines before the railroads expanded everywhere. One was a bus line in Berwick between depot and hotels, another a stage line from Wilkes-Barre to Danville and Wilkes-Barre to Easton.

His other pursuits included an ice company in Williamsport offering daily home delivery, a wagon-and horse-rental business in Baltimore, a projected riding academy in Wilkes-Barre (it may never have opened), and an "opera house" (minstrel-show theater) also in Wilkes-Barre. For some years he operated the farm near Wapwallopen which his grandfather had established, and he also managed Daniel Seybert's large farm while Dan was in jail.

In all these pursuits Hart made money but never was able to keep it for long. According to another obituary he was "distinguished for his sunny nature and love of children" and gave them gifts without counting the cost.

Port had a family of his own, but his treatment of them was perhaps less than "sunny." He and his wife, Mary J. Waltman (1840-1916) had six children and a home in Shenandoah. Hart was, of course, away from home a great deal, and he and his wife separated soon after the youngest child was born in 1874; a decade later they divorced. Their home, unfortunately, was lost to a sheriff's sale (for unpaid taxes) while Port served a year in state prison after he was involved in a knife fight. From then on, Port lived in Berwick, Nescopeck and Wilkes-Barre when he wasn't traveling.

Port Hart died in October, 1892 after a year's illness. His grandfather's farm descended to Port and became a disreputable tavern known as "Hart Ranch." After Port's death the farm was sold to a developer who laid out lots for summer cabins. When a Pennsylvania Railroad branch line was opened through the land, a whistlestop station was established there and known as "Hart." The station is long gone, but the legacy of the region's premier horse handler lives on.