


# R. W. WEHRLE

## *A Natural Life*



**R. W. Wehrle** (1852—1937) was an Indiana, PA jeweler, successful businessman and avid naturalist credited with discovering a new type of salamander in Indiana County's Two Lick Hills area in 1911. The salamander, *Plethodon wehrlei*, was named in Wehrle's honor in 1917.

*Dedicated to  
R.W. Wehrle  
in honor of his efforts on behalf of  
Indiana County's natural history.*



**Front Cover Photo:** *R.W. Wehrle - courtesy of the  
Indiana County Historical & Genealogical Society, from  
Caldwell's History of Indiana County and Its People, 1913.*

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# Richard White Wehrle (1852-1937)

Richard White Wehrle, as the head of the firm of R.W. Wehrle & Company, operated a leading jewelry business in Indiana County for many years. He was also involved in other lines of business and as a student of natural history was a highly regarded authority of Indiana County's natural history.

Mr. Wehrle was born in Indiana, PA on October 1, 1852 and attended the public schools. He learned the jeweler's trade from his father, Blaeus, who had emigrated from Germany.

At the age of fourteen he began an apprenticeship in Brookville, PA with his uncle Sylvester M. Tinthoff. He made the two day journey from Indiana to Brookville on foot with three dollars in his pocket—all that he owned at the time.

He returned to Indiana County in 1873 and operated his own jewelry store in Blairsville, PA for over 20 years. He sold the business in 1895 and moved to Indiana, PA to engage in the same business with his brother Boniface, under the name of B.I. Wehrle & Brother. The association lasted until his Boniface's death in 1899.

Mr. Wehrle devoted much of his leisure time to the study of the natural history of Indiana County. He made numerous collections of the fish, snakes, salamanders, insects and turtles of Indiana County which he submitted to museums.

Mr. Wehrle lived at 36 South 5th Street, in Indiana, PA (now the site of the Indiana Schwinn Cycling & Fitness store).

## His Boys Mourn



R. W. WEHRLE

**"UNCLE DICK"  
WEHRLE DIES IN  
HOME HERE**

**Community Mourns  
Passing on of  
Naturalist**

After his brother's death the business operated under the name of R.W. Wehrle & Co. Mr. Wehrle was a skilled jeweler who gave personal attention to the repair department. He also sold eyeglasses, and although not formally trained, functioned as an optometrist would today.

Mr. Wehrle also owned other business interests. In 1889 he purchased two stone quarries, both located in Indiana County, which shipped bluestone and Belgium block paving stone to Pittsburgh. He sold the quarries and later acquired over one thousand acres of coal and timber lands in Center and Burrell Townships.

### *Community Contributions...*

In 1912 Wehrle established the Boy's Naturalist Club. The club provided opportunities for boys to go on field trips and participate in other activities related to natural history. Mr. Wehrle never married and devoted much of his leisure time to the study of local natural history. He was fondly known as 'Uncle Dick' by children in the community. He served as a Game Commissioner of the Indiana County Branch of the Wild Life League and was known as the 'Bird Doctor' for his efforts to rescue and rehabilitate birds.

The Indiana County newspapers of his time often noted Wehrle's latest nature finds and stories of his rambles throughout Indiana County. Visitors to downtown Indiana, PA will note the words—R.W. Wehrle 1904—etched into the stonework of the building at 560 Philadelphia Street. This was the site of Wehrle's jewelry store, now Wolfendale's Pub & Club. A side street in Indiana Borough is named Wehrle's Way. Few people know what the name signifies or the important natural history work of the man behind the name.

### *A Life Well-Lived...*

R.W. Wehrle remained active his entire life and credited his outdoor lifestyle with his good health. On his 70th birthday he walked from Indiana to Punxsutawney to visit relatives, a distance of 25 miles. R.W. Wehrle was Indiana County's foremost naturalist of his time. He was awarded an honorary lifetime membership in the Academy of Sciences in Philadelphia for his collection efforts on behalf of the Academy.

He also contributed collections to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh on a regular basis, even as late as 1936, a year before his death. Many of his collections came from Indiana County's Two Lick area and from an extensive forested property he owned near Black Lick, PA.



# Examples of newspaper articles about the nature adventures of R.W. Wehrle...

## "Uncle Dick" Wehrle Presents Collection of Insects to the Honolulu Museum

R.W. Wehrle, of town, the well known jeweler and natural-ist, this week sent a valuable collection of over 1000 butter-flies and insects, all found in this county, to his friend Dr. Gregor, director of the Honolulu Museum.

While on his world tour last year Mr. Wehrle met Dr. Gregor in Honolulu and was greatly assisted by him in obtaining a rare collection of tropical fishes, which Mr. Wehrle brought home

with him and later presented to the Academy of Sciences, Philadelphia, of which he is a life member, At that time, Dr. Gregor expressed his desire to obtain a collection of insects from the United States for study.

The large collection which Mr. Wehrle sent this week were all collected this summer, are perfect specimens and will be highly prized by the Honolulu Museum.

- Indiana Progress,  
August 30, 1930.

## Century Old Turtle

R.W. Wehrle, local jeweler, has in his possession a large wood turtle found in the vicinity of Cherry Run. This turtle, Mr. Wehrle states, is not native to this section being found more frequently in the Southern states.

The figures 1841 are carved on the bottom of the shell indicating the turtle is very old, likely over 125 years. Mr. Wehrle plans to send the turtle to the Academy of Science, Philadelphia.

- Indiana Progress,  
December 9, 1931

## Tribute Paid to 'Uncle Dick' Here

One of the outstanding features of the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Academy of Science held at the State Teachers College here on April 10th and 11th, was the rare tribute paid to Indiana's well-known "Uncle Dick Wehrle". On Friday morning, April 10th, Mr. Graham Netting, herpetologist of the Carnegie Museum delivered two papers before the distinguished group. One of these was entitled

"The Amphibian and Reptiles of Indiana County" and the other "Wehrle's Salamander in Pennsylvania". The later paper was devoted to a eulogy of Indiana's "Uncle Dick", whose great love for natural science and the collections of specimens led him in 1911 to the discovery of a species of salamander, wholly new to science.

- Indiana Evening Gazette,  
April 14, 1936

# WEHRLE'S SALAMANDER

Wehrle's Salamander is bluish-black with large, scattered white spots on its back. Its sides are covered with white to yellow spots and irregular-shaped blotches. Its belly and bottom of the tail are solid gray, and the throat and upper chest usually have white or yellowish blotches. It grows up to 6 inches. It has 17 costal grooves and webbing on its rear feet that reaches almost to the tips of the first two toes.



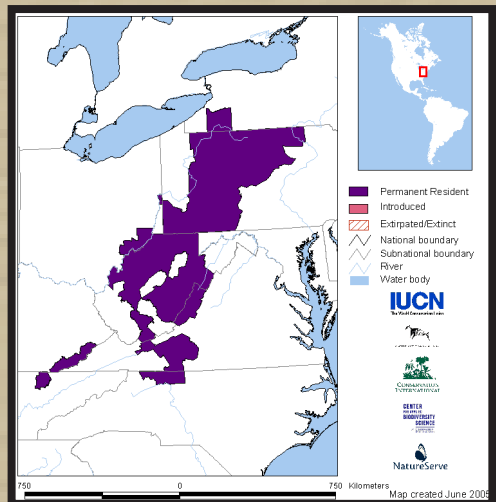
Mating is thought to occur from fall through spring. A cluster of eggs is laid in early summer in damp logs, soils or moss, and in crevices in caves and rock cover. Reproduction is biennial or irregular, many mature females fail to breed each year.

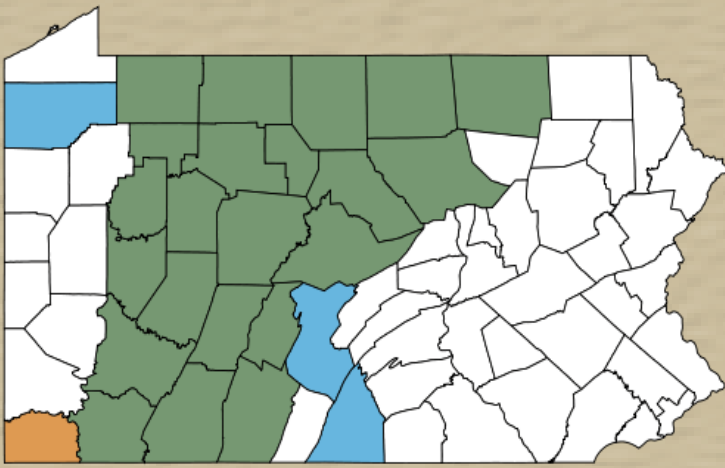
The species stays under cover during the day, and forages at night. It is found on forested hillsides in Appalachia and is also at the entrances of caves and deep rock crevices, as well as burrows under rocks and logs.



It remains in a small area its entire life and does not migrate but moves vertically in the rock strata in response to surface moisture.

A southern variety found near caves in Kentucky, Tennessee and southern West Virginia often has larger yellow and white spots. A red-spotted form, found in southwestern Virginia, is classified as a geographic variant.





● Verified by PAHERP   
 ● Verified before 2000   
 ● Historic in County   
 ○ No Record

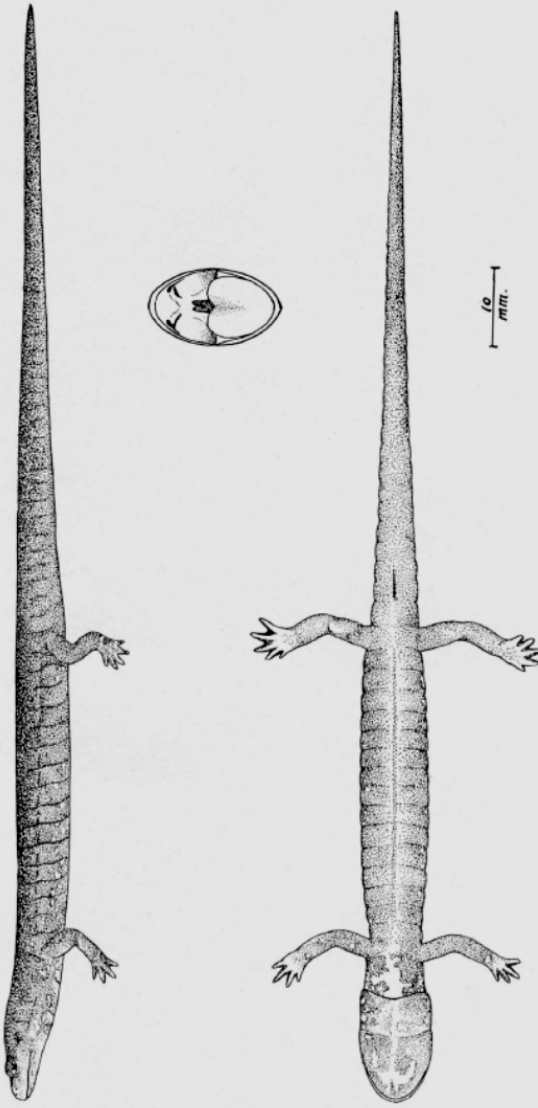
**Above:** Location map of Wehrle's Salamander in Pennsylvania (map from paheps.com). The species lives in mixed deciduous and coniferous forests at higher elevations. It is generally found under rocks.

## *Wehrle's Boy's Naturalist Club* *Established in 1912*



Over 400 bird boxes were distributed and placed on trees and other convenient places in Indiana to provide homes for the song birds by the army boys under the supervision of R.W. Wehrle who instructed the boys on how to make the houses and place them where they would most likely be adopted as homes by the birds. - *Indiana Progress*, 1916.





**Above:** This 1917 drawing of a Wehrle's Salamander is based on specimens that R.W. Wehrle submitted to the Academy of Sciences in Philadelphia. The specimens were collected in September 1911 in the Two Lick Hills area of Indiana County, PA.



# Timeline of the Life of R.W. Wehrle

- 1852 Born in Indiana, PA to parents who emigrated from Germany. Wehrle was one of eight children in the family. His father, Blaeus, was also a jeweler.
- 1860s Attends Indiana, PA public schools. Works in his father's jewelry store as a teenager.
- 1866 Travels to Brookville on foot to begin an apprenticeship at his Uncle Sylvester Tinthoff's jewelry store.
- 1873 Completes apprenticeship in Brookville and moves to Blairsville, PA to open his own jewelry store.
- 1878 Blairsville Forest Club, which Wehrle belongs to, goes on camping trip on Blacklick Creek five miles from Blacklick Station. Squirrel pot pie and baked potatoes are on the camp menu.
- 1894 Receives specimen of Golden Eagle, reportedly from Homer City, PA.
- 1895 Sells his business in Blairsville and returns to Indiana, PA to enter into the jewelry business with his brother Boniface Wehrle.
- 1898 Acquires two stone quarries in Indiana County which ship bluestone and paving blocks to Pittsburgh. Later acquires a large forested tract in Center and Burrell Townships.
- 1899 Brother Boniface dies. R.W. Wehrle assumes ownership of store at 560 Philadelphia Street, Indiana, PA.
- 1905 Eureka Club begins meeting on the third floor of the Wehrle Building. The club, a social club for men ages 16 to 21, consisted of fifteen members.
- 1905 Wehrle transfers ownership in some coal rights in the Shelocta area to the Iselin interests (R&P Coal Company).
- 1906 Contributes 26 specimens, (birds, insects, salamanders, turtles) to the Pennsylvania Zoological Society.
- 1908 Begins submission of collections to the Academy of Sciences in Philadelphia. First submissions are: Longtail Salamander, Red Spotted Newt, Northern Water Snake, Garter Snake and Eastern Milk Snake. From 1908 to 1933 Wehrle submits 708 species to the Academy, mainly salamanders, snakes, frogs and turtles. One submittal in 1908 is later registered as a Wehrle's Salamander.

- 1908 Indiana Bear Club has first annual banquet. Crooked Creek Green Turtle soup 'a la Wehrle' is served to the ninety attendees.
- 1908 Contributes to a PA Department of Agriculture publication on the *Economic Features of Turtles in Pennsylvania*.
- 1910 Contributes turtles, snakes, owls and other bird to the State Museum of Natural History.
- 1911 Collects a salamander in the Two Lick Hills area of Indiana County in September, eventually identified as a new type of salamander and named in his honor.
- 1912 Wehrle starts Boy's Naturalist Club in Indiana, PA.
- 1913 Wehrle and members of the Boy's Naturalist Club, ages 11 to 16, exhibit snake specimens at the Round House at the Indiana County Fair. Among the reptiles is a King snake.
- 1913 Wehrle featured in Caldwell's History of Indiana County and Its People. A photo of Wehrle and an account of his life to date appears in the publication.
- 1915 Serves as Game Commissioner for the Indiana County Branch of PA Wild Life League. Wehrle issues a warning to local youths that 'song birds must not be killed.'
- 1916 Sponsors a contest for members of the Boy's Naturalist Club who have the most nestings in their birdhouses. Over 400 birdhouses, built by the boys under Wehrle's direction, are placed throughout Indiana Borough.
- 1917 Fowler and Dunn of the Academy of Sciences name the new type of salamander *Plethodon wehrlei*, in honor of R.W. Wehrle.
- 1922 Walks from Indiana to Punxsutawney to visit relatives and to celebrate his 70th birthday.
- 1926 Numerous collections sent to Academy of Sciences in this year.
- 1929 Goes on a five-month world tour. Collects specimens in many countries. Returns to Indiana, PA in May.
- 1930 Ships collection of over 1,000 butterflies and insects from Indiana County to the Honolulu Museum which he had visited during his world tour in 1929.

- 1930 Issues request in local newspaper for specimens of red squirrels, flying squirrels and chipmunks to send to the Academy of Sciences. Suitable prices will be paid for specimens.
- 1931 Finds old turtle having the year 1841 inscribed on its bottom shell.
- 1933 Indiana Progress newspaper declares Wehrle the 'dean of Indiana County businessmen' - his business career spans a longer period of time than any other current businessmen. Wehrle attributes his fine health and long career to daily walks in nature.
- 1936 Graham Netting (Curator of Herpetology at Carnegie Museum) writes that naming the salamander was "a tribute to the oldest and best-loved naturalist of Indiana County, Mr. R.W. Wehrle...an indefatigable collector of cold-blooded vertebrates. Since 1925 Mr. Wehrle has sent over 500 salamanders to the Carnegie Museum."
- 1937 Submits Eastern Redback Salamander specimens to the Academy of Natural Sciences as his final submissions. Over his lifetime Wehrle submits over 700 specimens to the Academy of Natural Sciences and over 500 specimens to the Carnegie Museum of Natural History.
- 1937 Dies on July 4th at his home 36 South 5th Street in Indiana, PA. Burial takes place at St. Bernard's Cemetery in the Wehrle family plot. His own gravesite is unmarked. The pallbearers at the funeral are six men who were members of the Naturalist Club as boys.
- 1947 Court appointed Auditor publishes notice to settle outstanding claims against Wehrle's estate.
- 2012 Wehrle's collection specimens still exist and an inventory of his collections records are available on-line.
- 2013 Wehrle's Salamanders are still be found at several locations throughout Indiana County, including one location only two miles from Wehrle's former home.

**"Time in the woods is important"...**  
**from a newspaper advertisement for watches**  
**marketed to outdoorsmen at the R.W.**  
**Wehrle & Co. Jewelry Store.**





*Above: Wehrle's Salamander*



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