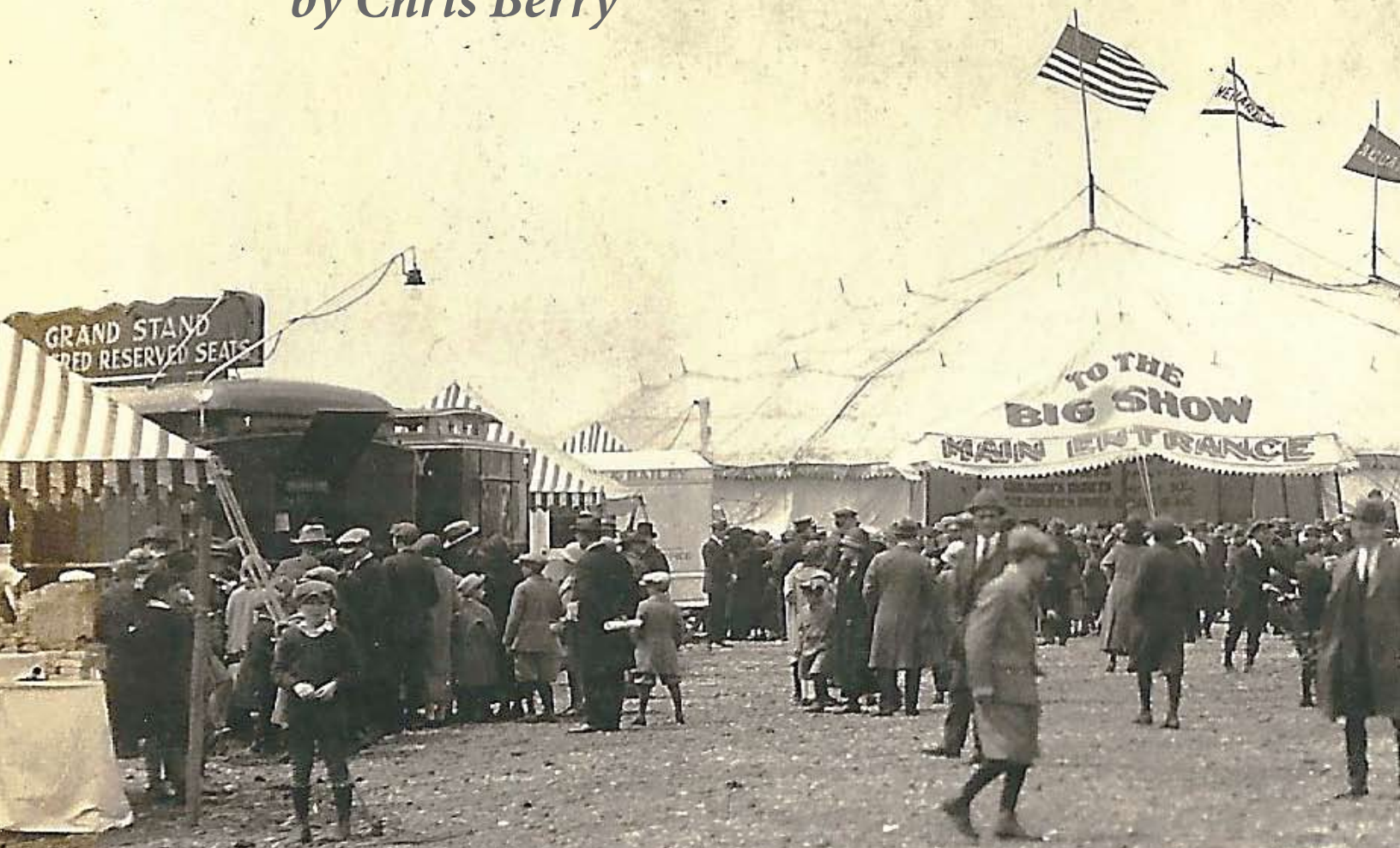


The Show T

Ringling Bros. and Barnum

by Chris Berry



*"There was never anything like it before, and I
am willing to prophesy there will never be anything
like it again."*

~Henry Ringling North

That Roared

mm & Bailey

1920-1926





A panoramic view of the Ringling-Barnum canvas city in 1924

Chris Berry Collection

John Ringling practically sprinted across the lawn that separated Ca' d'Zan, his Sarasota mansion, from the pink marble home of his brother Charles. "Mr. Charlie" had been ill since shortly after the 1926 season started,¹ and during a house call by Doctor Joseph Halton, the 63-year-old circus king suffered an apparent heart attack. "I pushed all of the buttons, whistled and called," the doctor said, and when there was no response Halton threw a chair through a glass porch door. "They all came running," he recalled. "Nothing attracts attention like broken and falling glass."²

For several hours on the afternoon of December 3, 1926, Charles' brother John, wife Edith, and their children Robert and Hester, kept a vigil at his bedside. Later that day Charles Ringling died, and after his widow and children had left the room, only Doctor Halton and John remained. Ringling broke the silence, and with tears in his eyes,³ looked at the doctor and said, "Joe, I am the last on the lot."⁴

It had been seven years since brother Alf T. Ringling had died at the end of the 1919 season, and in the time that followed John and Charles Ringling alone shared the management and vision of their circus. From the opening at Madison Square Garden in 1920 through the final performances of 1926, the two brothers, different in so many ways, took advantage of the booming post-World War I economy along with their own reputations, experience and business acu-

men to expand their circus to a scale never seen before, nor since.

"Let there be no false modesty about it, gentlemen," John Ringling said to a group of reporters after the 1920 opening at Madison Square Garden. "We knew that when we combined the great Ringling Bros. circus with the Barnum & Bailey *Greatest Show on Earth* that we had something, but was the public going to rise to it? Were the people of the United States going to appreciate the time and thought – yes, and the millions of dollars – that went into the build-up of this Circus Colossal? That we did not know – until tonight."⁵

According to bandmaster Merle Evans, those who did not experience Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in the 1920s could not possibly grasp the scale of the operation. "We had everything. A complete city in itself," Evans recalled. "There was nothing that we needed that was not available, right there on the lot...you could get anything you needed."⁶

The city within a city had a population of nearly 1,500, along with more than 700 horses, caravans of camels, herds of elephants and 100 railroad cars. The big top, sideshow, dining, menagerie and dressing tents required 15 acres of open land relatively close to a rail yard. And just like any other well-regulated city, there was a barbershop, postmaster, blacksmith, mechanics, harness shop, lawyers and detec-



Alf Loyal's trained dogs were a favorite throughout the decade. During some seasons, his poodles and German Shepherds were presented simultaneously in three rings and on four stages.

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tives, along with construction and sanitation crews.

And it moved to a new town nearly every day.

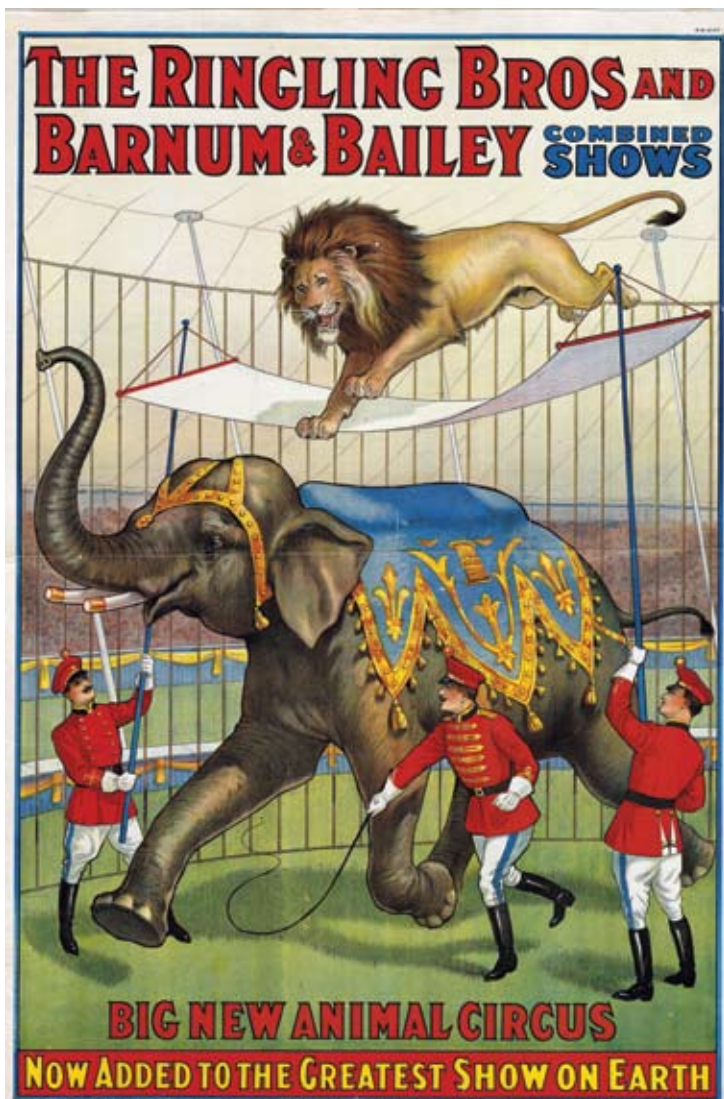
The programs of the early 1920s are a catalogue of many of the greatest names in American circus history, and because of its enormous size "a dozen eyes would be needed to see it all."⁷ Only the biggest of the stars appeared alone in the center ring, and on those rare occasions the audience would focus its attention on that solo performer. During "The Roaring Twenties" that privilege was afforded to bareback rider May Wirth, wire walkers Bird Millman, Berta Beeson and Con Colleano, along with perhaps the greatest performer of the era, aerialist Lillian Leitzel.

The 1920 program book promised that, "At no other time in the world has there been an offering so entirely great as this colossal combination of the World's Greatest Shows," and despite the hyperbole often associated with circus promotion, the description was amazingly accurate. In 1920 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey featured 69 individual acts that packed three rings, four stages and a broad hippodrome track.

In addition to three herds of elephants under the direction of George Denman, seven simultaneous dog acts were presented by veteran trainer Alf Loyal, whose animals were billed as "dogs that actually think and reason," including "Toque," who was said to ride, leap and "juggle like a man," and Chiquita, "the clown dog with a real sense of humor."

Laughs were also dispensed by an army of clowns that dealt with issues as fresh as the morning headlines, including Prohibition, communism and the high cost of living.⁸ Audiences were amazed by artists such as May Wirth who strapped baskets to her feet as she performed equestrian acrobatics; an act memorialized by *The New York Times* which reported that "Only the most blasé of the circusgoers, can resist a shiver when May turns somersaults on her horse's back."⁹

In a decade that embraced technology, culture and economic prosperity, the magic of the circus stimulated America, and the show was making headlines even before its first performance. On January 5, while still at the Bridgeport winter quarters, several railroad cars caught fire, threatening



In 1921 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey became a "Wild Animal Circus." Lions, tigers, polar bears and leopards were presented on a massive scale by a troupe of European trainers.

Chris Berry Collection

both the circus train and adjacent buildings. As the flames began to spread, the burning cars were uncoupled and three brave elephants: Albert, Babe and Queenie, saved the circus train by pushing the other railcars to safety, an act of heroism fanned by the circus publicity machine and splashed across newspapers from coast-to-coast.¹⁰

The firefighting elephants were soon overshadowed by news of the romance between aerialist Lillian Leitzel and Clyde Ingalls, manager of the circus sideshow.¹¹ In early February the couple married in what *The New York Sun* reported as the union of "the prince of side-showmen" and the "queen of the flying rings."

The unlikely pairing of the dainty 95-pound star and Ingalls, a towering figure 20 years her senior, created a buzz that was still talked about decades later when Merle Evans told a writer that he believed Ingalls was the surrogate father figure that Leitzel never had. The marriage was stormy from

the onset and at breakfast each morning the couple's loud arguments were a topic in the cookhouse. Among those who complained were midgets Harry and Gracie Doll whose compartment on the circus train was next to Ingalls and Leitzel.¹² According to Henry Ringling North, the quarrels reached a climax about four years into the marriage when Leitzel chopped off one of Ingalls' fingers.¹³ A short time later the pair divorced.

As it had for decades, Springtime in New York arrived in 1920 by way of Bridgeport and the winter quarters of *The Greatest Show on Earth*. On the afternoon of Friday March 19, five special trains made up of stockcars, flats and Pullman coaches arrived at the sprawling Mott Haven railroad yards in the Bronx. After the animals were unloaded, teams of horses were hitched to cages and baggage wagons and the wild animals and colorful props quietly made their way over the Willis Avenue Bridge, down 2nd Avenue to 27th Street and across town, rolling into Madison Square Garden just before midnight.¹

The 32-story Moorish tower across from Madison Square had permanent seating for 8,000 and only three days after the box office opened the circus had generated nearly \$20,000 in advance sales.¹⁵ The crowd that attended the season premiere on March 25 was standing room only, and when the big doors opened at the far end of the arena, four trumpeters stepped onto the hippodrome track and heralded the grand entry pageant that included hundreds of performers on foot, horseback and in carriages, along with dozens of camels, elephants and a parade of other animals from the menagerie.

Although not widely reported at the time, a small step toward racial equality was also made that opening night when, for the first time, P. G. Lowery's sideshow band appeared as one of the features in the grand entry, the occasion recorded in an African-American newspaper as "the first Colored band to play a feature number in any big show."¹⁶

From the grand entry spectacle, the performance moved "with the speed and precision of a production that had been playing a month instead of at its opening." The circus was described as "the best in years," and was "crowded with features and acts that kept the big audience bewildered."¹⁷

For many, the \$3.00 price of a box seat at Madison Square Garden was a luxury at a time when blue collar workers were joining unions and demanding better pay. The city's dockworkers went on strike while the show was in New York that spring and when some of the railroad unions walked off the job in sympathy, the city's food supply was suddenly threatened.

The circus scored a publicity coup when John Ringling hired a convoy of trucks and went shopping on the streets of New York. The circus grocery list included 900 pounds of butter, 600 pounds of coffee, 600 dozen eggs, 3,000 pounds of vegetables, six barrels of sugar, 350 tons of hay and 140 tons of straw. Once Ringling had accomplished his mission, he

told *The New York Times* that he would personally ensure that the lions, tigers and other animals would never go hungry, and that his army of circus workers would be taken care of.¹⁸

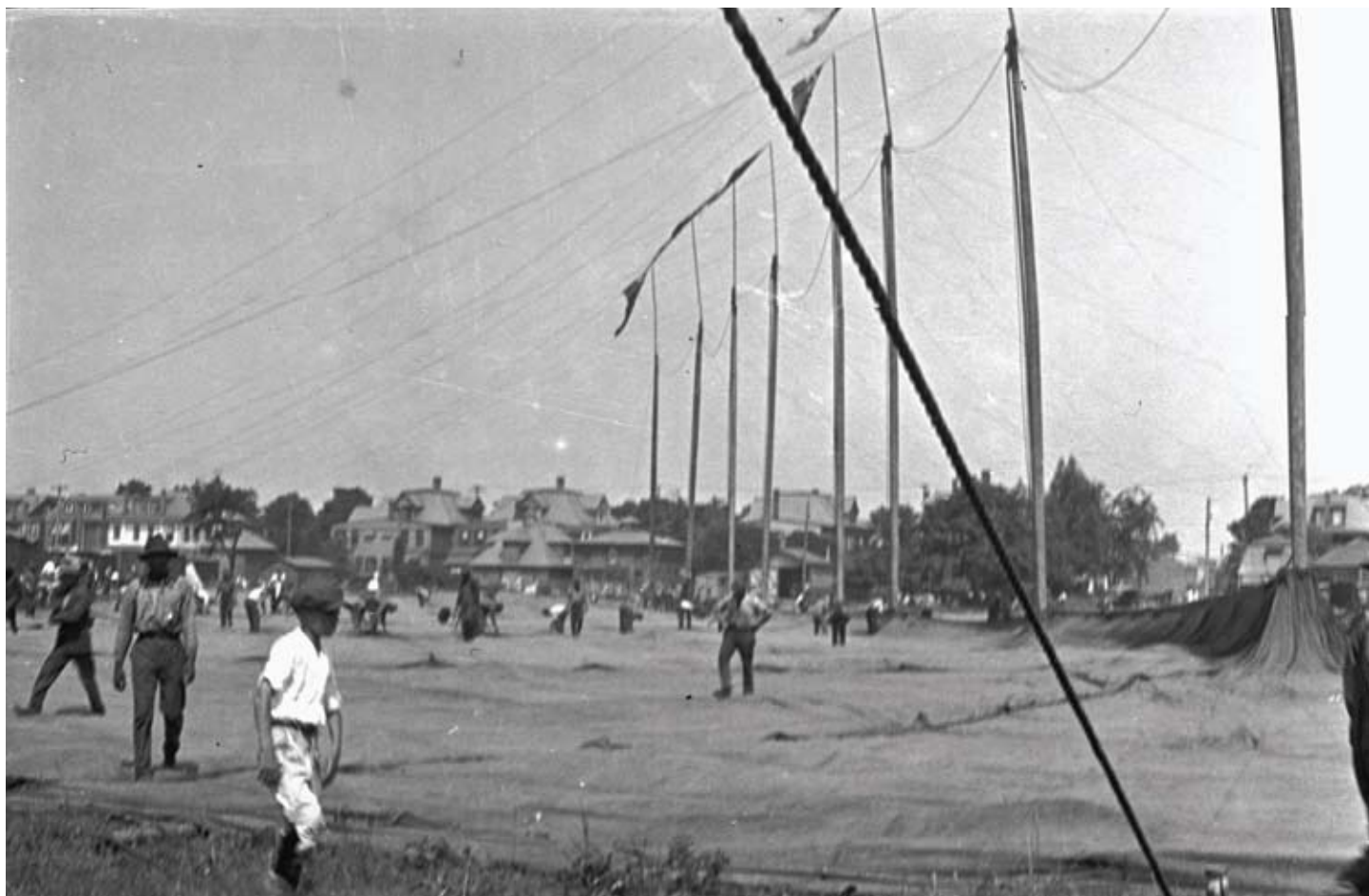
The 66 performances at Madison Square Garden set a new record for the circus and nearly a half million people, including 4,000 disabled World War I soldiers, saw the show during the five-and-a-half-week engagement.¹⁹ When the evening performance ended on May 1 the national tour began immediately as animals and equipment were packed for the short journey across the Manhattan bridge to Brooklyn where new canvas had been set up adjacent to the Washington Park baseball field in Park Slope. The lot was dominated by an eight-pole big top, a massive tent described by observers as “a world wonder.”²⁰

Many of those who ventured to the showgrounds at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Third Street in 1920 saw not only the first performances under canvas, but also witnessed Brooklyn’s last big circus parade as equestrian director Fred



The sideshow was a tremendous moneymaker for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in the 1920s. As enormous crowds waited on the midway for the performance to begin, thousands would pay extra to see the “Congress of Unusual People.”

Chris Berry Collection



When the shows combined in 1919, Ringling-Barnum used an eight-pole big top for most dates. This scene of the canvas laced around eight center poles in 1920 confirms that the same configuration was employed for an additional season. Stages and equipment that required less width were placed in the narrower sections of the tent that flanked the center ring.

Circus World Museum

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SUPERB NEW FOREIGN FEATURE BIGGEST T

Bradna led the march through the central business district on the morning of May 3. Although thousands lined the streets to see the colorful wagons, dozens of horses and gorgeous costumes, for many others the parade created a huge inconvenience on already congested city streets. According to news reports, hundreds of automobiles were stuck in the gridlock and streetcar traffic was suspended for more than an hour because of the parade. The massive traffic jam even forced the

fire department to reroute its apparatus around the area.²¹

Still the crowds poured into the big top. "It has been great in the past, but it is greater than ever this season," an elderly man said. "I have seen 'em all, but this is the biggest. I feel 20 years younger," adding, "I am glad though I came on Monday night, because I can get back here during the week."²² The top price for tickets under canvas was \$2.00 for a reserved seat, up from \$1.65 in 1919, and the

BARNUM & BAILEY

COMBINED SHOWS



GREATEST TRAINED ANIMAL CIRCUS EVER PRESENTED

seating in the tent was considerably more than that of Madison Square Garden. On May 6 the circus had its first big day of the season, generating \$28,387.25.²³

The huge tent required dozens of acts, and because of the increased distance between the performers and the audience, clowns who had perfected their art doing solo acts had to adjust their routines for the enormous crowds. "Mr. John maintained that the long build-up

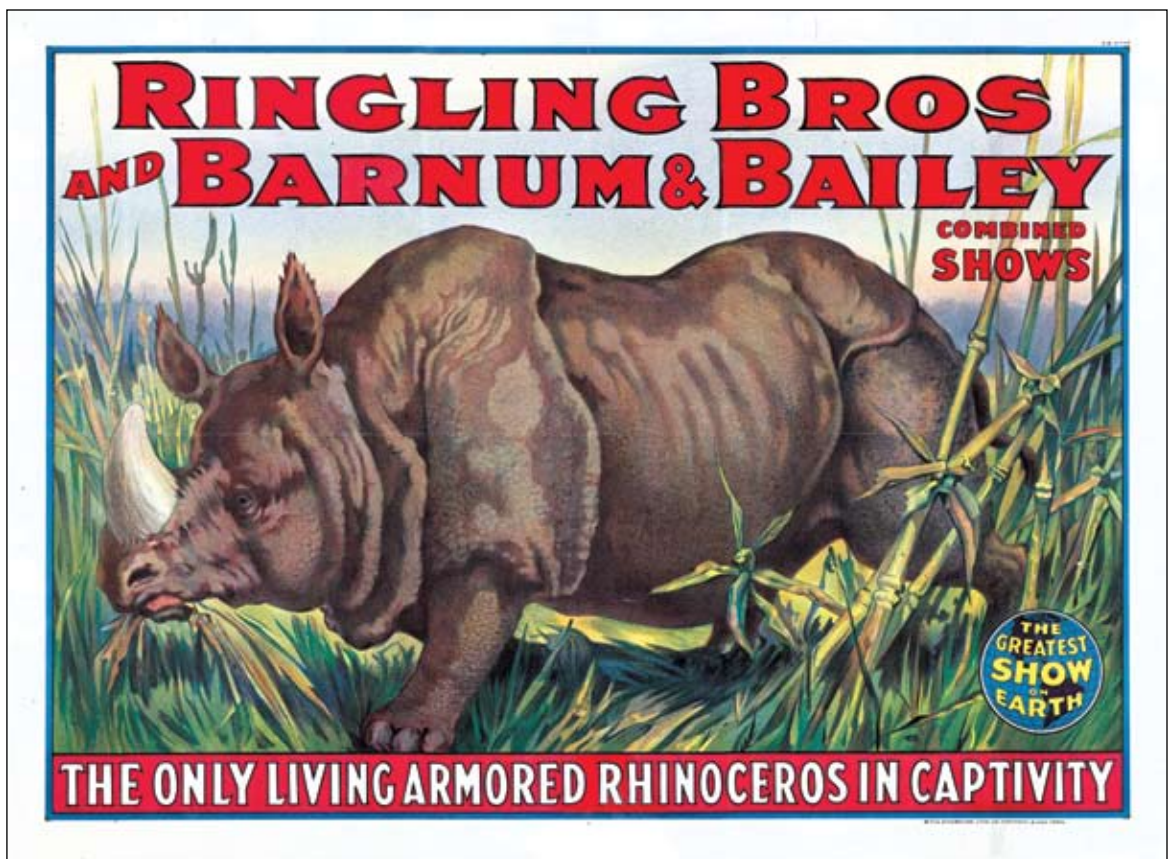
This twelve-sheet was one of several posters produced by the Strobridge Litho. Co. depicting the new wild animal acts added to the circus in 1921. This enormous lithograph measures 6' 8" high x 13' 2" wide and shows Olga Celeste and her trained leopards. Celeste, who was from Sweden, left Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey when wild animal acts were eliminated in 1925 and moved to Los Angeles where she performed each day at Luna Park Zoo. Her leopards were used in the 1938 film Bringing Up Baby and Tarzan and the Leopard Woman in 1946. Circus World Museum

that solo clowns required to establish rapport with the on-lookers slowed the show and therefore hurt the performance,” Fred Bradna recalled, adding, “Mr. Charlie as emphatically insisted that the clowns be allowed to develop their art in their own way.” When Charles Ringling died many of the solo routines made famous by clowns such as Harry Ritley, who did a breathtaking fall from a pyramid of tables, were cut from the program, replaced by ensemble numbers that included classic productions such as the clown wedding and the burning house routine.²⁴

Prohibition was one of the topics that created sure-fire gags for clowns, especially in the spring of 1920 when both the Republicans and Democrats were evaluating presidential hopefuls. Although it would be months before Warren G. Harding and James Cox were nominated as their party’s candidates, when the circus was at Madison Square Garden, press agent Dexter Fellows reported that Clicko, “The Wild African Bushman,” had startled everyone at an evening performance when he blurted out, “Iwill-voteforwhoeveriswet.” According to Fellows, Clicko did not speak or understand English and was merely repeating the expression that he had heard most, a “wet” candidate being one who supported the free flow of alcohol and repeal of the 18th Amendment.²⁵

Politics also made its way into the hippodrome races, still the traditional finale of the performance. Although the races had long included novelties such as monkeys dressed as jockeys and chariots driven by gladiators, as Election Day approached each performance also included a contest where an Indian elephant named Afbab and a trick donkey named Balaam would race around the track. Just as Warren Harding was elected President in November, the symbol of the Republican party inevitably won the featured race.²⁶

The contest between Afbab and Balaam was only one of the stunts that generated newspaper ink for the elephant



“Old Bill” was the only “Armored Rhinoceros” in the United States in the early 1920s. The Indian rhino first toured with Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. shortly after the turn of the 20th century. Prior to 1919, he was part of the Barnum & Bailey menagerie. The date of this poster is 1924.

Chris Berry Collection

in 1920. While the circus was at Madison Square Garden, press agent Jay Rial announced that Afbab was 92 years old, and a birthday party was soon planned. At the celebration, the elephant was presented with a huge pile of hay decorated with 92 bags of peanuts. Among those invited to the birthday party were the elephants at the Bronx Zoo, though regrettably none of them were able attend.²⁷

From Brooklyn the circus trains traveled to Philadelphia where thousands were on hand as equipment was unloaded for a one-week stand at 19th Street and Hunting Park Avenue. Despite cold weather and rain, the show generated \$154,072.50 during the six-day engagement, an average of nearly \$26,000 a day.

The daily revenues included not only the sale of tickets to the big show, but also money that was generated by concessions and admission to the “Congress of Strange People.” The sideshows of the 1920s featured performers who were remembered for decades, including Artoria Gibbons, the stunning young tattooed woman; Iko and Eko, billed as “The Men from Mars;” Jim Tarver, “The Texas Giant;” and “Major Mite,” described as the smallest man in the world.

From Philadelphia the show trains moved to Washington, D.C., and although the nation’s number one circus fan had routinely visited the showgrounds during his time in



"Old Bill" was photographed in his cage by Harry Atwell in 1923. He died three years later while the circus was in Ft. Worth, Texas. The elephant at the right is Ringling's "Old John."

Circus World Museum

office, when the trains arrived on May 16, Woodrow Wilson was still recovering from the severe stroke he had suffered the previous October. Because of his illness the President could not attend the circus, so John and Charles Ringling created a media event by bringing the circus to the President.

As the parade moved along 15th Street, it suddenly made a turn through the White House gates where it passed between the Executive Mansion and the Treasury Building. As President Wilson watched from a chair on the East Portico, the White House press corps reported that he "laughed at the antics of the clowns, and several times removed his hat" to acknowledge the performers in the parade.²⁸

Tremendous crowds were on hand at every stop, but none were as enthusiastic as those in Portage, Wisconsin on August 26. Although it was the smallest city on the route, it provided the largest crowd to date for a matinee performance of the combined shows. Portage is only 18 miles from Baraboo, and the closest that the circus had been to the Ringling's hometown in many years. While the show was in Wisconsin that summer the remaining animals were taken

from the old winter quarters and shipped to Bridgeport."²⁹

The circus menagerie always made for good newspaper stories and reporters often wrote about one of the rarest animals in the collection, "Bill" the "Armored Rhinoceros" that had first been exhibited on Forepaugh-Sells in about 1906 and was the only Indian rhino in the United States.³⁰

Described as "An animal that perpetuates the prehistoric of the rarest of rare living animals," Bill was pictured in a courier with two dinosaurs. In the weeks prior to the circus arrival the public was informed that "nothing else now alive so nearly approaches the weird prehistoric monsters that trod the earth millions upon millions of years ago."³¹

Whenever Dexter Fellows had the opportunity, he would tell reporters about the challenge that the circus had importing animals. "Camels are hard to get," he said when the show was in Kansas, adding that despite the armistice nearly two years before, "Practically no animals have been shipped to America since the war. Zebras are almost impossible to get. Elephants are plentiful, but they could not buy our rhinoceros and hippopotamus specimen."

The animal discussion also gave Fellows the opportu-



May Wirth and Lillian Leitzel were circus royalty during the Roaring Twenties. The two stars had a strong friendship that extended outside of the circus ring.

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nity to boast of the success the show was having at the ticket wagon. "Believe me the circus business is good," he said. "I do not know where all of the money comes from, but we have had great crowds this year."³²

Fellows' observation rang true when the circus was in Fort Worth late in the season and every seat was filled along with an overflow crowd on the hippodrome track. The audience of 15,000 was so large that police were called to the lot to maintain order. Those fortunate enough to get in were treated to what the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* called "the best circus ever seen."³³

May Wirth's bareback act and Bird Millman's wire walking were both showstoppers in the 1920s, but throughout the decade the star of the circus was Lillian Leitzel, "queen of aerial gymnasts." At four feet, ten inches and weighing only 95 pounds, her tiny appearance was emphasized when she was accompanied into the ring by Willie Mosher, her towering footman who stood six feet, four inches in height. The scene was even more dramatic when the circus lot was muddy and Mosher carried "The Dainty Miss Leitzel" into

the arena, followed by her maid, Mabel Clemens.

Once in the air Leitzel performed for six minutes on two eight-inch rings that hung only a few feet from the peak of the canvas. When the Roman Ring portion of the act ended, Leitzel descended to the ring, took a bow and was pulled back up on a swivel rope to perform her specialty, the plange, swinging her body up to the level of her shoulder and propelling herself over and over as the audience counted the revolutions.

In a story that press agents planted in newspapers throughout the season, Leitzel said that she was beginning to feel that her circus performance had become routine, and that she had hopes of becoming an aviatrix and presenting her hair-raising stunts higher than a circus tent would allow. Leitzel revealed that she had recently taken her first airplane ride and told how she had hoped for a more daring pilot. "I wanted him to do five or six loops or a tailspin or two, but he would not," she said, "next time I want to go up with an army flier who has been at the front and is not afraid to do things."³⁴

The 1920 performance featured many acts that were presented in the air, including Hillary Long, whose intricate feats of head balancing were performed at great heights, along with an aerial ballet of iron jaw human butterflies. The circus also included three rings of flying trapeze acts which climaxed with a triple somersault performed by Ernest Clark over the center ring.

Among the other veteran acts during the 1920s was Pallenberg's Bears, presented simultaneously on two stages. While one group of bears, handled by Miss Cato Pallenberg, roller skated, walked a tightrope and rode a bicycle, the other troupe, handled by her husband Emil, performed several of the same stunts adding bits of comedy to the routine.

The big show was swept up in the booming post-war economy and when receipts were tallied at the end of the 1920 season the circus had grossed over \$4 million³⁵ success that attracted the attention of competitors who realized that fortunes that could be made in the circus business.

Even before the 1921 season began, *Variety* predicted a circus war in the coming months, a battle of routes and billing between Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey and the new American Circus Corporation, owned by Ed Ballard, Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers. The syndicate wanted a piece of the action, as did Andrew Downie who surprised the circus world when he lured the May Wirth riding troupe to his Walter L. Main Circus at what was said to be the largest salary ever paid to a circus act.³⁶

Despite the loss of their great bareback rider, the Ringlings hired new performers and for the first time prepared a program that would feature numerous wild animal acts. Among the new offerings was a team of European trainers who worked with groups of lions, tigers, polar bears and leopards. And for the opening in New York John Ringling secured a gorilla by the name of John Daniel.

The arrival of John Daniel was a media event straight out of P. T. Barnum's playbook, dreamed up by Dexter Fellows, the Dean of circus press agents. When the ship *Old North State* arrived in New York ahead of the circus opening, the gorilla disembarked from his luxury stateroom wearing "a natty sailor suit with ribbon trimmings." The ape was then welcomed to Manhattan by a brass band and a cadre of newspaper reporters and photographers who jammed the wharf.³⁷

Fellows had enticed the Prohibition-weary reporters to cover the gorilla's arrival by promising "beer at the pier," and during the news conference he confided to the press corps that he had unfortunately been informed that the ape was an alcoholic. "I do hope that you will refrain from mentioning the circumstances of John Daniel's love of booze," he winked, joking that, "This creature simply must have his hootch three or four times daily....and if this were to get out, we would have far too many visitors at Madison Square Garden."³⁸

The tale of the supposedly inebriated gorilla was a sensational story in the era of bathtub gin, but the tongue-in-cheek news coverage turned sober when John Daniel refused to eat, became weak and hid under his blanket when curious crowds came to gaze at him.³⁹ "There is something wrong with that beast," John Ringling was overheard telling announcer Lew Graham one afternoon as he observed his \$20,000 investment in the menagerie at Madison Square Garden.⁴⁰

After consulting with the Bronx Zoo, Ringling sent a cable to Alyse Cunningham in London. Her father had captured the gorilla when he was a baby and the ape had grown up with her. "John Daniel pining and grieving for you," the telegram said. "Can you not come at once?" Although Miss Cunningham left immediately for New York, she arrived too late. John Daniel, the first gorilla exhibited by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, died of pneumonia less than a month after arriving in the United States.⁴¹

Even without John Daniel the circus had many new features in 1921, the most significant being the three immense steel arenas that towered above the three ring curbs. The big cages were topped by strong netting that was drawn to a peak above the ring, with chutes that allowed the animals



John Ringling was one of the richest men in America in the 1920s. The Circus King appeared on the cover of Time magazine in 1925. When "Mr. Charlie" died at his Sarasota home in 1926, John became the last of the famous brothers "on the lot." In this photo, he was being interviewed just outside of his private Pullman railroad car, the Jomar.

Illinois State University Milner Library, Special Collections

to be transferred into the arenas when the cage wagons were rolled in from the menagerie.⁴²

The addition of multiple wild animal acts was something new for the Ringling circus, and they were presented on a massive scale. "The animal acts on a whole and the lion, tiger, leopard and bear acts in particular, are the greatest features of this year's show," Charles Ringling said.⁴³

Three big acts were presented simultaneously at the start of the show. In center ring a group of eight polar bears trained by Christian Schroder, in ring one Peter Radke's lions and in ring three Olga Celeste and her leopards.

After those three acts concluded, the large center cage was filled with a display that featured seven tigers, described by one observer as "sleek young animals that have all the beauty and grace of creatures just out of the jungle." The tiger act was followed by Emil and Cato Pallenberg's trained bears which segued into three rings and two stages of performing seals and sea lions.

In addition to the wild animal acts, George Denman presented 32 elephants and Adolph Hess, a famed European horseman, worked with 24 liberty horses in intricate drills and formations.

The animals were just a part of a show that was jam-packed with traditional circus acts, so many of them that on the night before the circus opened in New York Charles



Wild animal act arenas capped with conical-shaped nets were in place within Madison Square Garden in 1923. Limited floor space permitted only two stages between the show's three rings. The arrangement during the under-canvas tour was normally three rings interspersed with four stages.

Circus World Museum

Ringling and Fred Bradna spent most of the dress rehearsal speeding up the performance time and getting the program in working order so there would not be a hitch.⁴⁴

As the New York engagement was coming to a close, Mrs. William Randolph Hearst asked John Ringling if he would help raise money for the Milk Fund, a charity for under-nourished babies. Mrs. Hearst's idea was to stage a circus parade and collect money from spectators along the route. Ringling, who never had children of his own, was enthusiastic and was quoted as saying, "Sure, anything for sick babies."⁴⁵

The 1921 "Milk Fund Parade" was Manhattan's first big circus parade in many years and followed a route that started at Madison Square Garden, moved up Madison Avenue to 57th Street and back down Fifth Avenue to the arena.

The grand marshals of the parade were equestrian directors Fred Bradna and John Agee followed by 20 mounted circus girls in red, white and blue costumes. The parade also included Merle Evans and a group of his musicians atop the Five Graces bandwagon, cages, camels and more than 20 elephants. There were also several units not typically seen in

a circus parade. Lillian Leitzel rode in a motorcycle sidecar, collecting money from those lining the street; Jackie Coogan, the five-year old movie star, was seen on top of a double-decker bus; and 24 chorus girls from the Ziegfeld Follies walked the route collecting money in milk pails.

The fundraiser was such a success for the Milk Fund, and the circus, that in both 1922 and 1923 the Ringlings again loaned their elephants, wild animals, clowns and calliopes to similar parades that raised enough money to help provide 2,000 quarts of milk each day to New York City's poor children.⁴⁶

Although thousands turned out for the New York Milk Fund Parade, it was the only time that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey officially took to the streets in 1921, as the Ringlings had decided to eliminate parades at the end of the 1920 season.

"First, the show is too big to allow us the time for a parade. Second, the automobile has virtually driven us off the big city streets," Charles Ringling explained. "Imagine what would happen in Cleveland, if all traffic on the downtown streets, or on one of the principal streets, were tied up for

two hours – the time required for one of our parades to pass. You would have people missing trains and a general demoralization of the traffic. The circus parade is a vanished institution.”⁴⁷

When the show moved from Madison Square Garden to Brooklyn a few days after the Milk Fund event, the newspapers repeatedly mentioned that there would be no more parades, however, not everyone got the word. On circus day thousands lined the streets where parades had been held since P. T. Barnum first brought his circus to Brooklyn 50 years before.⁴⁸

In the summer of 1921, battle lines were drawn for the circus war that had been predicted at the start of the season. The American Circus Corporation strategically routed its shows ahead of Ringling throughout the Midwest, and by the time the show reached Chicago it had faced opposition from John Robinson, Sells Floto and Hagenbeck-Wallace – circuses that were all owned by Jerry Mugivan, Bert Bowers and Ed Ballard. In addition, the independently owned Al G. Barnes and Sparks Circuses were all in the same territory within a few weeks of each other.⁴⁹

Despite the competition, Charles Ringling boasted that the smaller circuses were no match for his massive operation. “Our show costs \$10,000 a day to run, employs about 1,200 people and requires more than a hundred railroad cars,” he told a reporter in St. Louis. He then compared his

three ring and four stage circus to the smaller shows by focusing on its huge collection of wild animals, “This year we have troupes of performing tigers, leopards, polar bears and lions. We also have eight trained camels, and we have strengthened our feats in horsemanship and brought from Europe the very best horses in the world.”⁵⁰

The message was that the other circuses were merely an irritation and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was truly *The Greatest Show on Earth*, yet whether it was the increased competition or the economic recession of 1921, business was off significantly from the previous season. A year-to-year comparison of show receipts indicates that gross revenues were down 22% from 1920 to 1921.⁵¹

The opposition that the American Circus Corporation first provided in 1921 was unleashed in full force as soon as the 1922 season began. The first volley was fired in Philadelphia when Sells-Floto arrived on May 1, a week before Ringling. The spring tour quickly turned into a game of cat and mouse and Sells-Floto was on the offensive. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey followed Sells-Floto into Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Newark, Boston and Portland. The two circuses were only two days apart in Allentown and Scranton, Pennsylvania as billing up and down the eastern seaboard urged communities to “WAIT!” for the big show.

Despite the competition, or perhaps to take advantage of new territory, John and Charles Ringling took their circus to

California in 1922. It was the first transcontinental tour since Barnum & Bailey had combined with Ringling Bros. at the end of the 1918 season and the show featured a sensational addition to the program, a female tiger trainer who had appeared throughout the west as a headliner on the Al G. Barnes Wild Animal Show.

In its review *The New York Times* said, “It was a circus of animals more than it has ever been before,” singling out Mabel Stark’s act as “one of a half dozen animal acts in the circus which kept several thousand people leaning forward in their seats in tense excitement,” adding that “nobody else dares drive animals as she does, and nobody can counterfeit the nonchalance with



Although the daily parade was eliminated at the end of the 1920 season, the following spring John Ringling brought circus wagons to Manhattan as a fundraiser for the Milk Fund charity. The “Milk Fund Parade” was repeated in New York in 1922 and 1923.

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Shortly before his death in 1926, Charles and Edith Ringling completed a large mansion next door to his brother's palatial Ca' d'Zan on the Sarasota waterfront.

Library of Congress

which she does it.”⁵²

Mabel Stark was one of six wild animal acts on the program in 1922 but she quickly became the favorite of newspaper reporters assigned to cover the circus. When questioned about how she was able to keep her cats in line she said, “The secret of it is very simple...Never let yourself be placed upon the defensive...To look worried is one way of showing fear, and once that is apparent, serious results are likely to follow.”⁵³

Charles Ringling weighed in on the danger and said, “No one wants to see an acrobat or animal trainer injured. Surprisingly, few of them are hurt. But the crowd does enjoy a performer’s daring because in the first place, it admires courage of every sort, and in the second place every individual in the crowd can imagine himself in the performer’s place, taking part in the action.”⁵⁴

In addition to the wild animals that performed in steel cages, the menagerie included “Tiny Toodles,” a baby hippopotamus who was exhibited with her mother “Mighty Martha.” While the circus was at Madison Square Garden,

the baby hippo was advertised as being “only two months old and so far, weighs only part of a ton.”⁵⁵

When he was not promoting the charms of Tiny Toodles and the daring of Mabel Stark, press agent Dexter Fellows was dreaming up other stunts to generate newspaper coverage while the circus was in New York, and in 1922 it involved “Old John” who had first toured the country in 1885 and had been billed as “John L. Sullivan,” a boxing elephant on Adam Forepaugh’s circus.

On April 9, John began a 53-mile pilgrimage from Madison Square Garden to the small town of Somers, New York, home of “Old Bet,” one of the first elephants to be exhibited in the United States. Old John was going to honor his forebearer by laying a wreath at a monument that honored the pioneer pachyderm.

For four days Old John marched from Manhattan to Somers, followed by a car loaded with reporters from the city’s leading newspapers. Although Prohibition made the sale of alcohol illegal at the time, Fellows recalled that “...with the help of several bottles of first-class stuff just off the boats we managed to pass the time as Old John trudged along at a speed of about five miles an hour.”⁵⁶

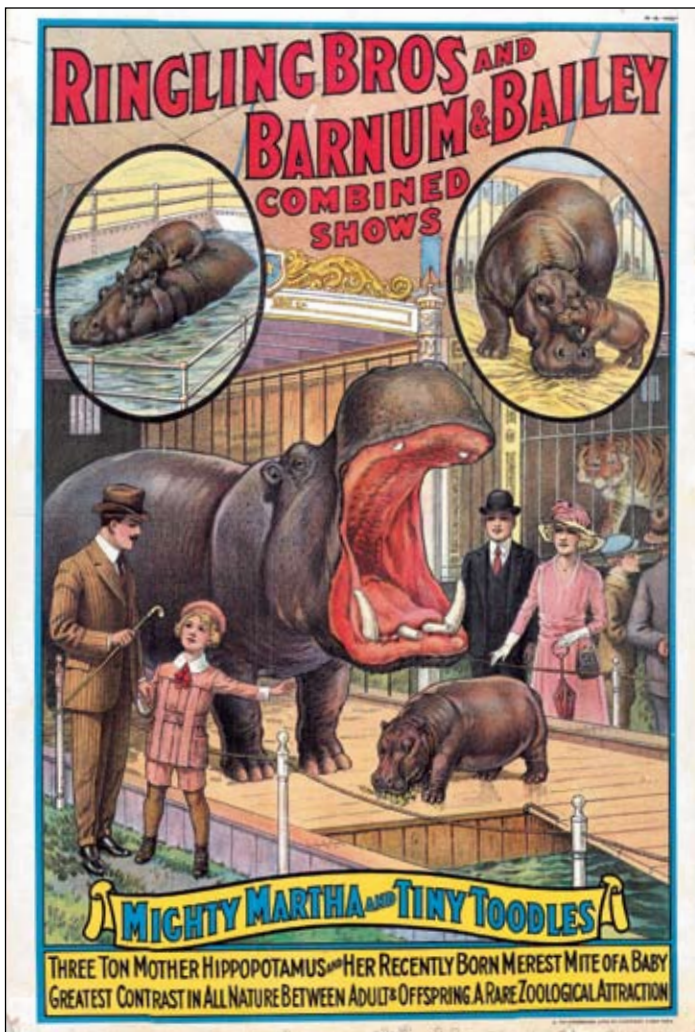
The population of Somers was only about 300 in 1922 but when Old John arrived some 2,000 spectators were on hand. It was one of Dexter Fellows’ finest moments considering the amount of press that the event generated nationally.

As the wreath-laying ceremony was ending and Fellows was describing what a great day it was for the village of Somers, he said, “I see the influence of the Grand Old Party... and I take pleasure in saluting you...three cheers...” The hundreds who had assembled then shouted him down.

The veteran publicist did not realize that part of Westchester County, New York was a Democrat stronghold, and during the Presidential election of 1920 the town had voted overwhelmingly in favor of James Cox over Warren G. Harding. After a bit of teasing, the circus press agent was forgiven and the crowd began singing a chorus of *Auld Lang Syne*, another national news story masterfully planted by Fellows, the wizard of circus press agents.⁵⁷

Although President Harding never attended the circus while he was in office, on a scorching hot day in the spring of 1922, First Lady Florence Harding attended a performance accompanied by John Ringling and Evalyn McLean, wife of Ned McLean, owner of *The Washington Post*.

“For the first time in my life I really had stage fright,” John Staley later wrote. The private steward for John and Charles Ringling described the First Lady and her party sitting directly behind “Mr. John” in the center section of the grandstand, surrounded by Secret Service agents. Staley brought the group souvenir programs and palm fans shortly after the performance began. “I had my tray loaded with glasses and pitchers filled with lemonade, balancing the tray with three fingers of my right hand, shoulder high,” he recalled. “By the



The huge Ringling menagerie of the 1920s was larger than many zoos, and for much of America it was the only time that they could see rare animals such as giraffes, zebras and ostriches. In 1923 the menagerie included a baby hippo named "Tiny Toodles."

Chris Berry Collection

time I reached the special section my knees were knocking so hard my feet did not know which way to go."⁵⁸

Staley was chosen to serve the First Lady's party because of the trust that he had gained as a special aide to both John and Charles Ringling, a responsibility which included serving them meals when they were traveling with the show. Years later he recalled his experience waiting on the pair during a two-day stand over Decoration Day in May of 1922. The date in Buffalo, New York was unique as it was the first time that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was presented by outsiders. Several Shrine clubs from upstate New York had bought out the entire circus on May 31, and John and Charles Ringling, both Shriners, were on hand for the performance.

Although Mr. Charlie would frequently dine in a small private tent on the showgrounds, John Ringling generally took his meals on the *Jomar* railroad coach or in restaurants.



Charles and John Ringling's trusted steward John Staley is seen outside of the brothers' private tent in 1924.

Chris Berry Collection

Staley said that he was sitting outside of the brothers' private tent in Buffalo when John Ringling's chauffeur drove up and told him that Mr. John would be over later for a sandwich.

Charles Ringling arrived first and after John arrived the two ate a dinner that consisted of soup, porkchops, green beans, lettuce and tomatoes, pie and coffee, served from fine china on a linen tablecloth. After dinner, the two talked for several hours until the evening performance ended. Although Staley spent years working for both brothers, he said it was the only time he ever saw them enjoy a meal together.⁵⁹

The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey "Shrine Circus" on May 31, 1922 coincided with the initiation of 153 new members of the charitable organization and was promoted with a Shriners parade in downtown Buffalo which included circus animals and cage wagons from the menagerie.

That night about 9,000 Shriners and their families from across the region were on hand for the performance which included a presentation of diamond-studded Shrine pins to both John and Charles Ringling.

Those in the audience described the "most brilliant performance of the evening," when Lillian Litzel entered the big top. "Climbing high on the rope, wearing a white fez with golden braid, and with her silver spangled dress throwing off brilliant-hued lights she began her spectacular performance.

"As she swung her body over her shoulder time after time the announcer counted the turns and called off every 10. The crowd gasped with amazement and wonder after Miss Litzel passed the half-hundred mark and there were several cries of 'Let her down!' heard above the tumultuous applause. She continued until she swung around 100 times."⁶⁰



Lillian Leitzel adored children, although she never had any of her own. In this 1923 view, the aerial superstar is seen with two youngsters at her private tent. The caption under the photograph reads, "Miss Leitzel Teaching School."

Circus World Museum

Leitzel was always a showstopper and when Fred Bradna reflected on her performance years later, he said that even he did not know how long her act would run. "In her prime years I never knew how many times she would revolve," he recalled, "never less than 75, sometimes 100, depending on how she felt." Because of the uncertainty, Bradna insisted that the next acts on the program always be in place the moment she *began* her swings, so they would be ready as she was taking her bow.⁶¹

From Buffalo the circus began its trek west and in town after town it faced opposition from the American Circus Corporation. When the Hagenbeck-Wallace advance car arrived in Montreal on May 23 to start billing for performances on June 5 and 6, the Ringling brigade was on the offensive and had already secured some of the best billboard locations in the city. Those who saw the brightly colored lithographs were again urged to "WAIT!" even though Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was not scheduled in Montreal until July 3, nearly a month after Hagenbeck-Wallace had moved on.⁶² Of the eight cities in Eastern Canada on the Ringling route, Hagenbeck-Wallace played six of them before the "Big One" arrived.⁶³

Despite the competition that dogged the show in 1922, when Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey set up on Chica-

go's Lakefront that summer the circus played to capacity at nearly every performance, breaking all previous records.⁶⁴

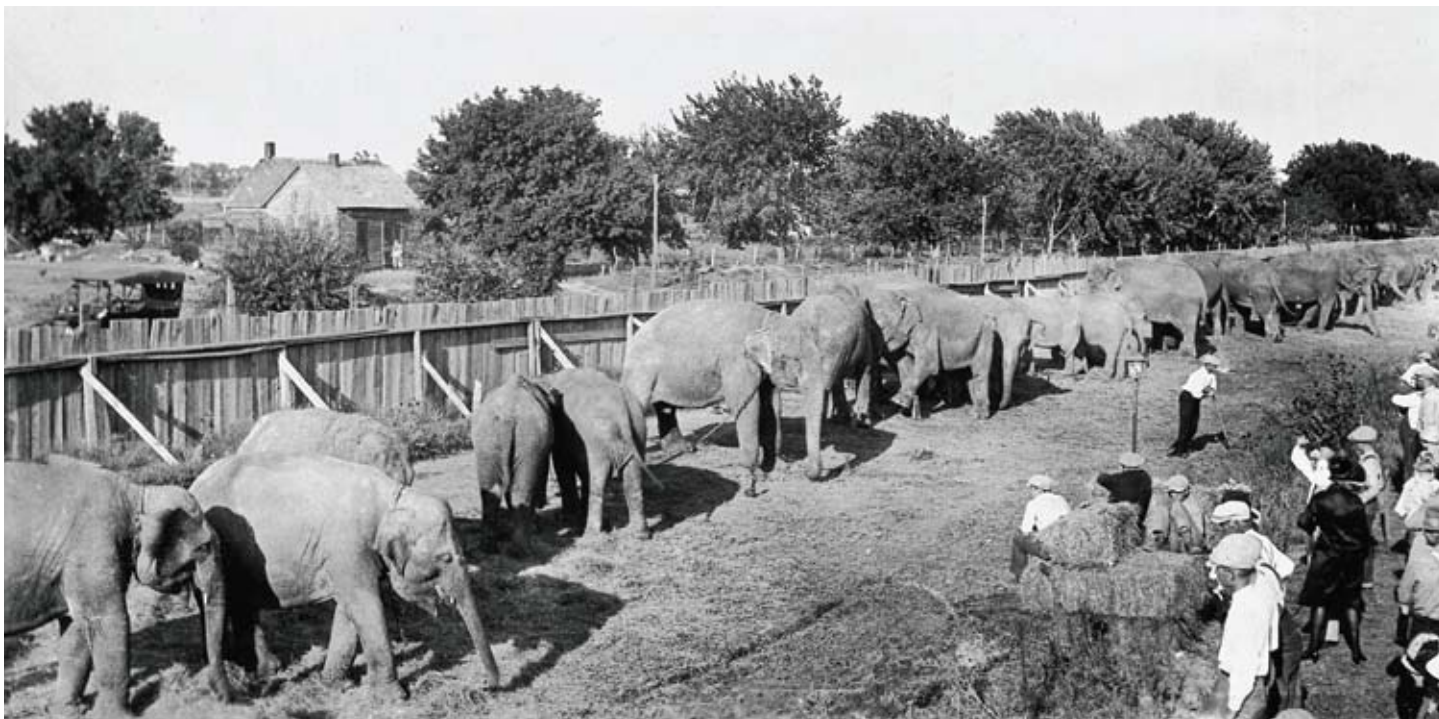
After leaving Chicago the show again faced opposition, this time from Sells-Floto, a battle that continued for the rest of the season. Sells-Floto was first into Spokane on August 5, followed by Ringling-Barnum on August 18. The Ringling show arrived in Seattle on August 22, two weeks after Sells-Floto had left town. The routes crossed again in Portland, Sacramento, Oakland and San Francisco, with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey always a day or two behind. Finally, in Los Angeles, Ringling beat Sells-Floto into town, and according to the *New York Clipper* the show did record-breaking business on the lot at the corner of Washington and Hill streets.⁶⁵ An analysis of the receipts reveals that the four-

day stand in Los Angeles generated \$115,238.16, an average of just under \$30,000 a day.

Despite the competition from the American Circus Corporation, the economy was strong in 1922, a major factor in the success of the circus. When a reporter asked Charles Ringling why the circus returned to the west coast after a long absence he replied, "Because we knew we could make money there."⁶⁶

"The Great Circus War of 1922" reached its zenith on September 18 in Phoenix, Arizona when both shows arrived on the same day and set up only a few blocks from each other. Phoenix, which had a population of about 25,000, had seen its first railroad circus in 1890, but hosting two of them on the exact same day was something new. Although Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was clearly the larger of the shows, Sells-Floto was first to make an impression as it paraded through the city on what was practically an unofficial state holiday. With crowds pouring in from the hinterlands, both performances of both circuses were "packed to the ring curbs," with some fans watching the matinee of one show, and the evening performance of the other.⁶⁷

The battle for ticket sales continued during the final weeks of the season, with the last skirmish in Little Rock, where Sells-Floto arrived on October 2, followed by



About 25 Asian elephants are visible in this photograph taken in the 1920s when George Denman was in charge of the herd.

Tegge Circus Archive

Ringling the next day. The competition carried over into the 1923 season, and although the battle was not as intense, as the Hagenbeck-Wallace parade was underway in several cities, men from Ringling-Barnum would infiltrate the crowd and distribute “coming soon” heralds to those who lined the sidewalks. In response Hagenbeck-Wallace placed roustabouts along its parade route looking for the Ringling men and when they were spotted, they “knocked a few heads.” As a final jab, the Ringling brigade hired Girl Scouts to distribute the “coming soon” flyers during Hagenbeck-Wallace parades, guerilla marketing that ultimately stymied the opposition.⁶⁸

One of the stars that Sells-Floto had promoted in 1922 was Berta Beeson, a female impersonator whose tightwire act mimicked that of Bird Millman who had retired from Ringling at the end of the 1921 season. When the circus opened at Madison Square Garden in the spring of 1923, Beeson, the former Sells-Floto headliner, was a solo act in the center ring.

During the ten-minute act Berta Beeson would dance a waltz and suddenly run across the wire at a very fast tempo. Billed as “positively and obviously the most sensational high wire artist of all time,” the act astonished even Merle Evans who told a reporter, “I have at times laid down my baton

Right, the artwork for the program cover used in both 1922 and 1923 had been created by Charles Bryson in 1905. Bryson’s artwork originally appeared on a unique piece printed by the Courier Litho. Co. simply titled “The Barnum & Bailey Circus Girl.”

Chris Berry Collection





More than 700 horses were carried on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in the 1920s. In addition to those that performed in the show, hundreds of draft horses were used to pull heavy baggage wagons from the railyards to the showgrounds.

Chris Berry Collection

and merely let my musicians follow the motions of those remarkable feet.”⁶⁹

“Remarkable” was the adjective assigned to many of the acts on the 1923 program. As in past years observers said it was impossible to see everything, “there is too much of it.” One reporter wrote of how one large family allegedly kept track of the many acts through a relay system. “The family had seven members and there was a ring or stage for each pair of eyes. What happened at one end of the arena was relayed to the other end of the family and so on back and forth. As a whole, the family missed nothing.”⁷⁰

The circus ran for three hours and included many new acts along with veteran performers in “costumes that dazzled and lighting effects that were handled in an artistic and sparkling manner.” Once again, the program was heavy on wild animal acts. As Mabel Stark wrestled with her tiger Rajah, Richard “Dutch” Ricardo put nine lions through their paces and presented a tiger named Nairobi and a lion named Sultan riding on the back of an elephant.

The 1923 herd included 33 elephants under the direction of George Denman. The promotion of the “quarter-million-pound act,” included the advisory that the display required “more cars to transport it and its massive properties than are possessed by many so-called circuses.”

Among the featured acts was a display that included six new baby elephants billed as “The Tiny Tommy Tinkers.” During the performance the group played a military march

on six different instruments, a stunt that Denman said was a tremendous challenge to orchestrate. “I would rather train a dozen grown elephants than one baby,” he said. “They are just like children. I cannot be harsh with them, for it scares them...I have to let them have their own way and develop their individuality after their own wishes.”

Denman went on to describe the various attributes of the baby elephants, singling out Marcella as an extremely valuable addition to the circus with a rare gift for learning.⁷¹ Denman’s early observations proved true and Marcella soon became a leader in the Ringling herd, a role that she played for decades, both under canvas and after the circus moved indoors. Marcella, one of the original “Tiny Tommy Tinkers,” performed with the show for nearly 55 years until her retirement at the Circus World theme park in Haines City, Florida where she died in 1977.⁷²

In 1923 the circus carried 785 horses ranging from enormous Percherons to a dwarf horse exhibited in the side-show. Of the stock, 350 horses were used to unload and haul wagons, while the remainder appeared in the performance which included dressage and liberty acts along with the riding Reiffenachs, Ernestos and Sevillos. There were so many horses on the show that when the circus was in Boston they could not be accommodated on the main lot and had to be stabled across the railroad tracks from the Huntington Avenue showgrounds.

Also notable throughout the 1920s was veteran dog



The mobility of the big show and speed of setup were enhanced by experienced workers like this “poler” and agile elephants working together to position wagons on the lot. Wagon #66 carried wardrobe trunks and was presumed being “spotted” near a dressing tent in this 1923 view.

Circus World Museum

trainer Alf Loyal, whose poodle act one observer said was “worth the price of admission” and “a whole show in itself.” The act included a routine where five dogs carrying flags of various nations would race in one direction as a single dog carrying an American flag ran the other way. Just as a collision appeared inevitable, the “American” dog would leap over the other five.⁷³ In addition to Alf Loyal’s performing poodles, the circus had a kennel of 35 other dogs that traveled in cage wagons. Each day when they reached the lot they were taken out and put into a wire enclosed pen for exercise.⁷⁴

Dixie Willson, a showgirl during the 1920s, remembered an assembly of pets that the public never saw, including a raccoon, baby rabbits, two mud-turtles on leashes and a three-legged dog named Paddy that nursed a litter of lion cubs that their mother had abandoned. The remarkable private menagerie was set up each day behind the cookhouse.⁷⁵

The circus kitchen of the 1920s carried 10 to 12 wood-burning stoves designed to withstand the rigors of trouping. With nearly 1,500 employees, tremendous amounts of food had to be prepared each day. Each of the heavy-duty stoves could handle about 40 seven-inch skillets, and every day eight to ten cases of eggs and six to eight hundred pounds of bacon, sausage or ham were prepared in the roughly 300 frying pans. It took 14 men just to crack the eggs for a typical breakfast.⁷⁶

If the circus moved on its stomach, it also was depen-

dent on the nation’s network of railroads, and the circus train of 1923 was a major upgrade from previous years. New to the show were 21 government surplus hospital cars that had been used during World War I. Charles Ringling confirmed the purchase in *The Billboard* of October 7, 1922 and said that the new rolling stock would be an improvement to the train, noting that the old wooden sleepers were being exchanged for new steel reinforced cars.⁷⁷

With the new equipment, an enormous menagerie and dozens of sensational performers, John and Charles Ringling were committed to protecting their investment against the American Circus Corporation or any other competitor. Management went to great lengths to keep the route secret and the billing strong in 1923. More than 100 bill-posters traveled ahead of the circus and their work was displayed on barns and in store windows 50 miles from where the show would exhibit. According to *The New York Clipper*, “it is doubtful that any circus which has passed across the route of the Ringling show has not been inconvenienced.” *The Clipper* added that the billing for Chicago was particularly well handled.⁷⁸

The advance work paid off and when the circus set up on Chicago’s Lake Front that summer it had “nine days of the biggest business such an organization has ever known.”⁷⁹

It was not just the big cities where throngs flocked to the show as evidenced by the turnout in Marshfield, Wisconsin where 15,200 people turned out for a matinee performance.



A gorilla named John Daniel II was heavily promoted when the circus opened at Madison Square in 1924. One might imagine that some of the boys shining shoes outside of the old building used their earnings to attend the show.

Chris Berry Collection

The population of Marshfield was only 7,500 yet thousands had to be turned away. Management reported that if fire officials had allowed all of those on the lot into the big top it would have been the largest audience ever to assemble for a circus performance.⁸⁰

A big crowd was also expected for a two-day stand in Kansas City but as the first section was being unloaded early on the morning of September 30 the skies opened and unleashed a torrential cloudburst that continued for hours, flooding the showgrounds that were located at the bottom of a long sloping hill. Despite the best efforts of the canvas crew, the big top could not be raised. The next day the crews tried again but when John Ringling arrived on the lot that

afternoon and saw that the side poles were sliding in the mud, he called off the stand. Even though no performances were held, it was well into the night before all the equipment was off the lot.⁸¹

A downpour also created problems a few weeks later when the circus was in Omaha. Midway through the evening performance heavy rain began falling and management stopped the show, concerned about the safety of the 3,000 in attendance. As the crowd exited the big top hoping for refunds, they found that the ticket wagon had already left the lot. The next day angry citizens began complaining to local lawmakers and an ordinance was drafted that would have prohibited the Ringling circus from ever returning to Oma-

ha. Charles Ringling got word of the situation while the show was in Shreveport and immediately sent a wire that offered refunds to anyone who took their ticket stub to a downtown drug store. He also offered a donation to the Omaha Community Chest. As a result of Ringling's promise of restitution, the City Commissioner who had wanted to ban the circus withdrew the proposed ordinance.⁸²

Not all of the news was bad in the summer of 1923, and about the same time that the circus was battling weather in the Midwest the Ringlings announced that May Wirth and the Wirth family would be returning to the circus in 1924. The act had been part of Andrew Downie's Walter L. Main Circus for the first half of 1923 and after six months of negotiation the Wirth family inked a new contract to return to the show that had first brought them to America in 1912.⁸³

By the mid-1920s John Ringling was riding the wave of prosperity that defined the decade, a tycoon who dabbled in railroads, oil fields and real estate. In the summer of 1923 came word that Ringling, along with promoter Tex Rickard and other investors, had purchased nearly an entire block in Midtown Manhattan. Although it would be several years until construction was complete, Ringling promised that the property, at 50th Street and Eighth Avenue, would hold "the largest indoor arena in the world."⁸⁴

Despite new business ventures and frequent trips abroad, John Ringling was still committed to improving the circus, and on March 28, 1924 the Hamburg-American liner *Deutschland* left Southampton with a first-class passenger, the latest European import to join the circus.

When the ship arrived in New York, a limousine whisked the show's new star to a suite at the Hotel McAlpin where more than 100 reporters and photographers attended a press conference that generated more than 200 column inches in the next day's newspapers.



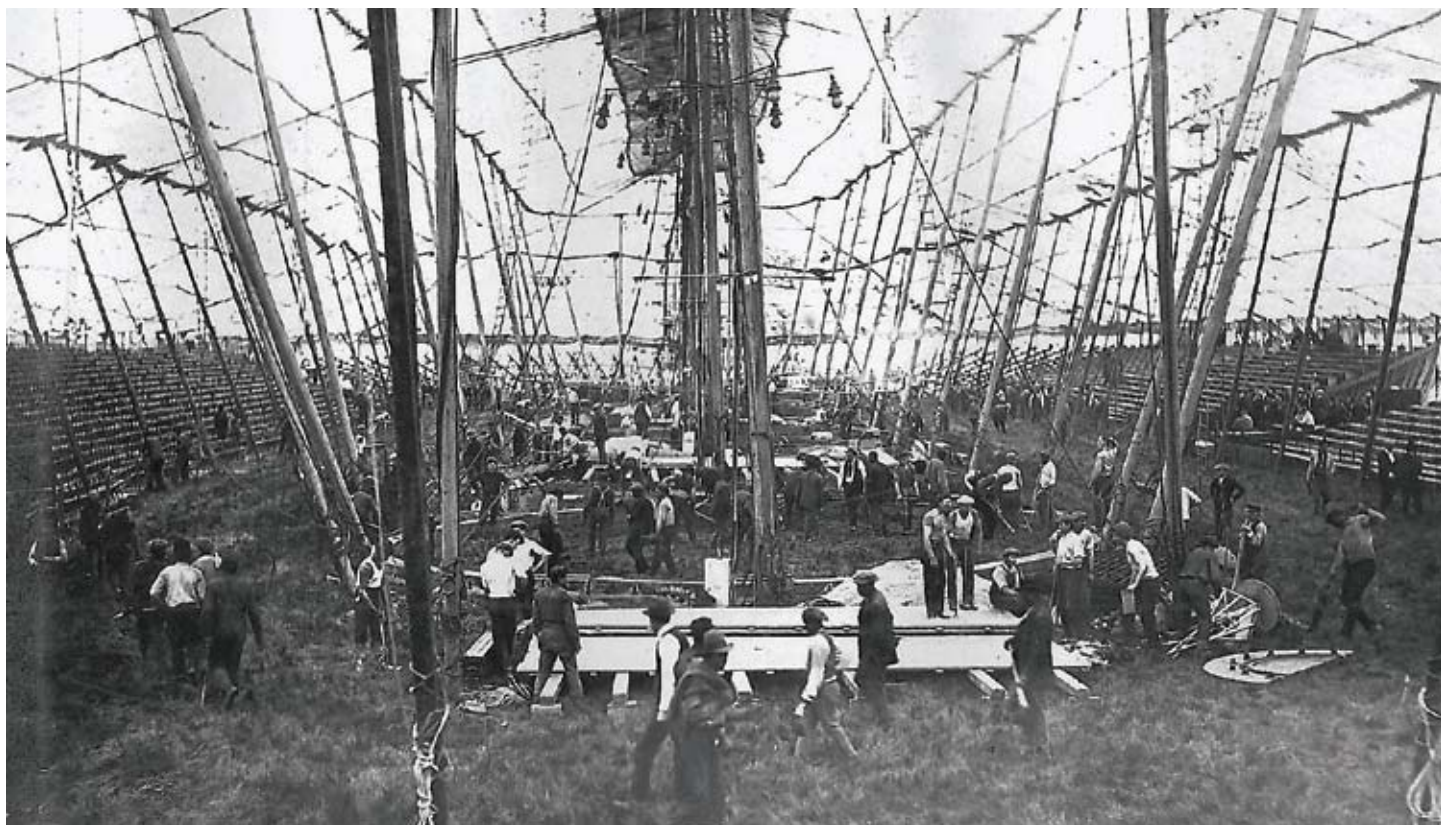
The artists at the Strobridge Litho. Co. had only a few weeks to produce this two-sheet promoting the show's new attraction in 1924. This particular poster is among very few that did not include the name of former circus owner James A. Bailey.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Circus Collection

The new attraction was John Daniel II, a three-year-old gorilla named after his predecessor who had been brought to America four years before and had only lived a few months. John Daniel II was billed as "the only gorilla in captivity and the only gorilla ever taken on tour in this or any other country."

He debuted his debut at Madison Square Garden on April 9 in a specially ventilated glass-lined cage.

Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution was a major topic of discussion in the 1920s, and although the celebrated



Hundreds of canvassmen and laborers were required to set up the big top and seats, along with three rings and four stages. The immense size of the operation was recorded in this photograph taken inside the big top in 1924.

Chris Berry Collection

“Scopes Monkey Trial” would not occur for another year, the circus capitalized on the controversy with a handbill distributed by the show’s advance crew. Along with photographs and stories about the human characteristics exhibited by John Daniel II, there was a disclaimer that said in part, “Ringling Brothers desire to emphatically state that they hold no brief for or against the theory of evolution... statements made here are set down for the sole purpose of acquainting you with what has been said of this amazing animal, that upon seeing him, you may be better able to reach your own conclusions and form your own upon this important subject.”⁸⁵

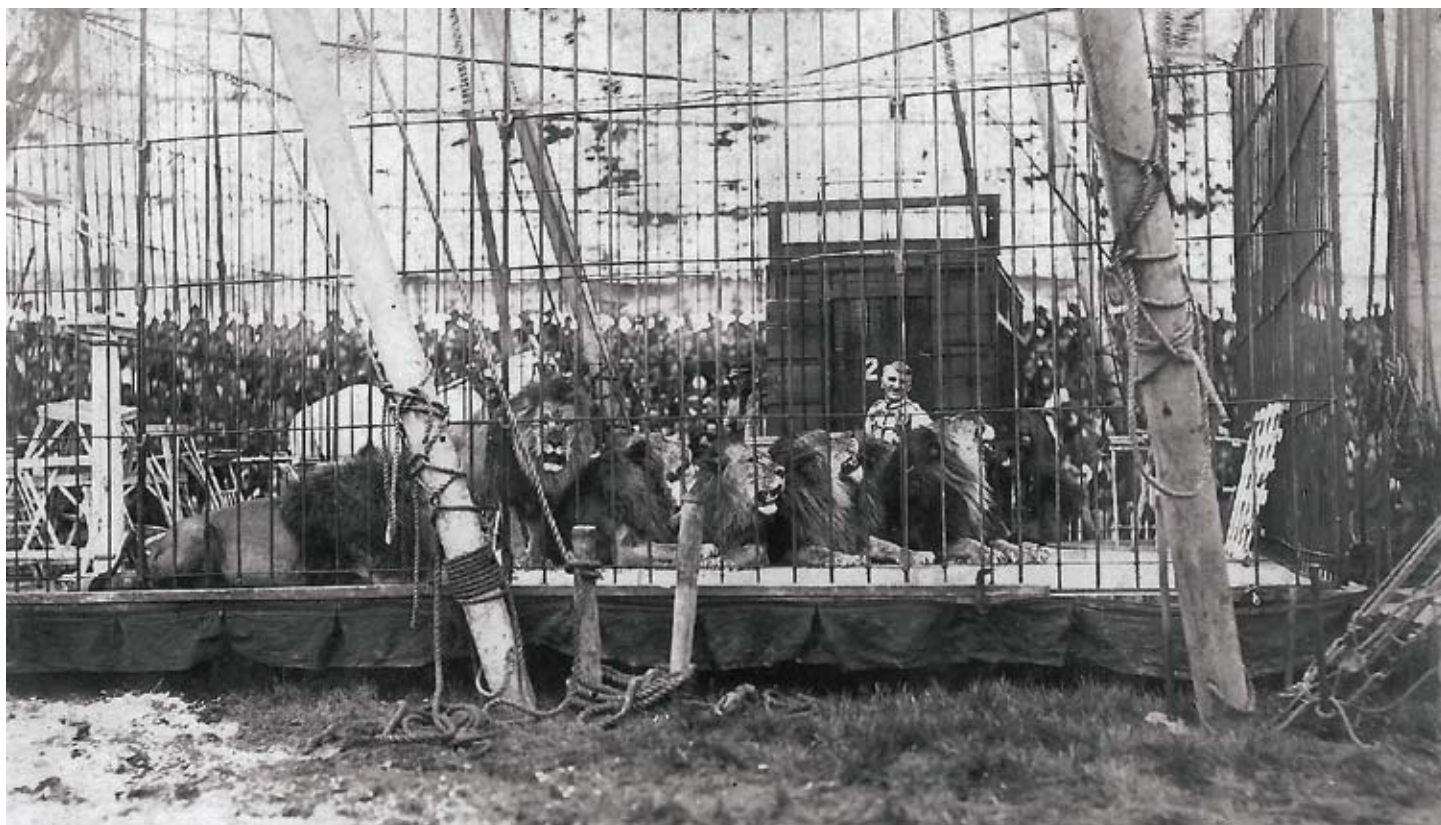
Among the new cars on the train in 1924 was a coach in the fourth section which carried the new attraction and his attendant Miss Alyse Cunningham. Although the gorilla was exhibited in the menagerie, he traveled in a luxurious stateroom and each day was transported to the showgrounds by taxi.⁸⁶

Before the circus left Bridgeport for New York in 1924 fire once again broke out at the winter quarters destroying the huge paint and blacksmith shop. Turpentine and paint fueled the flames and firefighters initially feared that the elephant barn and horse stables would also catch fire. Fortunately, the blaze was confined to the three-story brick building that was nearly the size of a football field. While several cage wagons were destroyed in the fire, only one animal, a large ox, was killed.⁸⁷

Repairs were made, the destroyed cages were replaced, and in late March the trains, animals and equipment were enroute to New York where they again made their annual trek from the Bronx railroad yards to Madison Square Garden.

As the procession traveled through Harlem on the night of March 23 several wagons, pulled by teams of four horses, stopped to rest at the corner of First Avenue and 112th Street. Hundreds were watching when a huge rat, later described as being the size of a rabbit, ran across the street, frightening one of the four horse hitches. The team of horses lunged and drove their pole into the wagon in front of it leaving a gaping hole in a lion cage. As police officers drew their guns, spectators began throwing mops and brooms from tenement windows. A group of circus workers used the makeshift pikes to drive the lion to the front of the cage and the hole was quickly boarded up.⁸⁸

The roar of lions and other menagerie sounds were heard from coast-to-coast a few days later during a special live broadcast on the NBC Radio Network. Although announcer Lew Graham had appeared on local radio stations in 1923,⁸⁹ the broadcast that originated from the basement of Madison Square Garden on April 10 was the first time that listeners across the country heard a program from the actual circus itself. Before the broadcast began, elephant superintendent George Denman said, “I do not know much about this radio thing, but if Fanny does not get over her



Captain Richard "Dutch" Ricardo was one of the wild animal trainers who joined Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1921. The transfer wagon which brought the lions from the menagerie to the big top can be seen in the background of this photograph from 1924.

Chris Berry Collection

toothache before the stunt takes place, I will bet she puts every receiving set between here and St. Louis out of commission. That elephant sure makes a noise when she is not feeling well."⁹⁰

Denman's concerns proved to be unfounded and when the program began listeners heard a short calliope concert followed by an interview with Mabel Stark. The microphone then picked up various sounds of the menagerie, including the chattering of monkeys and the barking of sea lions followed by an interview with Dutch Ricardo while he was in a cage with a lion.⁹¹

The 1924 menagerie also included 36 elephants that performed during the performance. At the end of the act 32 of them appeared on the hippodrome track for a long mount, a display that Denman said was one of the greatest achievements in his long career as a trainer.⁹²

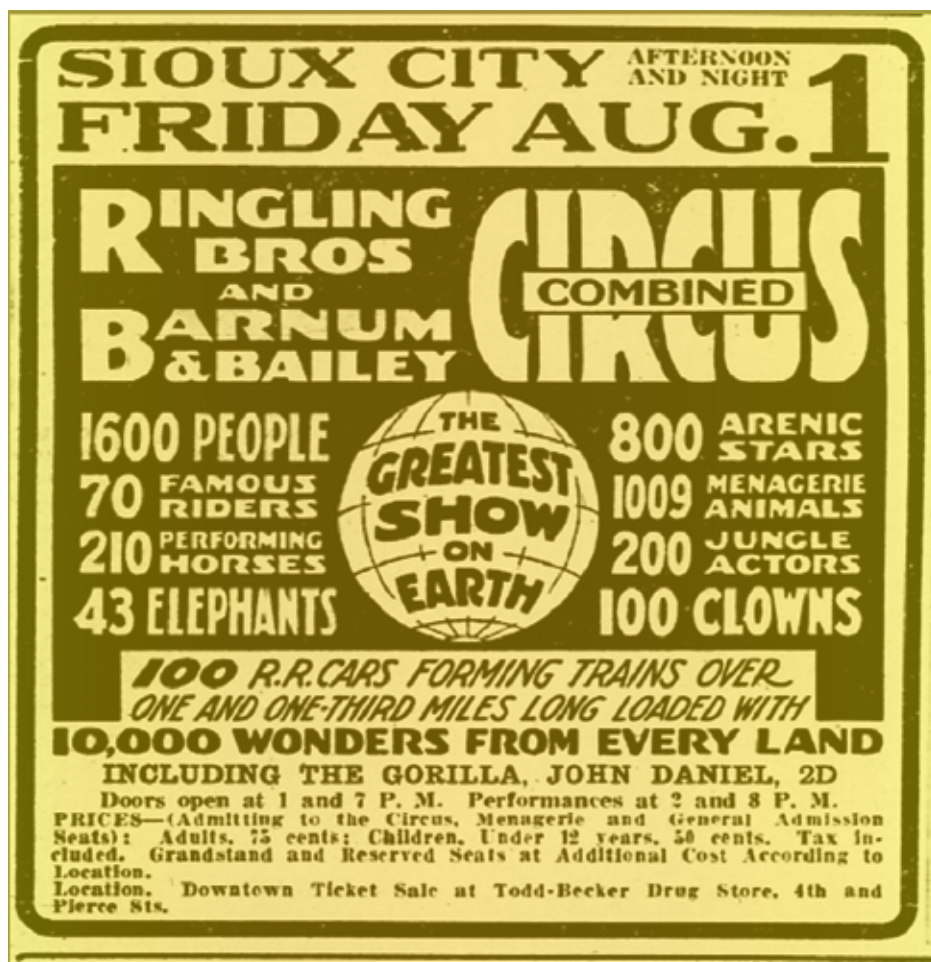
Another performer who spent decades with the circus was Pat Valdo who in 1924 had already spent 20 years with the show. Although Valdo would later become a trusted manager and executive with the circus, in the 1920s he was performing as a clown whose unique act involved boomerangs. During the performance Valdo would throw the crooked stick across the arena only to have it come back and spin on the top of his head, something even he could not explain. "I do not know why the sticks come back, but it is the same thing that makes a baseball curve," he told a reporter.

"The secret is to throw a curve into a boomerang in the same way that a pitcher throws a curve ball."⁹³

Another astonishing act that season featured the Nelson troupe: six daughters along with one son, a mother and father. The Nelson family had been a part of the American circus scene since just after the Civil War and had joined Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1923. Although the family performed in several acts, they were best known for their foot-juggling and acrobatics. One of those who attended a performance in Pittsburgh reported that the Nelsons, "...appeared to be tumbling all over themselves and were all tangled up, but they always landed on their feet. But when Theo Nelson started at one end of the sawdust track and turned back flip-flops at lightning speed almost down to the other end. Well, you just had to see it."⁹⁴

Among those who did see the circus in 1924 were President Calvin Coolidge and his wife Grace, invited to the show by John Ringling during an Oval Office meeting that only lasted about three minutes.⁹⁵

It was a warm spring afternoon when President and Mrs. Coolidge made the trip from the White House to the showgrounds near Florida Avenue and 5th Street in Northeast Washington. Just prior to leaving for the circus lot the President held a brief news conference where he told reporters that he was a lifelong circus fan who had first seen Adam Forepaugh's wagon show when he was about six years old.



Throngs turned out in Sioux City, Iowa to witness the unloading of the enormous circus train on the morning of August 1, 1924. That night a swarm of tornadoes swept across the region, and the show narrowly avoided a major disaster.

Chris Berry Collection

John Ringling sat with the President and First Lady during the performance and the White House press corps reported that "The President did not eat any peanuts or drink any red lemonade, nor did he join the laughter of the crowd at the anti-prohibition jokes of the clowns." Overall, however, Coolidge appeared to enjoy the performance, with one observer reporting that his favorite acts appeared to be the Wirth Family of bareback riders, the trapeze performers and Alf Loyal's dog act, "at least he applauded those portions of the show more than the others."⁹⁶

Although President Coolidge did not return to the circus until 1928, the First Lady became a frequent visitor, often attending the show several times a season, and like many, she became an enthusiastic admirer of Lillian Leitzel. In return Leitzel would always bow to the First Lady after completing her act. On one occasion Grace Coolidge stood up and vigorously waved her handkerchief toward Leitzel so that everyone could see it.⁹⁷

The friendship between Lillian Leitzel and Grace Coolidge extended beyond the showgrounds and the aerialist was a guest at the White House several times, including

an overnight stay where she reportedly arrived two hours late.⁹⁸ During one of those visits the First Lady gave Leitzel what she later said was one of her most prized possessions, a photograph inscribed, "With affectionate regard for Lillian Leitzel – Grace Coolidge."⁹⁹

With the return of May Wirth after an absence of three seasons the circus press agents had another star to promote. The pretty bareback rider was a favorite of reporters, telling one that her philosophy was "Work hard, play hard and smile, smile, smile." She continued, explaining how she was able to perform her forward somersaults, "I start to spring through the air at just the second or part of a second when the little watch inside of me says it is time to go. That is the only watch we riders have and the only one we ever need. And then I keep right on smiling when things go wrong. When the face is relaxed in a smile all the rest of the body relaxes too. And so, you see I always land on my feet."¹⁰⁰

As May Wirth pointed out, conditions can change at any time during a circus performance as they did during the matinee in Sioux City, Iowa on August 1, 1924. According to news reports 15,000 people were in the big top that afternoon when a tornado swept through the community. The roaring wind whipped the big top into a balloon which threatened to collapse on the huge crowd. As

the sea of canvas began swaying and tent poles began dancing, about 8,000 people, half of those in attendance, began surging toward the exits where they encountered ankle-deep mud and no shelter except for a few nearby houses where 75 to 100 refugees huddled in three and four room homes.

The local newspaper reported that the 7,000 who remained in the tent were calm and apparently avoided panic, making forced jokes about the streams of water dribbling through holes in the canvas and bantering with canvasmen who scurried about with sledgehammers, driving stakes as fast as they were pulled out by the bobbing tent poles.

The performance stopped for 20 minutes when it became impossible for the acts to enter the tent as hundreds of frightened spectators blocked the backdoor. Throughout the unexpected intermission Merle Evans calmly led the band, and when the crowds started rushing toward the exits the musicians began playing Effie Kamman's popular jazz tune *What's Your Hurry?* followed by *Yankee Doodle*, *Marching Through Georgia* and other well-known tunes.

When the storm finally subsided, Lillian Leitzel was carried into the tent on the shoulders of Willie Mosher and the



Among the many features of the 1924 Grand Entry procession was an alluring performer being conveyed in a lavishly decorated sedan chair suspended between two Bactrian camels. Just ahead of this unit, the Cinderella Carriage (now preserved at Circus World Museum) can be seen. Down the track on the right side of the image, four transfer cage wagons are being placed for the upcoming wild animal acts.

Chris Berry Collection

show resumed, although some horses slipped in the mud and several performers narrowly escaped injury.¹⁰¹

Nearly 20 years later, Merle Evans spoke of the night during a radio interview. "In a flash the windjammers were on their feet playing to avoid a panic," he recalled. "They knew enough to hang on to their instruments," but Evans said that the snare drum did get blown away. "I saw a bucket of water nearby, so I threw out the water and tossed the bucket to the drummer and he drummed the rest of the show on the bottom of the bucket."¹⁰²

After four years of heavily promoting wild animal acts, Charles Ringling surprised the entertainment world when he announced that beginning in 1925 the circus would no longer present trained lion and tiger acts. The ban on trained wild animal acts followed complaints from animal rights activists and Jack London Clubs, whose members "pledged to prevent cruelty to wild animals and birds."

Ringling explained the decision in *The Billboard*, writing:

- 1) "There has been enough criticism by the public of wild-animal acts to warrant us in withdrawing them, as a quite common impression is prevalent that tigers, lions, etc. are taught by very rough methods, and that it is cruel to force them through their stunts.
- 2) Many parents object to bringing young children to a show in which men and women enter the cages with ferocious beasts.
- 3) The delay in hauling the animals into and out of the circus tent and of transferring the animals from their shifting dens into the arena and back, is very objectionable and not altogether without danger.
- 4) The public seems to prefer animal acts in which the animals themselves seem to take an interested and playful part, as do dogs, seals, horses, elephants etc."¹⁰³

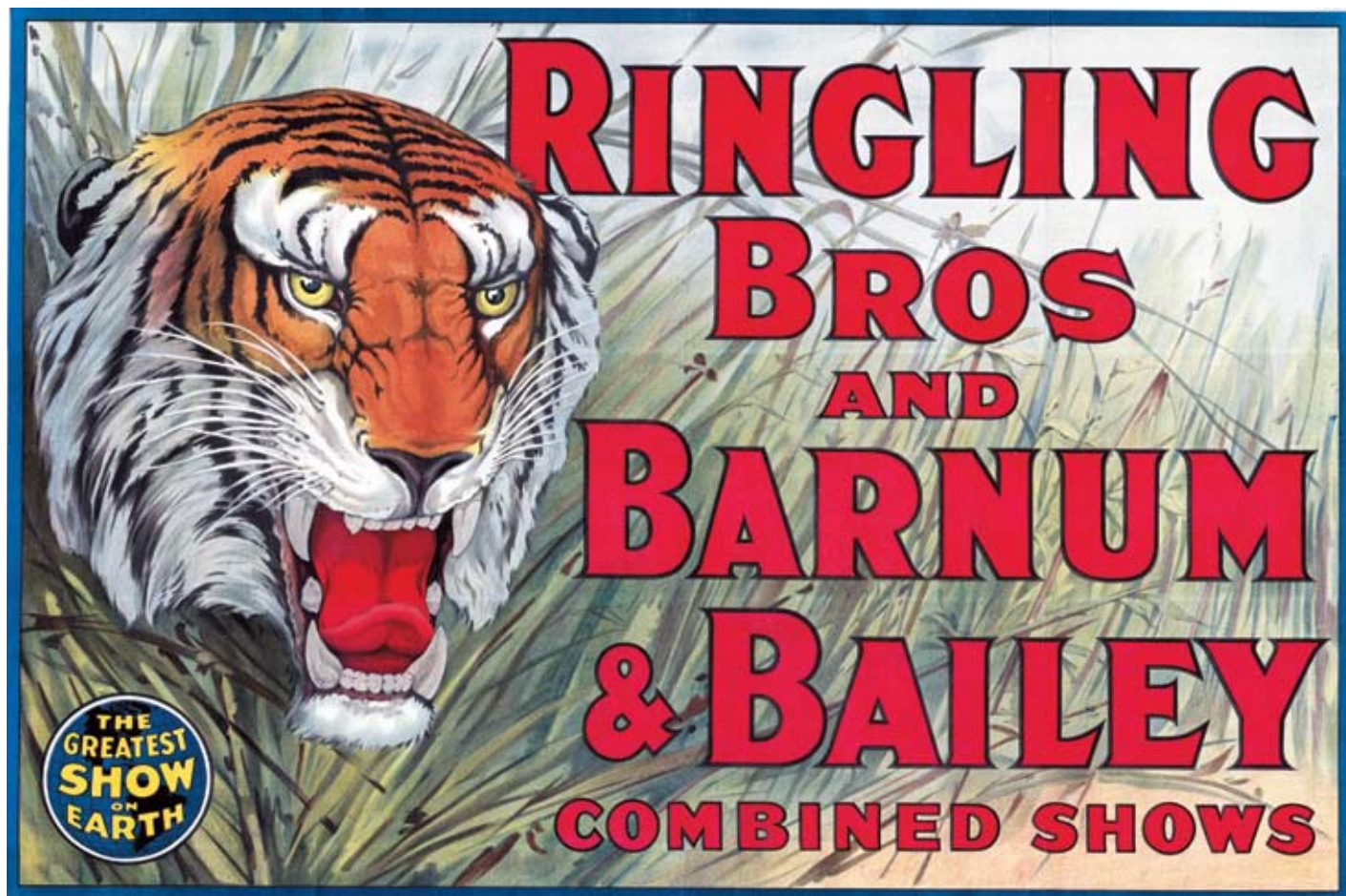
After the announcement both Charles and John Ringling said that they had received many letters of support from individuals and humane societies including the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals which praised the circus for dropping the wild animal acts.¹⁰⁴

Among those caught up in the controversy was Mabel Stark. Although she was known as the world's most famous female tiger trainer, in 1925 – and again in 1926 – she ap-

expert horseman or horsewoman will be shown in a pretentious number called the 'Fete of the Garlands'".¹⁰⁶

In addition to the horse acts John Ringling reminded the public that, "dogs, seals, horses and elephants are especially popular. We shall have plenty of this type of act."

As the animals were being loaded for the trip from Bridgeport to Manhattan, it was reported that there was trouble getting the dozens of horses onto the train, and it



This rare Strobridge lithograph from 1925 was produced in the same style as the classic "Charging Tiger" poster that was first created ten years earlier by the well-known animal artist Charles Livingston Bull. At the time this one-sheet was used, many of the performing tigers of previous years had been transferred to the menagerie.

Chris Berry Collection

peared with liberty horses and most of the Bengal tigers from her act were transferred to the menagerie. When interviewed about her changing role Stark wistfully repeated the company line, "I find the horses more difficult to manage than the tiger," she told a reporter, "but there is no doubt that the elimination of the more dangerous acts was for the best."¹⁰⁵

While trained wild animals were no longer being promoted, circus press agents boasted that the menagerie was now home to more than "a thousand zoological rarities," and Dexter Fellows promised, "This year's circus program will glorify the horse in a manner never before approached, no less than 350 equines being offered in displays of great intelligence and beauty. At least 150 horses, each ridden by an

took a barrel of sugar cubes to coax the dancing horses into their stock cars."¹⁰⁷

Once the circus arrived in New York the circus press agents began hatching a plan to promote the fact that the 1925 stand would be the last ever at the old Garden, with demolition to begin a week after the engagement ended.

As he stood on the southwest corner of Madison Square with a reporter for *The New York Times*, the veteran press agent looked up at the statue of the goddess Diana on the roof of the Garden and said: "It is the last time that dainty Diana will ever look down on our astounding aggregation of ponderous, palpitating pachyderms, and it greatly grieves me to bid her goodbye. All circus men grieve."¹⁰⁸

Fellows realized that after nearly 50 years of perfor-



NBC broadcast a national radio program from the basement of Madison Square Garden in 1925 and elephant trainer George Denman brought two-year-old Dolly to the microphone. The sounds of the circus menagerie were heard on the program from coast-to-coast.

Library of Congress

mances the circus had to do something momentous to mark the occasion. A few days later more than 1,000 invitations were sent out to the New York press and friends of the show for a special party on the evening of Sunday April 26 when no regular performances were scheduled, and the arena was dark.

As the guests began arriving that night they were greeted with the cries of “Get your pink lemonade!” from the candy butchers. According to Fellows when the reporters took a sip they suddenly began to smile. Although Prohibition had been the law of the land for more than five years, equestrian director Fred Bradna had mixed up gallons of spiked lemonade that included Bacardi rum, white wine and grenadine to give it the authentic pink color.

“Thanks to the juice boys who moved about the seats dispensing their wares, our audience was in the proper spirit when the old arena was flooded with light for the opening number,” Fellows recalled.¹⁰⁹

Nostalgia then filled the Garden as the ghost of P. T. Barnum, played by clown George Zammert, made his way around the arena, along with Barnum’s white elephant and Tom Thumb in his original carriage, lent by Samuel Gumpertz, then the operator of



During the circus Grand Entry, Merle Evans led his musicians around the hippodrome track. Throughout the performance the band played traditional circus music, along with classical arrangements and popular songs of the day.

Chris Berry Collection

Coney Island's Dreamland amusement park.

The performance started as an accurate reproduction of an old-time one-ring circus and paid tribute to the hundreds of performances that had been held in the old Garden. But soon a bareback rider burst through a paper hoop and a modern production was presented for the audience that consisted of friends and family of circus performers along with John and Charles Ringling. After the performance, the guests were served dinner in the circus ring.¹¹⁰

Although only a small group celebrated the early days of the American circus that night, millions more were embracing the future as they tuned into another national radio broadcast from Madison Square Garden on April 4. The success that NBC had the previous season was repeated with another national hookup, this time a one-hour program, which almost ended in disaster.

Just before six o'clock, as listeners were still adjusting their crystal sets, a giraffe named Bozo began chewing on wires that had been stretched across the ceiling of the basement menagerie. Although Lew Graham's opening monologue was briefly disrupted by static, once the engineers realized that the giraffe was to blame a carrot was produced and Bozo turned his attention to a more substantial and satisfying snack.

The broadcast itself was punctuated by the noises associated with the various animals of the menagerie, including a lion named King who "let out a roar that nearly bowled over the microphone." According to one of those listening to the broadcast, "some of the animals acted as though they

had contracts with a phonograph company."¹¹¹

During its six weeks at the Garden the circus ended each performance with the band playing *The Star-Spangled Banner*, but when the last horse trotted out of the arena on the night of May 2, 1925, Merle Evans raised his baton and instead of the national anthem, those in attendance heard the strains of *Auld Lang Syne*. It was the farewell to Madison Square Garden, the New York home of the circus for 34 years. The next week contractors began tearing down the old building, and the next season the circus opened in a new arena, built by the Ringling brothers and Tex Rickard at the corner of Eighth Avenue and 50th Street in midtown Manhattan.¹¹²

As the 1925 tour began under canvas, the 350 horses that appeared in the show that season required much more space, so two extra rings were placed around two of the stages, creating a true five-ring circus. When the show was in Baltimore, an observer marveled at the magnitude of the layout.¹¹³

The five sawdust rings were filled with horse acts that were simultaneously presented by Jorgen Christiansen, Rudolph Mayer, Harry Herzog, Mabel Stark and Vladimir Schraube.¹¹⁴ The program also featured a dozen simultaneous wire acts, including the Ringling-debut of Con Colleano, who performed a forward somersault, and the return of Berta Beeson, described as "a young fellow in girl's clothes who fools the crowd every time."¹¹⁵

Among the many acts that joined the show in 1925 was a comedy aerial duo of contortionists Michael Morris and



The circus train of the 1920s included as many as 100 railroad cars, regularly traveling in four sections. This photograph from 1925 shows 16 loaded flatcars, part of trains that were advertised as "More than One and One-Third Miles Long, Loaded with Ten Thousand Wonders from Every Land."

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Circus Collection

Lou Jacobs. One of Jacobs' gags had him cast as a clown photographer who would set up a picture with Harry Clemens, husband of Lillian Leitzel's maid Mabel, only to have the flash power "accidentally" go off in Clemens' face. By the following season Lou Jacobs had decided that his future career was as a clown rather than an acrobat, and he began developing his own routines and costume, which included baggy pants, big shoes and rubber ball for his nose.¹¹⁶

When the show was in Washington, President and Mrs. Coolidge were again invited to the circus; and although the President was unable to get away from White House business, Mrs. Coolidge, accompanied by the wife of Attorney General John Sargent, attended and stayed for the entire performance.

Another guest that day was General Nelson A. Miles, who had become famous during the Civil War as a 25-year-old boy general. Now 85, Miles was greeted by John Ringling when he arrived on the lot, and Miles told him "You know I never miss a circus. I have been coming for years."¹¹⁷

Just after the grand entry General Miles, who had received the Medal of Honor for gallantry at the Battle of Chancellorsville, suffered a heart attack and was removed immediately from the tent. The illness came so suddenly, and he was carried out so quietly that Mrs. Coolidge, who was sitting nearby, and the thousands of others were not aware that it happened. The General died a short time later, and the story of his passing at the circus performance was national news.¹¹⁸

The season of 1925 once again took the circus to the west coast and enormous crowds again filled the big top. After a very successful run in San Francisco the circus moved south to Los Angeles where it set up on the traditional circus lot at the corner of Washington and Hill streets. The canvas layout was so enormous that a temporary bridge was built across Hill Street to move the huge crowds from the menagerie and sideshows to the big top. The tents were packed in Los Angeles, and on the first day of the four-day stand 25,000 witnessed the two performances.

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Circus Stories

PERTAINING TO THE

RINGLING BROS. AND BARNUM & BAILEY COMBINED SHOWS



**SEASON OF
1926**

**TO
EXHIBIT IN**

TO THE EDITOR:

Realizing that any courtesies you may see fit to extend our Circus entail extra work for your department, we have endeavored to simplify matters by writing heads and captions for our stories and cuts. The original etchings of the pictures shown herein have been left with you. One week prior to our date of exhibition another representative will call and, with your permission, supply you with additional news stories until the Circus arrives.

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**RINGLING BROS. AND
BARNUM & BAILEY
COMBINED**

When circus press agents such as Dexter Fellows visited a newspaper, they left behind press books which included pre-written stories and photographs. If a city had more than one newspaper, a different book would be provided so that the newspapers would not duplicate the same article.

Chris Berry Collection

Among those in attendance was Calvin Coolidge's Vice President Charles Dawes.¹¹⁹

Even though it had been years since the Ringling circus had presented a daily street parade, the era officially ended in 1925 when circus owner George Christy reached out to Charles Ringling about the possibility of buying some of the parade wagons still in storage in Baraboo. "The final result was I bought most of their parade wagons except for the big Bell Wagon, the United States bandwagon, the stream calliope, a big wardrobe wagon and several others," Christy recalled. Although circus owner Fred Buchanan also acquired some of the Ringling parade wagons, Christy made a deal for approximately 30 more wagons and floats that were stored at the Bridgeport winter quarters.¹²⁰

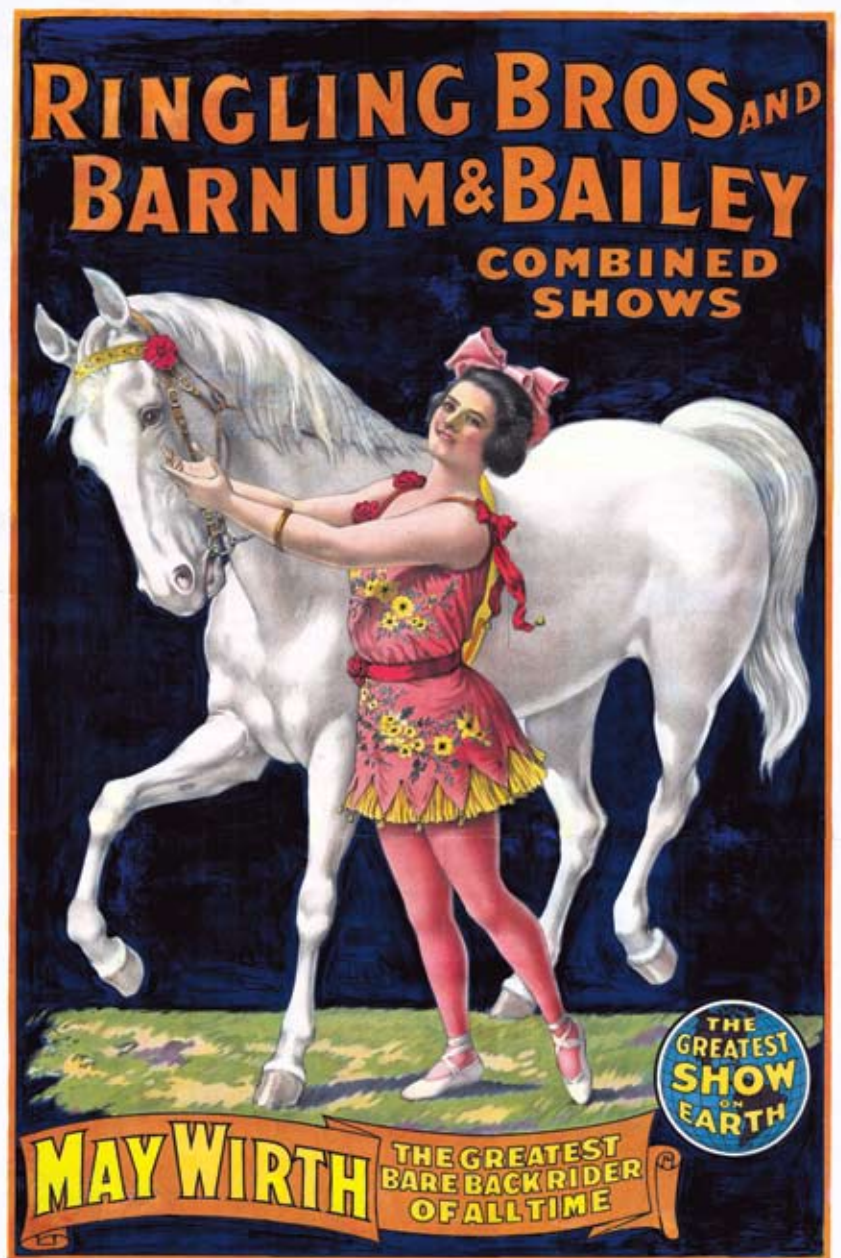
While several of the wagons may have been kept for sentimental reasons, John Ringling reiterated the belief that parades were no longer practical for a circus the size of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. "Circus parades are simply impossible in these days of congested traffic – physical impossibilities," he said. "The parades often finished late, and audiences would be grumbling: 'What are they holding us here for? Why doesn't the show start?' So we had to cut out the parades."¹²¹

Although parades and animal acts had both been eliminated by the time the circus rolled into New York in 1926, it was now setting up in a new arena that seated 14,000 people, considerably larger than the capacity of the old Garden. Never one to hold back, Dexter Fellows embraced the move to Midtown Manhattan and predicted that "the neighborhood will be redolent with the perfume of peanuts and red lemonade, and the echoes of the six-cylinder circus band crashing against the window panes," adding that "the roof of the Garden will resemble a huge spider's web with its wilderness of swinging ladders, trapezes, tight wires and aerial contraptions," promising that "acts of this character will be displayed to much better advantage than at the old Garden."¹²²

As the opening spectacle filled the new arena some remarked that the new building seemed smaller than the old one. Fellows quickly countered any criticism and said that from east to west the new Garden was only one foot shorter than the old one, and from north to south it was

20 feet wider. The roof was not as high however, and one reviewer said it seemed that the trapeze and other aerialists appeared "about to drop into the laps of the audience."¹²³

The turnout for the opening at the new arena was huge,



Competitors such as the American Circus Corporation frequently routed their circuses into cities ahead of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. A special brigade of billposters tried to stay ahead of the opposition, putting up lithographs like this 1926 example, that urged communities to "WAIT!" for the big show.

Chris Berry Collection



For many Americans, their first exposure to jazz music came from P. G. Lowery's sideshow band. Lowery's wife Carrie was a featured performer with "Lowery's Minstrels" and she sang tunes such as *I'm Gonna Jazz My Way Right Through Paradise*.
Charlene Gibbons Collection

bolstered in part by a school holiday. During the first six days of performances 150,487 crowded into the building. In comparison, the biggest six consecutive days at the old Garden delivered a little less than 80,000.¹²⁴

The performance opened with the "The Garland Cavalcade," which was also billed as an "Equine Ballet" under the direction of Jorgen Christiansen. Christiansen said that he picked 200 horses for the display after "auditioning" 500. Those chosen were selected not only for their beauty, but also for their "horse sense." "One out of every two elephants can be taught to perform a number of tricks," Christiansen said, "But it is rare when one out of four horses will have the necessary qualifications. Very often an extremely beautiful horse will prove to be absolutely rattle-brained."¹²⁵

The horses were taught to perform intricate steps including the Charleston.¹²⁶ The dance craze was sweeping the nation in 1926 and the circus embraced the fad, to the extent that a review in *The New York Times* reported that "It's a Charleston circus, with even the horses and the trained dogs – yes, even a seal – doing the steps."¹²⁷

With everyone dancing the Charleston it was no surprise that George Denman taught the steps to 29 of his elephants. One writer who reviewed the show was impressed with the dancing elephants and reported that, "some of those five-ton girls do it a lot better than some matrons we could mention," adding "there is one flapper elephant who does a solo Charleston. She has 13 variations in her front legs, and a few

new ones in the back."¹²⁸

Others performed their version of the Charleston including the Nelson sisters who danced on the tight wire and May Wirth who performed her version bareback as her swift white horse trotted around the circus ring.

If America was dancing in the 1920s it was also embracing jazz, a style of music that millions of Americans first heard from P. G. Lowery's sideshow band on the midway of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

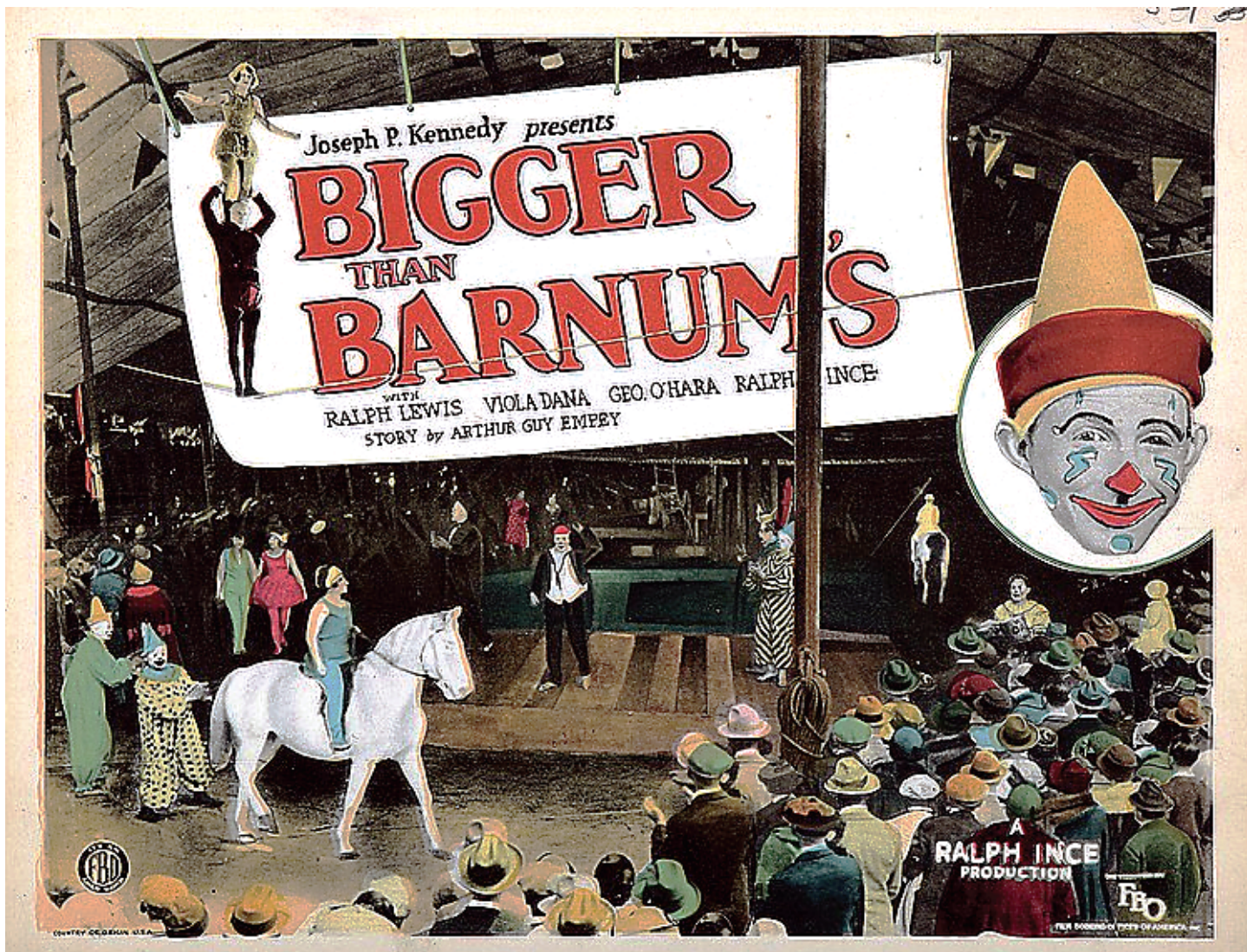
In small towns and big cities as crowds gathered on the showgrounds either Lew Graham or Clyde Ingalls would begin their spiel as the classically trained Lowery and his band took the stage. From the side of his mouth the talker would say "Bally P. G.! – and just like turning on a switch the band would come to life... They would play some kind of fast Dixieland, probably, do several bars of that and stop, and the sideshow manager would pick up again with his talking."¹²⁹

Throughout the 1920s, Lowery's wife Carrie was a featured vocalist with the sideshow band, singing *I'm Gonna Jazz My Way Right Through Paradise*, and *Never Let No One Man Worry Your Mind*. The jazz music performed by "Lowry's Minstrels" was contemporary, fresh and very well received. When the circus was in Los Angeles a reviewer said, "P. G. had one of the best bands in the business; in fact, the best I have ever heard under canvas. They could play everything from ragtime to overtures, from jazz to opera... These musicians, who played while wearing brilliant red, blue and gold uniforms, constituted the best sideshow band in America."¹³⁰

Another figure closely associated with The Jazz Age was New York Governor Al Smith, the Democratic presidential candidate in 1928. Smith was a regular at the circus and when he joined John Ringling in his box at the new Madison Square Garden, Merle Evans serenaded the popular Governor with his theme song *The Sidewalks of New York*. The news that Smith was at the circus soon spread to the dressing room and during the grand entry every performer and clown who passed his box turned and smiled at him, and when Jenny Rooney waved from the Cinderella coach the Governor waved back. As the show ended Smith said, "I get as much of a kick out of a circus now as I did when I was a kid."¹³¹

According to the souvenir program the daily expense for the circus in 1926 was between \$15,000 and \$16,000. Readers were also told that 2,200 stakes were driven in each town and canvas crews pulled 42 miles of rope. The big top measured "20 feet longer than in 1925," and the lighting had been upgraded with reflectors placed at both ends of the big tent to evenly distribute the light.¹³²

The lighting did cause problems for Lillian Leitzel, who told a reporter, "The air at the top of the tent is much hotter of course, than near the ground. In addition, there are huge searchlights only a few feet away and they are like stoves. The rings are of iron. They get hot and my hands slip. It makes it



Joseph P. Kennedy entered the film business in 1926 with a silent picture titled *Bigger than Barnum's*. Shortly after the movie premiered, attorneys for John and Charles Ringling were granted a restraining order which stopped exhibition of the film.

Internet Movie Database

very difficult indeed.”¹³³

As the circus evolved so did America's entertainment appetite, and while several circus-themed movies had been produced in the time since Edison perfected the motion picture camera, when a Boston businessman named Joseph P. Kennedy produced a silent film titled *Bigger Than Barnum's* John and Charles Ringling took him to court. The patriarch of the Kennedy political family had invested in the film that featured a questionable circus by the name of “Ranglin,” an insult which the show's attorneys said was “damaging, degrading and harmful to the circus as an institution.”

After the film premiered in July the Ringling brothers were able to get a restraining order against showing the film. The show's attorneys claimed that the events depicted in the movie – including a fire – were “the very things that a high-class circus always and continuously, cautiously and zealously guarded against.” The complaint also said, “The picture itself is misleading, in that as a portrayal of circus

life, it is inferior in quality and disparaging in its influence on the public.”¹³⁴

Joe Kennedy then filed a countersuit which claimed that the circus was interfering with his distribution and exhibition of the picture. The countersuit also claimed that the Ringling brothers had no property right to the name “Ranglin,” and “Barnum” was a public figure, therefore his name was in the public domain.¹³⁵

Although the film was pulled from distribution, research for this article has not determined how the lawsuits were resolved, and while some publicity material for the film remains, *Bigger than Barnum's* is now believed to be among the “lost films” that no longer exist in any studio archives, or public or private collection.

One of P. T. Barnum's original attractions, “Zip The What-is-It,” had been a feature of the Ringling sideshow throughout the 1920s. When the show opened at the new Garden, Zip and his ever-present violin were there, though



During the Roaring Twenties, large crowds routinely packed the menagerie exhibition as was the case on July 11, 1925 in Muskegon, Michigan. In later decades side-walled menageries often signaled a late arrival, but sometimes on sultry days Ringling presented their zoological collections in the open air to create a less stifling environment for the animals as well as the public.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Circus Collection

at the time he was seriously ill with pneumonia. Shortly after the show opened the 83-year-old “Dean of the Sideshow” was taken to Bellevue Hospital and Charles Ringling ordered that no expense be spared for his care.

Zip, whose real name was William Henry Johnson, had been hired by Barnum before he was in the circus business and had supposedly been given his stage name by novelist Charles Dickens during a visit to the American Museum in 1868. According to the story, when Dickens saw Johnson, an African-American with a tapered “pinhead” he asked Barnum, “What is it?” Thinking fast, Barnum supposedly said, “That is it!...a ‘What-is-It?’”

On April 24, 1926 Johnson died and the entire “Congress of Strange People” attended the funeral service.¹³⁶

Shortly after Zip’s death, and while the circus was still at Madison Square Garden, Charles Ringling became ill with what was first said to be influenza¹³⁷ and later reported to be a nervous breakdown.¹³⁸

After convalescing at his new mansion in Sarasota, Ringling was able to rejoin the circus in Milwaukee for a short visit, and after attending sold out performances on July 27 in Sheboygan he returned to the east coast.¹³⁹ Late in the season he was back with the show, and while the circus was in Birmingham on October 30, he became ill with what

was described as a severe cold.¹⁴⁰

The next day the season ended and when ticket sales for 1926 were totaled, the circus once again generated nearly \$4 million in revenue.

Despite the winning season Charles Ringling’s health continued to deteriorate, and soon the lingering cold developed into pneumonia. Ringling’s weakened condition was believed to be a factor in his heart attack and death on December 3, the day after his 63rd birthday.¹⁴¹

A funeral was held at Ringling’s new Sarasota mansion and literally thousands were allowed into the palatial home, paying their respects as they passed by his casket. Ringling’s body was then taken to a local mortuary where it remained while a mausoleum was completed at the Manasota Memorial Park. On the day of the funeral every Sarasota business was closed, and the American Legion placed flags at ten-foot intervals on Main Street.¹⁴²

Although Charles Ringling’s 500-word will gave his share of the circus to his widow Edith,¹⁴³ John Ringling was clearly in charge of the show, and less than four months after “Mr. Charlie” died, the last of the Ringling brothers announced that the circus would be leaving Bridgeport and relocating its winter quarters to Sarasota at the end of the 1927 season.¹⁴⁴



The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey performance tent was 500 feet long in 1925 – a six-pole big top with three rings, four stages and seating for 12,000 spectators. The large hippodrome track provided space to “straw the house” for even larger audiences.

Greg Parkinson Collection

The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus of the 1920s was a reflection of the times. The decade was defined by cultural changes, a strong economy and a bright future. Shortly before his death Charles Ringling realized that society was evolving and he explained how *The Greatest Show on Earth* was positioned to keep up with the changes:

“You see what keeps the circus young is imagination. Imagination of two kinds. The first kind is the imagination which the showman uses to keep the circus fresh and entertaining. The second is the imagination of the spectator which lifts him out of himself for just a little while and lets him know how it feels to be stronger, braver and physically more skillful than the average of his kind...The circus does change. Its acts become better, the feats of the performers increasingly difficult. But the reason it remains the same in general is because it appeals to three basic qualities in human nature: people’s love of strange animals, their fondness for pageantry and display, and their admiration for strength and daring.”¹⁴⁵ **BW**

Acknowledgements

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Four of the six baby elephants that had first performed as the "Tiny Tommy Tinkers" in 1923 are seen pulling a highly decorated float, one of the final units in the Grand Entry parade. Among the group was an elephant named Marcella who became a leader in the Ringling herd until her death in 1977.

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