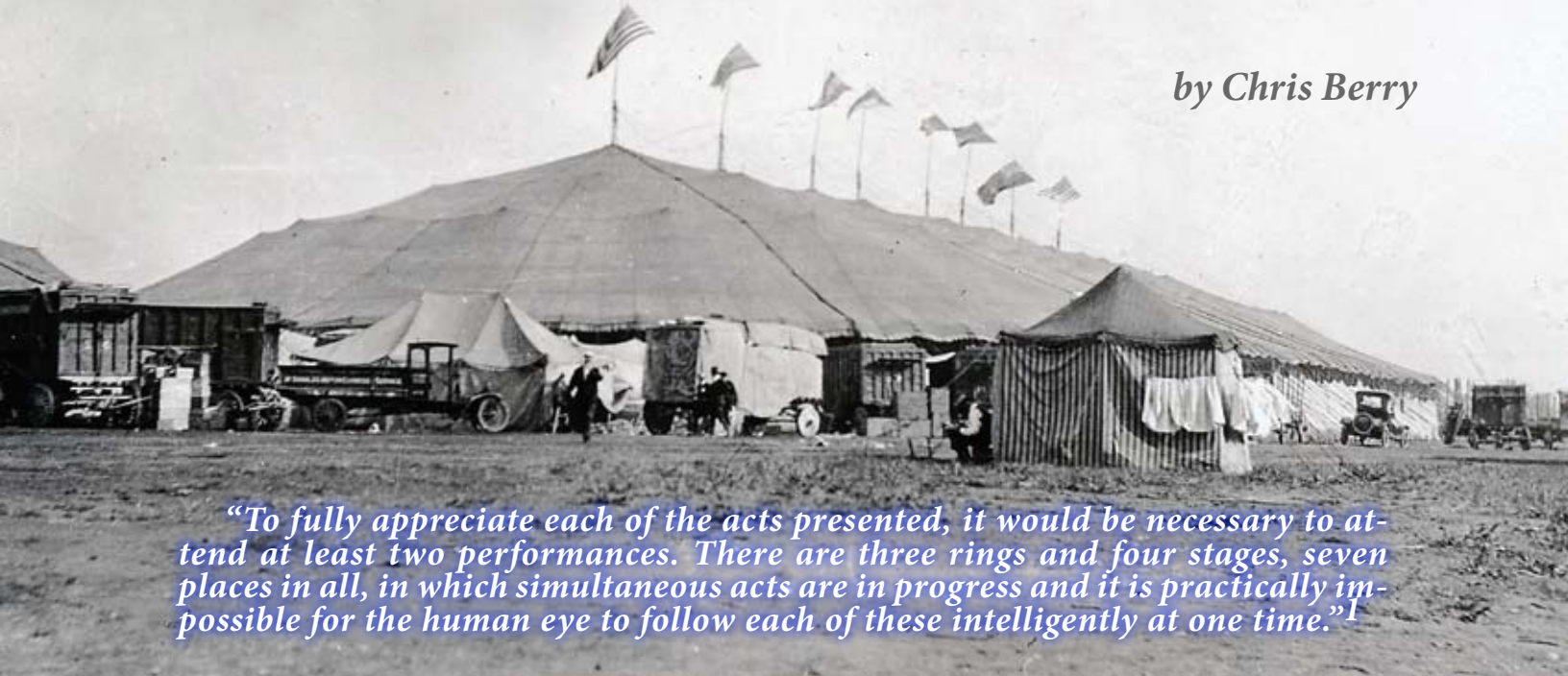


The Super Circus of 1919

by Chris Berry



“To fully appreciate each of the acts presented, it would be necessary to attend at least two performances. There are three rings and four stages, seven places in all, in which simultaneous acts are in progress and it is practically impossible for the human eye to follow each of these intelligently at one time.”¹

Circus World Museum

“Ladies, this is the first day of the circus, and I want to have everything pleasant at the beginning of the season. There is no more Ringling. No more Barnum & Bailey. Please remember we are all members of one family now.”

That announcement was made in the dressing room at Madison Square Garden on opening day of the 1919 season, and overheard by a reporter from the *New York Tribune*.² “Aunt Allie” Hartzell, had good reason to admonish the young women, as the rivalries that had been building between management of the two large shows had filtered down to the performers and working men who had been tapped to staff the new “Super Circus” that would premiere that day.

Decades later equestrienne May Wirth had vivid memories of that time, “There was great jealousy because they had acts from each show in it,” she recalled.³ The sentiment was echoed by aerialist Jennie Rooney, “Charles Ringling had his performers and John Ringling had his. Whoever was popular with John Ringling was not popular with Charles Ringling and John Ringling didn’t like the performers that Charles hired, so there we were.”⁴

The friendly rivalry that had previously existed between the two shows became a matter of professional survival when the Barnum & Bailey trains arrived at the Bridgeport winter quarters at the close of the 1918 season, only to find that the Ringling Bros. show had already unloaded, and its managers were clearly in charge.⁵

The Billboard was effusive in describing how the Ring-

lings were blessed with two qualified department heads for each open position.⁶ Combining the two circuses meant that long-time qualified employees were now redundant and no longer needed. Some top managers were fired, and others resigned when told they would longer be heading up their department. The first to quit was Barnum & Bailey’s elephant superintendent Harry Mooney,⁷ followed by his colleague, boss canvasman “Happy Jack” Snelling, who would later re-join the show.

With rival factions forming, John Ringling was forced to make an unscheduled trip from Sarasota to Bridgeport to smooth out the growing dissention, which had even spread to Lombards, the popular saloon near the winter quarters. The owner of the nearby bar had partitioned the pub and created two entrances, one with a sign that read “Barnum & Bailey” and the other “Ringling.” On either side was a bartender who would serve only those in his area.⁸

The smaller management team allowed for the immediate reduction of expenses at the top end of the payroll, and by early January the Ringlings had eliminated half of the department heads used in 1918. For the new combined show, 17 managers were picked from the Ringling circus and 12 from Barnum & Bailey. Fred Warrell, who had been general manager of Ringling, was tapped to lead the new operation, overseeing key department heads from Barnum & Bailey including treasurer Charles Hutchinson, and general superintendent Frank McIntyre.



Among the female artists on the new Super Circus were highly acclaimed performers such as Ella Bradna, Tiny Kline, Lillian Leitzel, Bird Millman, Jennie Rooney and May Wirth.

Circus World Museum

In the publicity office, Dexter Fellows, long associated with Barnum & Bailey, was among those who departed, only to return to the show late in the season. Frank Cook, the legal adjuster for Barnum & Bailey, would continue to smooth out issues for the new combined show, assisted by Ringling attorney John M. Kelley.

With the management team in place, the next step was to plan the performance and schedule the acts. Following the death of Al Ringling, some of those responsibilities had been picked up by Alf T., but in the winter of 1918-19 he was convalescing at his New Jersey estate, unable to help frame the new combined circus.

John Ringling realized that he would not be able to handle the job himself so he enlisted Fred Bradna to take on an expanded role. Yet despite regular meetings and long limousine rides from Manhattan to Bridgeport, Bradna said that Mister John never revealed what his actual job would be

with the new combined circus.⁹ Bradna definitely had reason to be concerned about his future, for although he was clearly favored by John Ringling, brother Charles believed that John Agee, equestrian director for the Ringling circus since 1913, was the best choice to blow the whistle that introduced each new act.

According to Bradna, the opportunity to solidify his future presented itself on a blustery day two weeks prior to the Madison Square Garden opening. While speeding from Manhattan to Bridgeport, John Ringling's chauffeur was pulled over by a police officer in Rye, New York. As Bradna told the story, he immediately jumped from the car, pulled out an honorary badge given to him by the sheriff of Beaver County, Oklahoma, and asked the officer for directions. Bradna picks up the story from there:

"Ahm f'm Oklahoma, son," I said. "There's a canvas-man on the circus wanted in mah state for murdah, and this



Charles Ringling was often present in the circus backyard. Many of the acts that had been with Ringling Bros. felt a strong allegiance to the well-liked circus king.

Circus World Museum

heah's Mr. John Ringling with me, to identify the felon. Mah man's been tipped ah'm coming, and ah don' want him to git away."¹⁰

Agee, "it will work out alright."¹¹

After an argument between the two brothers, Bradna was named equestrian director and



Only days before the circus opened at Madison Square Garden, John Ringling (center) was faced with a crisis over who would be equestrian director for the combined show. John Agee (left) was given the title, and Fred Bradna (right) was named "general equestrian director."

Circus World Museum

The policeman peered into the car and immediately recognized John Ringling. The officer then turned on his siren and provided a police escort to the state line. Once the limousine was safely in Connecticut, John Ringling smiled and said, "That was clever, Fred. You think quickly?"

Bradna responded, "Thinking quickly, I would like to ask about my job. Where do I stand anyway?" John Ringling told him not to worry and even though Charles had already hired

to tell Agee that he would not be needed for the 1919 season.¹² With the decision made, Agee left for California and Bradna continued working on the program. All was going according to plan when shortly before the New York opening Bradna contracted encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain that was so severe he was not expected to survive.

With Bradna on his deathbed, Charles Ringling convinced Agee to return to the show with the understanding that he, not Bradna, would be equestrian director "for as long as he wished."¹³ With an ironclad offer and a

new contract, Agee returned to New York and began finalizing the program for the March 29th opening.

Meanwhile, Bradna began making a miraculous recovery, and shortly after the circus equipment arrived in New York from Bridgeport, he met with John and Charles Ringling at Madison Square Garden. During the meeting Bradna was told that although Agee was guaranteed the title of equestrian director, the combined show was so big that it also needed a “general equestrian director,” a new position described as being superior to Agee. Bradna accepted the job and began overseeing rehearsals at the Garden only four days prior to the first performance.¹⁴

With veteran showmen now in key leadership positions, the only new department head was Merle Evans, an outsider hired to replace both Barnum & Bailey’s bandmaster Karl King, and Johnny Richards, who had led the Ringling Bros. musicians the previous season.

Decades later Evans said he believed the table had been set for him on August 12, 1918 when he was in Sioux City, Iowa on the same day that the Ringling Bros. circus pulled into town. Although only 26-years old, Evans was already a capable veteran who had led the band for a number of touring shows, including the 101 Ranch Wild West in 1916. Evans had friends on the circus and while visiting that summer day he had a conversation with the Ringling bandmaster. Evans recalled the conversation as being brief and “frosty” and remembered Richards as being rather distant. The two

only exchanged a few words, but later that day when Evans spoke with sideshow manager Lew Graham, he was told there might be an opening for a bandleader in 1919.

Several months later while Evans was performing with Gus Hill’s Minstrels at a theatre in Cincinnati, Charlie Wilson, the trainmaster for Ringling Bros., caught the show. During the conversation that day the young cornet player mentioned that if anything turned up he could be found with Brunk’s Comedians out of Wichita.

Although none of the Ringlings had ever met Merle Evans, the brothers clearly had a tremendous respect for Wilson, as just before Christmas 1918, and only a few days short of Evans’ 27th birthday, he received a telegram from Charles Ringling.

HAVE POSITION FOR YOU AS LEADER OF RINGLING CIRCUS BAND. REPORT AT YOUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE.

The telegram did not specify what the pay would be, but Evans said that he was not concerned. “I knew they’d be fair with the salary. It had to be more than I was making, and it was a great honor to be band leader on the Ringling Show.”¹⁵

Although we may never know for certain why the Ringlings decided to go in a new direction, Evans told biographer Gene Plowden that he believed Karl King, who had led

the Barnum & Bailey band, had fallen out of favor with John Ringling because of the extended trips that he had taken with his new wife during the 1918 season. Evans also was told the musical arrangements that Johnny Richards had chosen for the Ringling Bros. band in 1918 did not sit well with Charles Ringling because of his use of symphony-like orchestrations rather than the brassy, fast-paced music normally associated with a circus.¹⁶

With the leadership team in place, John and Charles Ringling approved a program that would surpass any circus performance that had ever been presented. The lineup was so strong that performers who had been headliners and center ring stars only



Merle Evans (by drummer at left), seen here with the 1919 band and others, was lauded by the New York press for creating “one of the finest combinations of musicians that Ringling has ever had.”

Circus World Museum, Merle Evans scrapbook

six months before were now assigned to the end rings and stages, simply because there was a better act now destined for the center ring.

As he reflected on his 50 years leading the circus band, Merle Evans said that the 1919 performance featured the greatest array of stars ever seen on any show. “We had talent everywhere,” he recalled. “A lot of it, the top performers from both big circuses.”¹⁷

From aerialists to equestrians, and acrobats to animal acts, audiences attending Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey would see a two-hour program featuring the best of the best. As the *New York Times* predicted, the “two in one show” would be “the biggest thing of its kind that New York had ever seen.”¹⁸

Although the circus train of 1919 typically traveled in four sections, on Sunday March 23 eleven trainloads of equipment made the 55-mile trip from Bridgeport to the Bronx where the cars were spotted at the Mott Haven yards of the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad.¹⁹ After the first wagon was unloaded around 9:00 p.m., the caravan crossed the Willis Avenue Bridge into Manhattan and rumbled down Second Avenue to 23rd Street where the animals and wagons turned west toward Fifth Avenue and Madison Square.²⁰

Only five days before the premiere, rehearsals began at the old Garden. The building, which had opened in 1890, was nearly 30 years old when the combined shows rolled in and it was already showing its age. Merle Evans recalled that the rehearsal space for his new band was less than ideal. “It was high up in a loft and you had to climb old narrow stairs to get there. I still don’t know how we got our instruments up there.”

Yet despite the trek to the rafters, John Ringling was on hand for one of the band’s first rehearsals. “He listened and waited around until we took a break,” said Evans, who until that day had never met any of the Ringlings. “He asked how everything was going and I said ‘Fine.’ I told him I thought we’d be in good shape for the opening, which we were.”²¹

Less than six months after the two shows had prematurely ended their seasons, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows gave its inaugural performance on Saturday March 29, a day when New York was feeling the brunt of a powerful winter storm. Despite city sidewalks that were caked with ice and cold winds that howled in the streets, it was springtime inside Madison Square Garden, where an enormous crowd soaked in the smell of popcorn and sawdust.

Merle Evans recalled that opening performance, the first



In 1919, the lavish spectacles that had been a part of the circus for many seasons were replaced with a grand entry, a change from the pageants based on fairy tales or historical re-enactments.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Circus Collection

of three in Gardens where he would lead the circus band. "We had bright new uniforms and every member of the band sat like he was starched...I felt really important, real proud. I'd come a long way, for a country boy from Kansas."

For the grand entry of the first performance of the combined circus Evans chose a march titled "Crescent City." While waiting for his cue to start the performance he encouraged the band to, "Give it all you've got boys," and they did.²² In its review of the New York opening, *The Billboard* made special mention of both Merle Evans and the band saying, "It is without a doubt one of the finest combinations of musicians that Ringling has ever had."²³

"Greatest show I ever saw," was John Ringling's reaction to a reporter after seeing the performance, although he balked at saying which act he enjoyed the most. "Remember, I'm the boss. If I told you I liked May Wirth better than Poodles Hanneford, Poodles might quit, and May might ask for a raise. Or if I said the clowns were better than the aerialists, the flyers might accidentally fall down on my neck, so I will play it safe and say every act was the best."²⁴

When it came to equestrian acts, Ringling was spot-on. Never had such a combination of riders been together in a single performance. May Wirth and the Wirth Family featuring Phil St. Leon, along with Poodles Hanneford and

his family's riding troupe, plus The Riding Davenport, the Clark brothers, Fred Derrick and Ella Bradna, The Riding Rooneys, Tony Parker and Bagonghi, "the world's smallest rider," all took their turn in the spotlight.²⁵

In its review of the performance the *New York Clipper* described the difference in the acts:

"Miss Wirth is the acknowledged queen of the equestriennes and as such is given the center ring where she has the arena all to herself. She eschews the simpler stunts of bareback riding and confines herself to feats, any of which would make a star of any other woman rider. She does many backward somersaults while riding, rides in all kinds of difficult positions, makes leap after leap from the ground to the horse's back and as a climax, with each foot fastened in a ten-inch basket, makes a flying leap to the back of her horse.

"The Hanneford Family is also accorded the entire arena while their act is being presented. They come to the circus direct from the Hippodrome, but the fact that their work has been seen by admiring thousands at New York's biggest playhouse in no way detracts from their worth, for in the arena at the Garden, the value of their performance is enhanced many fold."

Among the other performers singled out in the review was wire walker Bird Millman, "the graceful little girl who does everything in her dance but shimmy," while accompanied by a tenor named Matt Keefe.²⁶

Yet despite the scolding that had been given in the ladies dressing room before the opening performance, the rivalry between the Barnum and Ringling camps was not subsiding, as aerialist Tiny Kline recalled decades later:

"Not a day passed by without some excitement, arguments over trivialities. We, the Barnum people, felt that that other



The great Australian equestrienne May Wirth accomplished twisting backward somersaults and other sensational feats, rarely, if ever, performed by other female riders.

Circus World Museum

ATOP NEW AMSTERDAM THEATRE

9 ZIEGFELD O'CLOCK REVUE

(FOR THOSE WHO DINE WITHOUT RUSH)
"ANOTHER FOLLIES"

With the advantage of being given in the GOOD OLD PRE-WAR PARIS ATMOSPHERE. Enjoy your after-dinner smoke while witnessing the best musical show ever produced.

ALL SEATS \$2.00. EXCEPT FRONT ROW

NEW ZIEGFELD MIDNIGHT FROLIC

BEYOND IMITATORS

☛ "The night was one of beauty, such as even Paris has never seen."—Charles Darnton, *Eve. World.* ☛

TWO ENTIRELY DIFFERENT SHOWS

| | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| BESSIE McCOY DAVIS | LILLIAN LORRAINE |
| FANNIE BRICE | BERT WILLIAMS |
| LILLIAN LEITZEL | BIRD MILLMAN |
| EVAN BURROWS FONTAINE | DELYLE ALDA |
| BEE PALMER | GREEN & BLYLER |
| HAL HIXON | EVA LYNN, &c., &c. |

There is more feminine beauty on the roof of the New Amsterdam Theatre than there is under the roofs of all the other theatres in New York.

Lillian Leitzel and Bird Millman were among those performing at Florenz Ziegfeld's Midnight Frolic during the 1918-19 winter season. Leitzel was not present during the Madison Square Garden engagement because of her commitment to Ziegfeld.

New York Morning Telegraph, December 22, 1919

gang was there by the grace of kindness from us, whereas the Ringling bunch was under the illusion that we were the poor orphans who needed adoption, letting us know it in no uncertain terms.... During the first week, the Garden was like an arsenal of explosives, where everyone trod lightly. Then, gradually, each got bolder and stood his ground, maintaining that his side was in power."²⁷

One of those noticeably absent from the performance at Madison Square Garden was Lillian Leitzel, who was wrapping up her winter engagement with Florenz Ziegfeld's *Midnight Frolic* in the Roof Garden atop the New Amsterdam Theatre in Times Square. Leitzel had been a part of Ziegfeld's revue each winter since 1917, performing nightly along with Bird Millman, singer Fanny Brice and comedian Bert Williams. When the 1919 circus season began, Leitzel was still featured at the nightclub, where she continued to perform during the entire Manhattan engagement.

Lillian Leitzel's place in circus history might have been much different had events unfolded differently during the winter of 1918-19. When the Ringling Bros. circus closed early in 1918, Ziegfeld offered Leitzel a contract of \$350 per

week for 100 consecutive weeks to perform in his *Midnight Frolic*,²⁸ considerably more than the \$200 that she had been earning under her contract with Ringling.²⁹

By all indications the New York nightclub audience loved the dainty aerialist in the Ziegfeld production, but shortly after her winter engagement began an event happened that would change American history, and possibly Lillian Leitzel's career. On December 18, 1918 the U.S. Senate proposed the 18th Amendment which would prohibit the sale of alcoholic beverages from coast to coast. After approval by 36 states, the Amendment was ratified and on January 17, 1920 Prohibition became the law of the land.

Ziegfeld evidently realized that the future of his exclusive nightclub that served cocktails during a sophisticated variety performance was in jeopardy, and perhaps it was no longer prudent to put performers under contract for 100 weeks.

Documentation is sparse, but Lillian Leitzel's agreement was apparently modified. Although she would return to the *Frolic* for the 1919-20 winter season, Ziegfeld closed the revue shortly after Prohibition went into effect.

Even without Leitzel on the program, the Super Circus was a sensation. During its final week at the Garden, the *New York Times* reported that the performance had been witnessed by nearly a half-million New Yorkers.

"For the first time in its history the circus has played to standing room only at every performance, and the advance sales indicate capacity audiences for this, the final week. When the performance finally ends next Saturday night, it is the belief of the management that nearly 500,000 persons will have witnessed the spectacle."³⁰

The population of New York City in 1919 was approximately 5.6 million people,³¹ and though it appears that the figure of 500,000 patrons was inflated, several hundred thousand did see the performance at Madison Square Garden. According to records from the 1919 season now in the Pfening Archives, during its four-week New York run, the circus generated \$383,210 in ticket sales (approximately \$5.8 million in 2019).³²

Admission to the performance at Madison Square Garden ranged from 50 cents to \$2.75,³³ and the sold-out performances quickly made the show the hottest ticket in town.

When a reporter for the Associated Press named Edward Roberts tried to buy a ticket midway through the engagement he was informed that the performance was sold out. As he and two others were leaving the Garden they were told that tickets were available across the street at the Madison Hotel. At the hotel they met with the unlicensed broker and were told that one-dollar tickets were available for \$1.50 and a \$3.00 ticket could be bought for \$4.40. The scheme was reported to police and Sam Gipps and Abe Berkowitz were arrested and charged with violating a city ordinance regulat-



The Hanneford family was one of several riding acts in the 1919 program. This lithograph was originally produced for Barnum & Bailey and was one of several reworked for the Combined Show.

Tegge Circus Archives

ing the sale of amusement tickets. Although now deprived of their income, the punishment was not overly harsh, as each of the illegal scalpers was fined \$10.00.³⁴

The success of the circus also attracted the attention of the American Federation of Musicians, which governed wages for the circus band. In early January, before Evans left Kansas, Charles Ringling sent specific instructions on the size of the band and what its members should be paid. Evans was told to hire 31 musicians at an average salary of \$19.00 a week, based on the 1918 pay scale which had ranged from \$14 to \$24 per man. More seasoned musicians would be given a higher salary, and Merle was to receive \$60.00 a week.³⁵

After the first evening performance, the musician's union approached John and Charles Ringling and demanded that everyone in the band be paid a minimum of \$25 per week. According to Evans, John Ringling was outraged, while Charles was more reasonable and began sharpening his pencil. The brothers told the union they would raise the band salary, however to stay within budget, 12 musicians would have to be immediately fired. Evans said, "[W]e dropped a dozen men right off the reel and I wound up with

four trombones, two basses, four cornets, four clarinets, a piccolo, two horns – 24 men in all. That still gave us a pretty good circus band."³⁶

Despite his embarrassment after being told to sack a dozen men he had just hired, Evans' spirits were lifted when he began receiving positive feedback on the band's performance, most notably from John Ringling, who made his way to the bandstand after the show ended. "Young man," Ringling said to Evans, "I like the way you handle that horn. When you were in that grand entry, you damned near blew me out of my box!" As Merle retold the story more than 50 years later he reflected on that first performance of the combined circus and said, "It was one of the nicest compliments I ever had."³⁷

For decades Barnum & Bailey had opened its season at Madison Square Garden, yet many of those from the Ringling Bros. circus were making their first-ever appearance in New York. Even some of the veteran performers were terrified of how they might be received by the sophisticated metropolitan audience and its discriminating tastes. For most, that fear vanished with the first performance. "I've seen every spot of the United States, but I never enjoyed entertaining

WANTED FOR
Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey
1919 Combined Shows 1919

Freaks, human extremes, entertainers of merit, novelties, etc., etc., for

THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE SIDE SHOW OF ALL TIME

Describe all details fully, send recent photos, state where last engaged, etc.

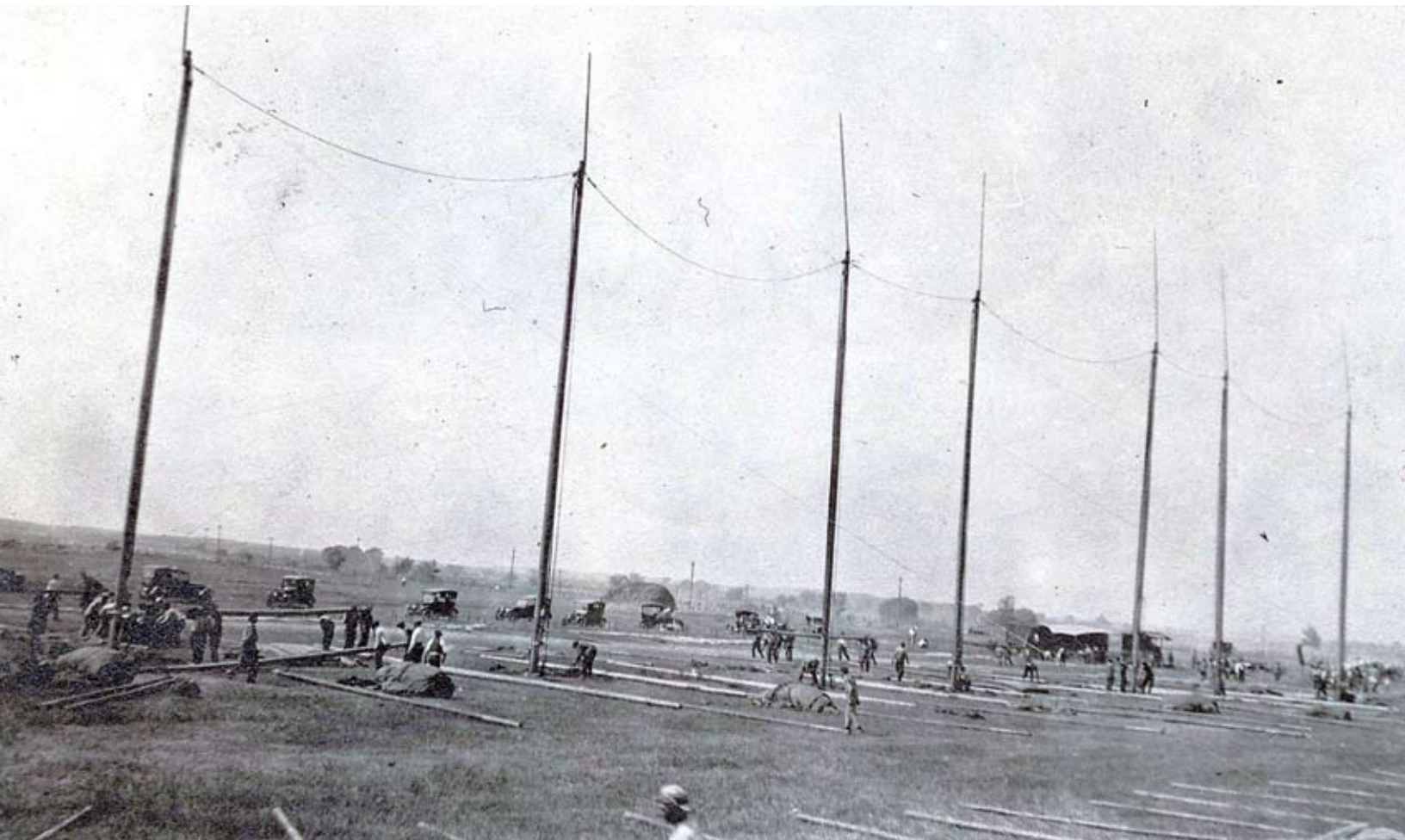
BEST WARDROBE AND PROPERTIES IMPERATIVE

Season opens in New York City in March. Colored talent address P. G. LOWERY, 219 Neilston Street, Columbus, Ohio. **All others address LEW GRAHAM, Manager Side Shows, 905 Palace Theater Building, New York City.**

(Two weeks' silence respectful negative.)

During the winter of 1918-1919, advertisements ran in The Billboard recruiting acts for the side show that was managed by Lew Graham, who also was the announcer for the big show.

Chris Berry Collection



Each morning Jim Whalen supervised an army of workers who set up the largest spread of canvas ever created for a traveling show. A straw house in the eight-pole big top could accommodate up to 16,000 people.

Circus World Museum

the people as much as I have right here," said veteran clown Al Minco, who was making his debut in New York. "I'm for Broadway from now on."³⁸

The New York press corps, like the New York audience, also had a reputation for being sophisticated, yet two days after the circus opened, publicity agent Wilbur Williams planned an event that generated ink in the metropolitan newspapers, just as when Tody Hamilton had pulled the same stunt on London reporters during Barnum & Bailey's tour of Europe more than 20 years earlier.

In New York, as in London a generation before, reporters were alerted that sideshow performers were "protesting" in the lobby of the Garden, complaining about banners that described them as "freaks." According to the *New York Tribune*, the scene was a "near riot" among the performers who believed the word "freaks" was a disrespectful term. The loud protest ended only after the sign was changed to read "Congress of Strange People."³⁹ The resulting coverage offered the circus free space in the form of "legitimate" news rather than paid advertising.

During the four weeks the circus was at Madison Square Garden, winter transitioned to spring and exceptional weather greeted Jim Whalen and his canvasmen as they set up the enormous big top in Brooklyn. Six days before the first outdoor performance of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, Whalen supervised construction of the largest spread of canvas ever created for a traveling show, an eight-pole tent nearly the length of two football fields, 560 feet by 200 feet, with a capacity for 16,000 people. There were 28 other tents in the canvas city, the smallest being the circus post office, along with an expanded menagerie, sideshow and a score of other pavilions for horses, wardrobe, performers, blacksmiths, properties and a cook house that served 3,700 meals



Above, Bird Millman was described in the program as "a fairy on a cobweb." Her tight-wire act included a ballet dance where she balanced on her pointed toes.

Circus World Museum

daily.^{40 41}

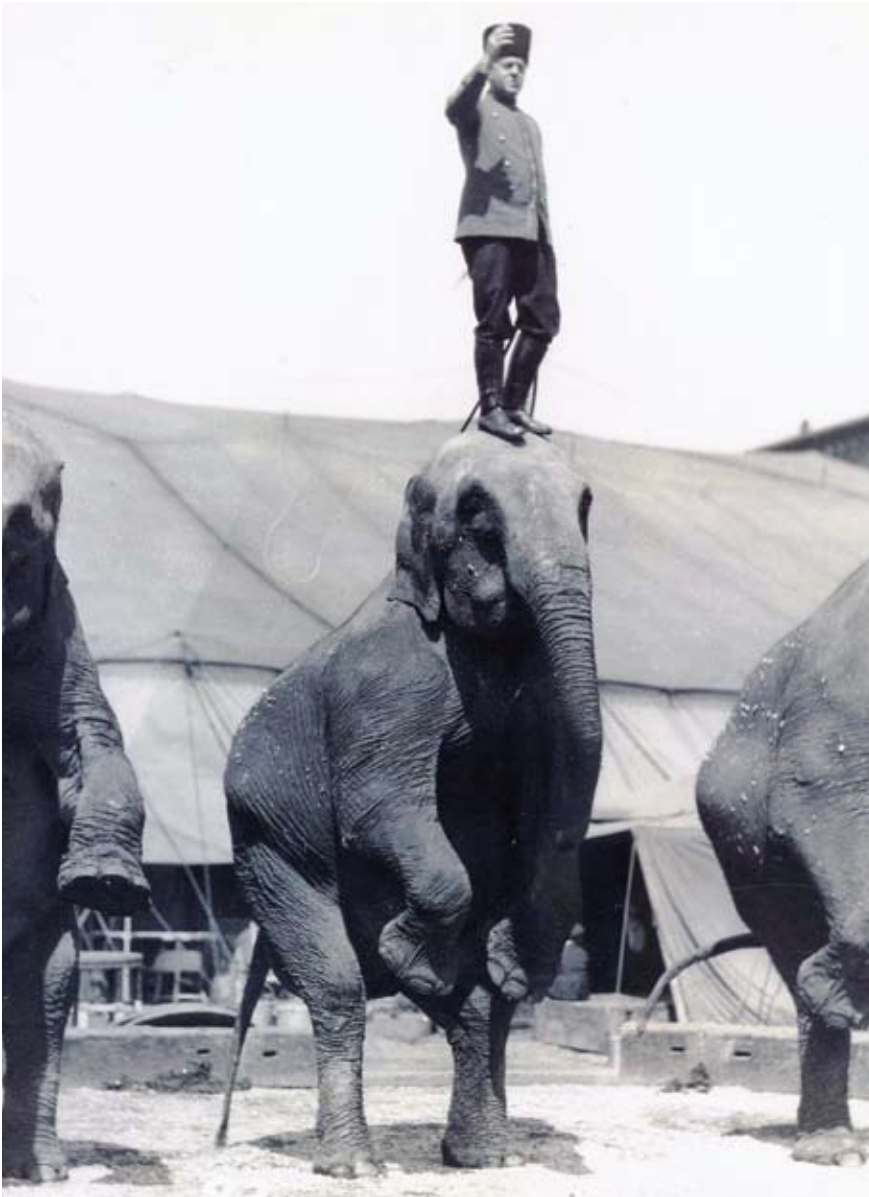
The six-day Brooklyn stand provided the first parade of the combined circus which rumbled its way through the borough as thousands lined the streets to view the procession. The parade, which featured Merle Evans and his band atop the Two Hemispheres bandwagon along with another, paid tribute to the United States military and the allied nations that had participated in the first World War. A review of the parade pointed out the popularity of the patriotic theme and reported that "the Italian float passing through the Italian quarter of the borough created a furor."⁴²

Whether it was the street parade, or the thousands of lithographs placed in storefronts and pasted on walls, the performances – and audiences – in Brooklyn were a harbinger of things to come. On Monday April 28, Fred Bradna blew

his whistle and the under-canvas season began, featuring a center ring sensation not seen by Manhattan audiences. Lillian Leitzel was back with the show, her act singled out by the *Brooklyn Eagle* as "a clever one [that] gave the audience many thrills."⁴³

Decades later as Merle Evans wistfully looked back on that 1919 performance, he agreed. "Lillian Leitzel, who performed on Roman rings and swiveled rope, high above the center was the greatest ever." As she made her way into the center ring, the band played her favorite waltz, "The Crimson Petal," continuing until she reached the top of the tent when the musicians segued into "The William Tell Overture," when she began her six-minute act on the Roman rings. Just as the routine reached its climax, she would continue with her specialty, the "plunge," where she would propel her body over and over, faster and faster to "The Flight of the Bumblebee."⁴⁴

Everyone seemed to have a favorite act on the show, and for May Wirth, herself a superstar performer, the highlight



George "Deafy" Denman was responsible for the combined herd of 38 elephants, the largest group of pachyderms ever exhibited to that time on an American circus.

Circus World Museum, Tom Parkinson papers

was the grace and talent of Bird Millman's performance on the tight wire. "She was a very lovely person," Wirth recalled. "She danced like a ballerina on the wire."⁴⁵ A reviewer for the *Boston Globe* agreed, calling her "one of the most remarkable, and certainly one of the most beautiful of the many acts." The program described her as "a fairy on a cobweb," and the Boston reporter said that "she whirled, pirouetted and pointed as securely as any ballet star."⁴⁶

From the moment word first filtered out that the two shows would be combined, the entertainment world had eagerly waited for scraps of information about the new combined circus, and once the show was under canvas *The Billboard* gushed in its review of the performances in Brooklyn, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.

"Sharply at 2:15 General Equestrian Director Fred Bradna blew the whistle and the season 1919, under canvas, was underway and to the guy who knows, destined to be a banner year of all shows. At the side show entrance, Lew Graham, ably assisted by Clyde Ingalls, had a show that knocked them crazy. At the front door was Chick Bell who had assistants who said, 'thank you.'

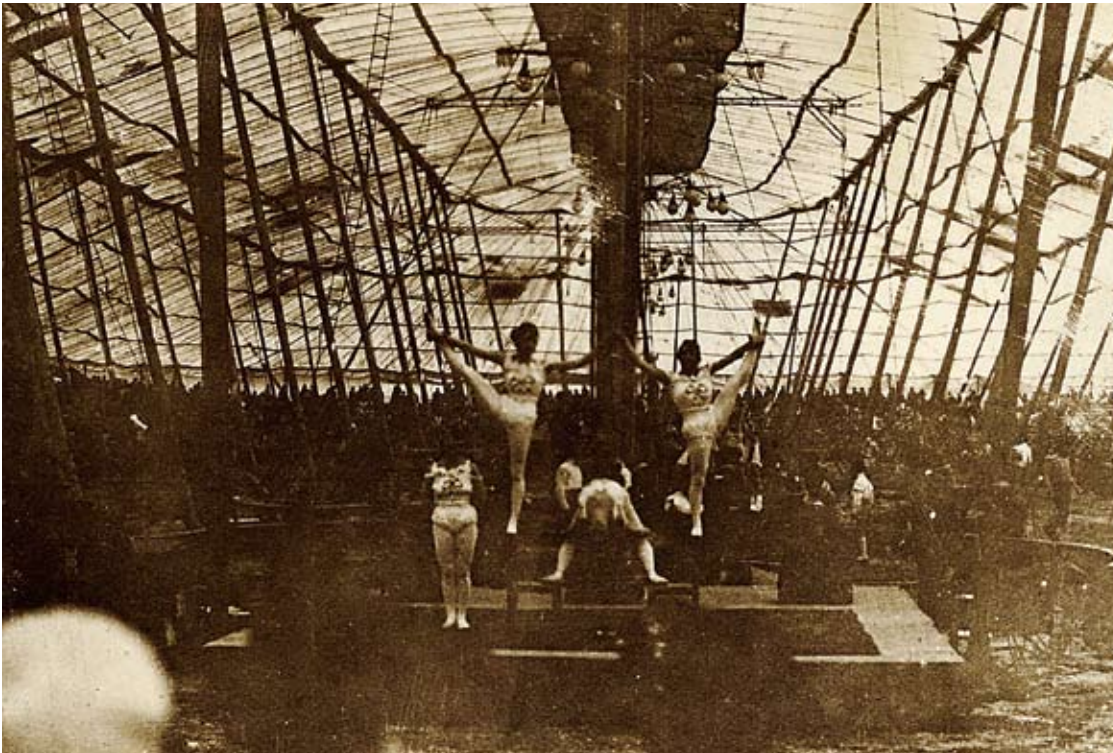
"Inside the menagerie was a stupendous collection of wild animals, elephants 38 – count 'em. No wonder they called it the first Super Circus. George Denman, the elephant trainer, has added ten pachyderms to the already large herd. At the conclusion of his act, the bulls, standing on their hind legs on the track from one end of the tent to the other, make a remarkable picture.

"Philadelphia turned out en masse for the week despite the terrible downpours of rain, which continued throughout the engagement. Bales of straw were used to accommodate the people sitting on the track. Washington business was also wonderful. Four complete turnaways with the public sitting up to the rings and stages at times. This season is the first time that President Wilson has missed the circus since taking office. The Knights of Columbus entertained about 250 soldiers at each performance in Washington [and] Government offices were all closed for one day to enable officials to see the first Super Circus."⁴⁷

In his notes about the Philadelphia stand, clown Herman Joseph also wrote of the cold and rainy weather and marveled at the crowds.

He described how, during six performances in Philadelphia, spectators were seated "way out to the ring curb" and mentioned that because of the enormous mob seated on hippodrome track, "the races were omitted."⁴⁸ He also noted that when the show was in Washington "the side-show, under the direction and management of Lew Graham, smashed all previous figures ever made by the Ringling Bros. or Barnum & Bailey shows."⁴⁹

The nation's capital had long been considered a good circus town, and with government offices closed so that workers could attend the big show, the response was overwhelming. The trains arrived from Philadelphia on a Sunday, and with no performances scheduled that day, the setup at 15th and H Streets NE was leisurely and impressive, as reported by *The Washington Post*:



Above, the Super Circus of 1919 included a multitude of displays that simultaneously filled the three rings and four stages. From acrobats to clowns, equestrians to aerialists, it was truly a colossal performance. Circus World Museum

“The unpacking of a circus from its wrappings is a thing to see. Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus carries everything that a circus ever thought of carrying, besides a lot that was never thought of until this very year. Herds of wild animals, many of which do odd and intellectual things, almost 700 horses, 28 tents, including the big top that is 600 feet long in itself, a company of 1200 people, 300 wagons, seals capable of astounding feats and a man who skates on his head to solid earth from the apex of the big top.

“Over 400 wounded soldiers from Walter Reed, St. Elizabeth’s, and the Naval hospitals will be the guests today and tomorrow at a circus party to be given by the Knights of Columbus committee on war activities.”⁵⁰

Despite a day where temperatures in the nation’s capital never reached above 60 degrees, the ticket wagons were overwhelmed as reported by *The Evening Star*: “At both performances of the opening day every foot of space in the stands was taken and straw was spread on the ground for the overflow from the seats. It is estimated that 40,000 persons

Right, there were at least 38 clowns on the 1919 circus, including Herman Joseph, who was a correspondent for *The Billboard*. He provided weekly updates on the personnel and activities of the big show. Circus World Museum

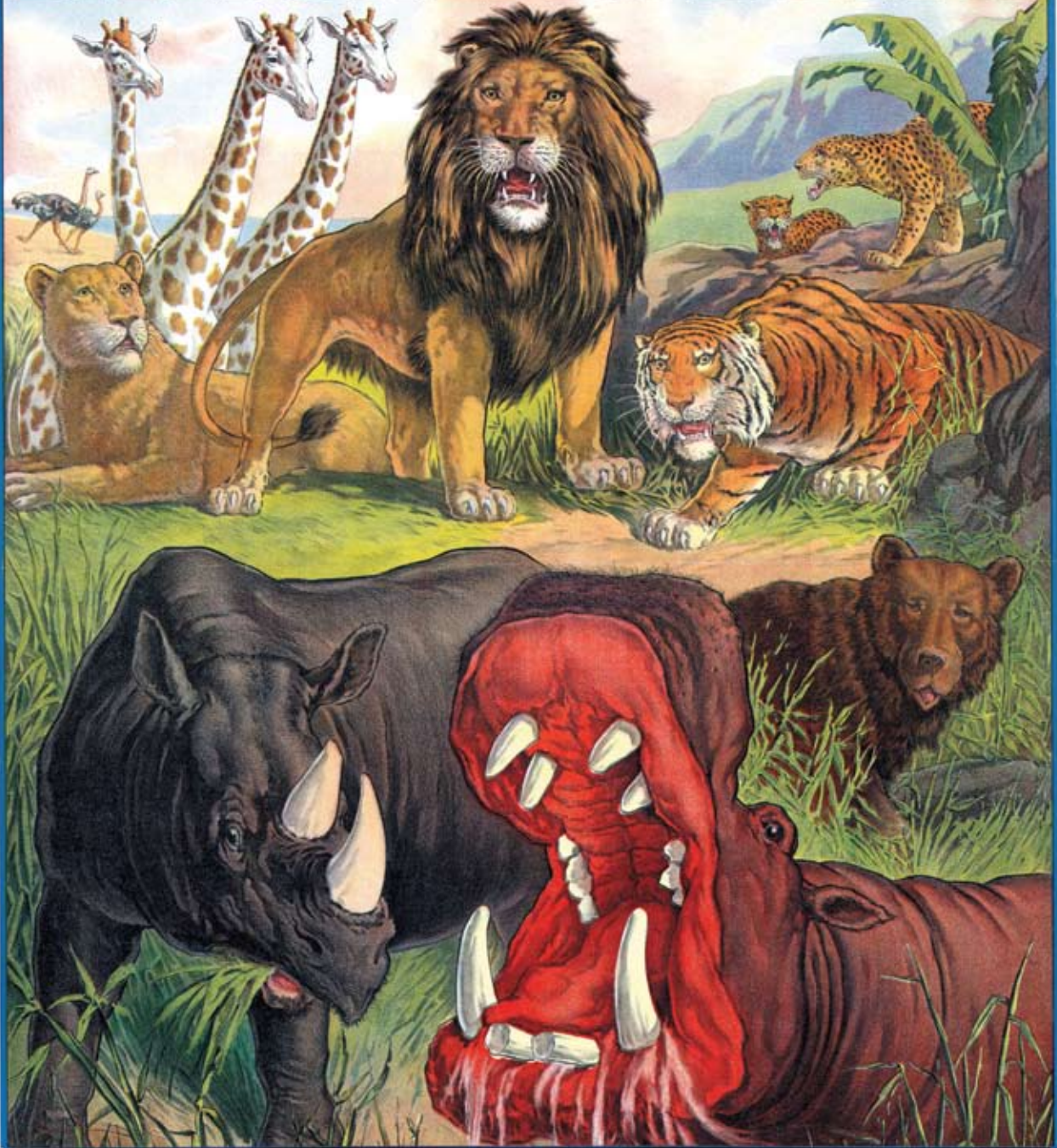


saw the big show yesterday.⁵¹

Records from the 1919 season now in the Pfening Archives confirm the immense size of the crowd. When all the receipts were tallied, May 12, the opening day in Washington, D.C., provided the biggest box office of the entire season, generating \$36,293.99 in ticket sales (about \$530,000 in 2019.)⁵²

The 400 wounded soldiers who were among the throngs attending the circus in Washington, D.C. were but a handful of World War I veterans who were treated to the

RINGLING BROS



AND **BARNUM & BAILEY** COMBINED SHOWS

This lithograph had been left on the shelves at Strobridge at the end of the 1918 season. The title Barnum & Bailey was pasted by hand to the bottom of this and thousands of other posters, so they could be utilized by the Combined Show.

Chris Berry Collection

show less than a year after the guns had been silenced in Europe. While the circus was in New York, wounded soldiers from New Jersey's Colian Hospital were invited as John Ringling's personal guests, and during a matinee performance in late April eleven double-amputees received a standing ovation from a crowd of 8,000 as they took their seats. After the performance one of the former soldiers told a reporter he enjoyed the acrobats and clowns much more than the equestrian acts, remarking that he had seen "too many wild horses in battle to get worked up over a chariot race."⁵³

Among the clown gags that no doubt struck a chord with the audience of 1919 was a takeoff on the burning house, only this time the routine was more topical. With the audience keenly aware that the sale of alcohol would soon end as Prohibition became law, the burning house was replaced by "The Last Chance Saloon," which was raided and then set on fire by a group of clowns portraying "down with liquor" teetotaling protestors. Once the saloon was on fire, other clowns tried to put out the blaze and save those inside, along with the liquor.⁵⁴

A production of that size would require a small army of clowns, and the combined circus offered exactly that. According to Herman Joseph's notes from the Madison Square Garden opening, there were at least 38 clowns on the show in 1919,⁵⁵ and among their routines was a gag that poked fun at the automobiles that were quickly replacing horses on city streets and rural highways. During the performance the clowns presented an early version of a "Pfunny Pford" act, where a fleet of Model T's had been modified to "do everything but talk." A reporter from the *New York Tribune* watched a rehearsal with Charles Ringling describing the scene as the cars "raced about the arena, ran forward and backward with equal ease and were as ready to go into the sections set aside for reserved seats as to remain in the sawdust oval." When the reporter asked Ringling his opinion on the act, the circus king quipped, "I've a new respect for them. I'll never drive another car!"⁵⁶

The success seen at the ticket wagon was no doubt due to the tremendous promotion of the world's first Super Circus. In the days before radio and television much of the bal-lyhoo came from the platoon of advance men that visited each town in the weeks prior to the show's arrival, and in 1919 there were "exactly 108" men traveling ahead of the circus,⁵⁷ including billposters and the contracting agents who arranged for everything from sawdust to cookhouse provisions, most of which was purchased locally each day.

At a time when large zoos were only found in metropolitan areas, the circus offered most rural Americans their only opportunity to see unusual animals from around the world, and when the two great shows were brought together, the menageries were also combined under the supervision of John Patterson. The expanded menagerie offered the opportunity for the publicity department to promote that the

show carried entire herds of animals, including a "baby section" which consisted of several lion and tiger cubs, a baby kangaroo, five baby elephants, a camel and two baby giraffes.⁵⁸

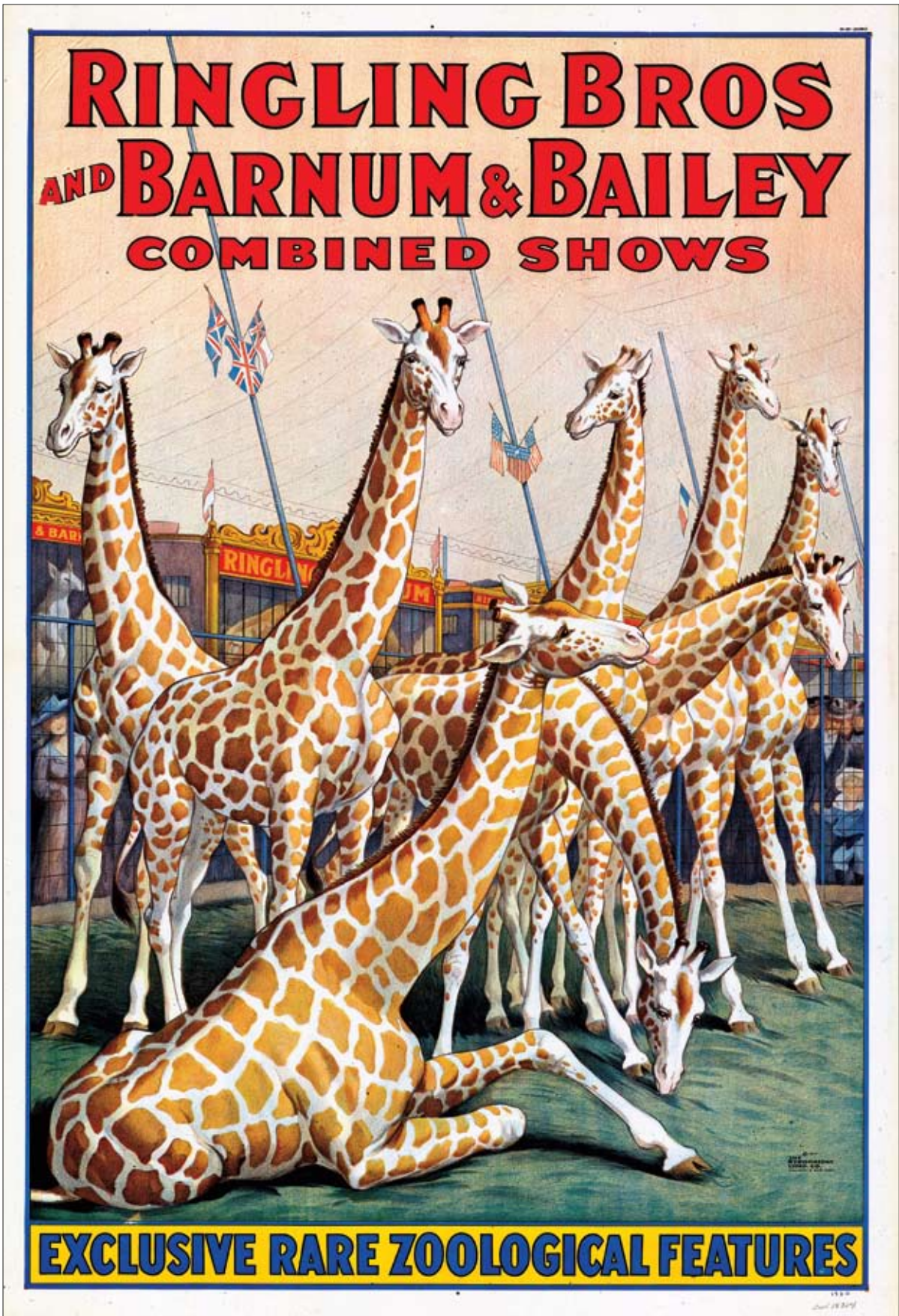
Although the menagerie contained 23 cage wagons filled with a variety of big cats, bears and even a hippo,⁵⁹ the most valuable and rarest attraction was a two-horned rhinoceros named "Old Bill" who had made his first appearance in the menagerie of the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Bros. circus of 1906, moving to Ringling Bros. in 1912, and Barnum & Bailey in 1913. Bill was a featured attraction with the combined show from 1919 until 1926, and special lithographs were created to promote his appearance in the traveling zoo.⁶⁰

The exact number of animals in the 1919 menagerie may never be known, as previous research published in *Bandwagon* and other publications differs somewhat from several newspaper reports published in 1919. In all likelihood the variance can be attributed to press agent puffery, however, there are several inconsistencies related to both the elephant herd and the number of giraffes that were carried on the combined circus.

In 1918, the Barnum & Bailey circus carried 18 elephants and Ringling Bros. carried 23, for a total of 41.⁶¹ Previous research revealed that prior to the 1919 opening, the herd was reduced to 38 following the death of two elephants at winter quarters and the sale of another to the Rockford, Illinois zoo.⁶² Despite the widely accepted roster of 38 elephants, the larger number of 41 was mentioned by both the *Boston Globe*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Research during the preparation of this article suggests that the inflated number was likely provided by press agent Wilbur Williams, who was also quoted in the *New York Tribune* as saying there were 42 elephants in the herd,⁶³ an apparent exaggeration when compared to the known tally of 38 elephants reported by *The Billboard* in its detailed coverage of the opening performance.

Determining the number of giraffes on the combined circus of 1919 is a bit more problematic for the historian a century later. Previous research supports the accepted premise that four giraffes were carried on the show in 1919,⁶⁴ however dozens of newspapers advertisements and thousands of posters promoted an extraordinary group of eight giraffes in the menagerie, six adults and two babies. Despite the belief that four giraffes were part of the Barnum & Bailey menagerie in 1918, along with another group of four on Ringling Bros., an analysis of the menagerie, wagons and train of 1919 suggests that no more than four were carried on the new combined show.⁶⁵

Throughout the early spring, the circus kept to a route that closely mirrored that which Barnum & Bailey had followed in seasons past. After long stands in Brooklyn, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, the show moved into New Jersey and Pennsylvania, where disaster was narrowly avoided when sleeping car #90 caught fire in the Jersey City



The 1919 menagerie was enormous with 23 cages of wild animals, 38 elephants and other exotic beasts. Although the show's billing promoted eight adult giraffes, it appears there were actually no more than four in the menagerie.

Circus World Museum

railyards. Had it not been for the quick work of the fire department, the blaze might have spread throughout the train. Fortunately, there were no injuries and the show was not delayed.⁶⁶

As the circus moved into New England, enormous crowds continued to make their way to the ticket wagon, despite hardships such as one encountered in Lowell, Massachusetts when the show's arrival coincided with a strike by trolley car operators. With the showgrounds located several miles outside of the city, many of those who normally would have attended and taken the trolley were not able to do so. Yet despite the strike and difficulty getting to the lot, the show did big business and two performances were given with a turnaway in the evening.⁶⁷

The Greatest Show on Earth's arrival in Boston each summer was a tradition that began in 1871 when P. T. Barnum's Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan & Hippodrome spent six days at the city's fair grounds during its inaugural season. With the exception of the hiatus when

Barnum & Bailey was touring Europe, the circus had visited Boston annually for over 45 years. The success that Barnum & Bailey experienced in Boston may have been one of the reasons that the Ringling Bros. *World's Greatest Shows* did not venture into the city until 1895 and even then rarely returned, making only ten appearances in the 23 years prior to 1919.

After a 200-mile jump from Albany, New York, the trains rolled into Boston on Sunday June 8. Despite a cold drizzle, a big crowd was on hand to watch the circus set up. Although the weeklong engagement began on a dreary day, the parade stepped off on time and considering the weather, business was very good. Tuesday was a beautiful day which resulted in a big matinee, and that night there was a turnaway. If Boston had been considered "Barnum Territory" in the past, the population welcomed the new combined circus, and the show reported the biggest advance sale ever experienced in the city.⁶⁸

In his notes on the Boston engagement, Herman Joseph



Thousands crammed the midway and big top in 144 different towns during the season that lasted from March until November of 1919.

Circus World Museum



One of the acts that transitioned from Barnum & Bailey to the Combined Show was Emil Pallenberg's performing bears. This lithograph had been created several years earlier, and rather than rework the title, the words Ringling Bros. were pasted to the bottom of the poster.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals Circus Collection

mentioned the tremendous crowds, saying that “Bales and bales of straw had to be used to seat the people,” adding that “quite a number of performers visited the Sells-Floto Show on Saturday while it was playing in Framingham.”⁶⁹

The crowds that made their way to Boston's Huntington Avenue lot apparently were not disappointed, as the features of the new combined show were described by the *Globe* as

Perhaps it was a professional jealousy or maybe the fact that close-knit communities such as circuses often spread gossip, but midway through the season rumors about the future of the show and the Ringlings began flying. While none of the rumors proved to be true, it no doubt had tongues wagging in the pie car.

The first rumor to be shot down was floated while the

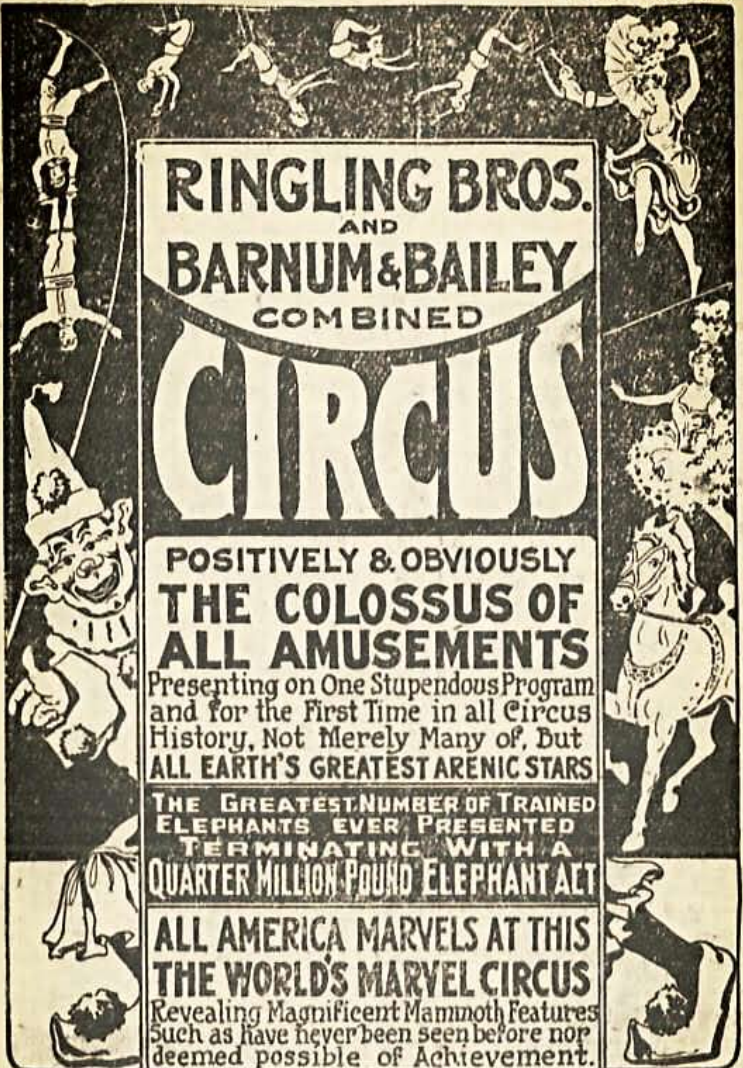
being presented on a “stupendous scale”:

“Just remember the Ringling Bros. shows, afterward think of Barnum & Bailey's and then try to imagine what the two are like since they joined forces. You can't do it. The only way is to go up some time between now and Saturday night, when the show closes and see for yourself.

“[You] have got to see at least a dozen circuses before you are competent to judge a performance like last night's. If you were an amateur of two or three shows you were probably so overwhelmed with the immensity and lavishness of it all that you can't remember whether there were 10 or 30 elephants.

“As a matter of fact, there were 41 [sic] of the huge, good-natured beasts that all children love. There were queer, accidental looking giraffes, and delightfully vicious tigers, dozens of camels and slippery lions, monkeys, hyenas, leopards, kangaroos (a whole family of them, including the baby), a hippopotamus, a rhinoceros and a good many other fascinating creatures to be looked at and perhaps fed.”⁷⁰

POSITIVELY COMING IN ITS ENTIRETY
BIGGEST **FRIDAY** **5** **ONLY**
CIRCUS **SEPT. . . .** **COMING TO**
DAY **CONCORDIA**



RINGLING BROS.
AND
BARNUM & BAILEY
COMBINED
CIRCUS

POSITIVELY & OBVIOUSLY
THE COLOSSUS OF
ALL AMUSEMENTS

Presenting on One Stupendous Program
 and for the First Time in all Circus
 History, Not Merely Many of, But
ALL EARTH'S GREATEST ARENIC STARS

THE GREATEST NUMBER OF TRAINED
ELEPHANTS EVER PRESENTED
TERMINATING WITH A
QUARTER MILLION POUND ELEPHANT ACT

ALL AMERICA MARVELS AT THIS
THE WORLD'S MARVEL CIRCUS
 Revealing Magnificent Mammoth Features
 Such as have never been seen before nor
 deemed possible of Achievement.

THE MOST ASTOUNDING SENSATIONS EVER ASSEMBLED.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>AUSTRALIAN AX-MEN In Amazing Tree-Felling Contests</p> <p>MIJARES High Wire Equilibristic Marvel of the Age</p> <p>MACPHERSON CLAN of Heedless Highland Horsemen</p> <p>WORLD FAMOUS CLOWNS FROM EVERYWHERE</p> | <p>MAY WIRTH The Greatest Girl Bareback Rider That Ever Lived</p> <p>HANNEFORD FAMILY In New and Novel Feats of Equestrianism, Featuring RICHARD HANNEFORD Most Sensational of All Riders</p> <p>BIRD MILLMAN World Famed Queen of the Air</p> <p>SIGNOR BAGONGHI Italy's Laughable Dwarf Comedian</p> | <p>MILLE LEITZEL The World's Most Marvellous Aerial Gymnast</p> <p>5 HIGHEST PERCH ACTS Intricate Feats at the Tops of Towering Poles</p> <p>THE CLARKONIAN With Ernest Clark, World's Greatest Aerialist</p> |
|---|---|---|

AND THESE BUT A TITHE OF A MULTITUDE OF WONDERS PARADE at 10 A.M.

Preceding First Performance
 Doors Open at 1 and 7 P.M.
 Performances at 2 and 8 P.M.
 Children under 12 years of age at Reduced Prices
ONE TICKET ADMITS TO ALL



Downtown Ticket Office Circus Day at Layton & Nelson's Drug Store

circus was still at Madison Square Garden. According to *Variety*, a European tour was planned in the fall after the show wrapped up its tented season in the United States. The story said that the show was booked for a six-week engagement at London's Olympia to be followed by performances at the Palais Royal in Paris.⁷¹ By early July the tale had been knocked down, with the explanation that after the Ringlings had proposed it to the management of the Olympia, it was decided that while a circus would be held there during the Christmas season, it would be "strictly of a British character and under local management."⁷²

At the same time the rumors of a European tour were cooling off, speculation began that the Ringlings would be resurrecting the Forepaugh-Sells title and putting it on the road in 1920. According to *The Billboard*, "several performers as well as members of the staff of the Ringling-Barnum show this season, have already been told by both Charles and John Ringling that 'in all probability there will be two shows next season.'" The reporter acknowledged that there was no official confirmation, stating that "...while the Ringlings, exhibiting their usual reticence, refuse to affirm or deny that they will put out two shows next year, it seems to be obvious to anyone with an ounce of show experience that with their masterly organization, the Forepaugh-Sells circus could be successfully handled without any great effort on their part."⁷³

Finally, although there was clearly admiration for the success the Ringlings were having with their combined circus, unsubstantiated reports began circulating that because of the success they were having, John and Charles Ringling had actually made the decision to retire at the end of the 1920 season. Once the circus was back in winter quarters, *The New York Clipper* reported that, "Both are said to believe they cannot properly oversee the operation of the big outfit and they will turn it over, with the rights to use both names, to whoever will pay the price."⁷⁴

One thing that was undeniably true was that in the summer of 1919 Chicago would be seeing the Ringling Bros. circus for the first time ever under canvas.

It was in 1895 when the Ringling Bros. circus

Concordia, Kansas was typical of towns that exploded in population on circus day. Five years later, the same community would set a record for the most people to attend a circus performance under canvas.

Chris Berry Collection



In mid-September, the third section of the circus train derailed near Milfay, Oklahoma. At least four stock cars left the tracks injuring 75 horses, a dozen of them so badly that they had to be destroyed. The circus resumed its tour after missing only one day of performances.

Circus World Museum

first ventured into Chicago, opening the season at Tattersall's Amphitheatre. In the years that followed Chicago was usually first on the itinerary, and always presented indoors.⁷⁵ With the new combined show opening in Madison Square Garden and touring the east coast prior to a swing through the Midwest, the Chicago date would now occur in the middle of the tented season.

Although P. T. Barnum's Grand Traveling Exposition and World's Fair had set up on the Chicago lakefront during its first performance in the city in 1872, with the exception of a benefit performance by Hagenbeck-Wallace in the summer of 1918, the open space now known as Grant Park had not hosted a circus in many years.

In late July, as the show was making its way west across West Virginia and Ohio, an arrangement was finalized that would allow the circus to set up for nine days on prime lakefront property.⁷⁶ Because some of those in city government questioned the idea of a private enterprise using the public park to generate revenue, the show agreed to contribute 10% of all tickets sold to help fund a memorial for the city's soldiers and sailors with a guaranteed donation of \$10,000.⁷⁷

The city of Chicago was on edge when the show trains arrived on the morning of August 9. Officials had just quelled seven days of race riots that left 38 people dead and more than 500 injured.⁷⁸ The show offered a welcome relief to the tension, as evidenced by the throngs that made their way to the Loop for the first downtown circus parade in 20 years. A crowd estimated at 300,000 was on hand, with all other downtown traffic at a standstill.⁷⁹

Although the Chicago Coliseum had sufficient seating for the indoor performance, the building was not large enough for the combined circus that was regularly turning

away customers from a tent that had nearly double the seating capacity of the amphitheater. The potential audience under canvas made for an easy decision and the circus played to capacity throughout the engagement.⁸⁰ A year-to-year comparison of ticket receipts in Chicago reveals that during the 16-days that the Ringling Bros. circus was at the Coliseum in 1918 it generated \$131,801. One year later, nine days of performances under canvas generated \$180,567, a 27% increase in revenue for an engagement that was seven days shorter than in 1918.⁸¹

Incidentally, the show made good on its promised contribution to the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Fund, donating \$17,000 to help create the memorial which is known today as Soldier Field Stadium, home of the Chicago Bears, and ironically the venue where Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey would set up its tents from 1935 until 1955.

Big cities like Chicago, Boston and Washington could always be counted on to deliver at the ticket wagon, but the lion's share of the season was played out in small towns such as Wichita or Concordia, Kansas where the circus provided high quality performances to a rural audience with few entertainment choices.

In its review of the circus, the *Wichita Daily Eagle* expanded on the observations made by the big city newspapers:

"The circus has been well dubbed the Super Show. Ringling Bros. Circus was more than any pair of eyes could see, and so was Barnum & Bailey. The consolidation of the two enabled the management to pick the cream of the acts.

"Not only are the performers wonderful, the



Perry George Lowery joined the Ringling organization for the 1919 tour as leader of the side show band, touring with Ringling-Barnum until 1931. Recognized as one of the best cornet players in the United States, Merle Evans lobbied the Ringling brothers to let him play in the big show band, but was turned down because of concerns over how an African-American would be accepted by some members of the audience. Lowery's career spanned more than 50 years, and it included stints with Forepaugh-Sells, Hagenbeck-Wallace and Cole Bros.

New York Public Library

menagerie intensely interesting with grand specimens of the animal world, but the costumes are bright and clean and the music – well it is worth the cost of tickets.⁸²

Not far from Wichita, in the small town of Concordia the population exploded on circus day, and even before the show arrived, residents were making plans, as reported by the *Blade-Empire* in a front-page story:

“The restaurants won't be able to handle the business tomorrow,' said a proprietor this morning. 'Unless some of the churches or women's organizations open lunch rooms for the day, I don't know how the people will be fed.'”⁸³

This same small Kansas community is where Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey would set an under-canvas attendance record in 1924. It was on September 13 that year that a straw-house audience of 16,702 crammed all seating and packed the hippodrome track in Concordia.⁸⁴

While enroute from Oklahoma City to Okmulgee on September 16, a major calamity was avoided when the third section of the circus train derailed while passing through

Milfay, Oklahoma. At least four stock cars left the tracks injuring a brakeman and 75 horses, 12 of them so badly that they had to be destroyed. The performances in Okmulgee were lost, however, after one day the tour resumed in Tulsa on September 17.⁸⁵

Although the route would take the show as far west as the Rocky Mountains, most of the 1919 tour was focused on the East, Midwest and South, with those along the Pacific Coast not getting their first look at the combined show until 1922.

Clown Herman Joseph's notes on the trip to Colorado describe a Sunday run of 454 miles from Salina, Kansas to Denver. After arriving early on the morning of September 8, the show paraded through the city to a new lot about 15 blocks from downtown where the tents were again filled to capacity. Joseph also mentioned that while in Denver, Sells-Floto owner H. H. Tammen and sportswriter Otto Floto visited, along with several other well-known showfolks including Buffalo Bill's “foster son” Johnny Baker.

If there was any animosity that existed between Fred Bradna and John Agee about sharing the role of equestrian director, it seemed to have evaporated by the time the

Only Circus Coming to Tampa

Big Circus Day **MONDAY NOV. 17** **Best Holiday of the Year**

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


UNION OF THE GIANTS
ASTOUNDING BIG COMBINATION

1/4 MILLION POUNDS ELEPHANT ACT

ARMY OF CLOWNS

EARTH'S LARGEST ZOO

EIGHT GIRAFFES



THE WORLD'S FIRST SUPER CIRCUS IS COMING!

POSITIVELY AND OBVIOUSLY THE GREATEST AMUSEMENT INSTITUTION OF ALL TIME

CENTRALIZING IN ONE MAMMOTH CIRCUS COLOSSAL

THE WORLD'S FINEST NEWEST AND MOST AMAZING FEATURES

COMBINED TRAINED ANIMAL CIRCUS FOR THE LITTLE FOLKS

PARADE AT 10 A. M. PRECEDING FIRST PERFORMANCE

DOORS OPEN AT 1 AND 7 P. M. PERFORMANCES AT 2 AND 8 P. M.

ONE TICKET ADMITS TO EVERYTHING. CHILDREN UNDER 12 YEARS AT REDUCED PRICES

Admission Tickets and Reserved Seats on Sale Downtown Circus Day at Taylor's Rexall Drug Store, 602 Franklin Street. Same Prices Exactly as Charged at the Circus Grounds.

Despite some of the worst weather in years, enormous crowds greeted the circus when it arrived in Tampa late in the season. Both John and Charles Ringling were on hand for what was to be the second most profitable day of the tour

Chris Berry Collection

show reached the Rockies. Joseph wrote that Bradna and Agee often socialized off the lot, and while the show was in Colorado, the two equestrian directors planned to hike from the showgrounds to Pike's Peak. After learning the distance from the showground to the mountain, they hired a private car, and while they made it to the top, they were delayed on their return and nearly missed the performance.⁸⁶

As summer transitioned to fall, temperatures began to drop, and the show was routed into Texas, Louisiana, and Tennessee where tremendous rains forced the circus to cancel nine cities during the month of October.⁸⁷ On October 22, after skipping performances in both Jackson, Tennessee and Nashville, word reached the show that Alfred Theodore Ringling, the brother who had been an early press agent for

the circus, and who later wrote the scripts for elaborate specs and produced annual route books, had died at the age of 55.

Alf. Ringling had been ill since before the start of the season, but according to news reports, his death was sudden, apparently from a heart attack, at his mansion in Oak Ridge, New Jersey.⁸⁸ Although his son Richard Ringling would inherit his portion of the partnership, Henry Ringling North later wrote that John and Charles never gave Richard a voice in the management of the circus, and essentially ignored him.⁸⁹

The death of Alf T. Ringling apparently had little if any impact on the operation of the circus, and crowds continued to be drawn to the showgrounds like flies to honey. In Montgomery, Alabama the scene on the midway was described as "an enormous multitude of curious persons of all colors and grades, each struggling apparently more for existence than to reach the entrance... and one was fortunate if he got to the entrance without being trampled upon or squeezed nearly to death."⁹⁰

Massive crowds continued to be the rule rather than the exception according to Herman Joseph who wrote, "At Richmond the show had considerable difficulty in getting up, but when the performance was underway the big eight-pole top could not accommodate the people. Charlotte provided the banner day in North Carolina as people were seated up to the ring curb."⁹¹

By mid-November the tour was already one of the longest ever presented by the Ringlings, yet there was still more to come, as John and Charles Ringling routed their circus into central Florida for the first time since 1912.

If the press agents can be believed, the reason that Tampa was on the tour was because of a conversation that John Ringling had the previous winter with two Florida bankers.

Evidently, the bankers joked with Ringling that they did not believe he truly owned a circus, since they had never seen it. When challenged, Ringling reportedly said, "Everyone in Florida will see the circus if I have to give him a free ticket and transport him to the grounds." The story, printed in the *Tampa Times* three months before the circus was to arrive, added that the Ringlings were not expecting to make a profit by bringing the show to Florida, they just wanted to prove to the bankers that they truly owned a circus.⁹²

By 1919, John and Charles Ringling both had winter homes in Sarasota, and when news arrived that the new combined circus would definitely visit Tampa, the Mayor of Sarasota chartered a special train that would carry 600 of his citizens from Sarasota to the showgrounds. Ferryboats were also put into service and on Circus Day hundreds more made the drive from Sarasota to Tampa.

Although Tampa had been preparing for the show's arrival for weeks, Mother Nature was anything but cooperative. Circus Day coincided with some of the worst weather that the Gulf Coast of Florida had experienced in years. Nevertheless, thousands braved the storm for the parade, and more than 1,000 of those who made the trip from Sarasota

were invited to join the procession. The group gathered in the rain behind a banner that read "Sarasota - Ringling" and joined the parade after a signal from John Ringling who, "with an executive sweep of his hand," motioned them to start marching.⁹³

As John and Charles Ringling surveyed the scene, John exclaimed, "Sarasota. There is no city on earth like our hometown," to which Charles replied, "Amen."⁹⁴

Because of the mammoth crowd in Tampa, the circus managers decided that to meet the demand three performances would have to be held, the first at 2:00 P.M., the second at 4:30 P.M. and the final show at 8:00 P.M. The payoff was beyond their expectations.

Despite the downpour, some 35,000 people attended the three performances in Tampa,⁹⁵ and when the day's receipts were tallied, it was the second biggest day of the season, generating \$35,294 in ticket sales for the three shows (\$514,000 in 2019).⁹⁶

With less than a week left in the season, the trains next moved to Orlando where observers noted that the railroad yard was filled with 134 cars, 92 from the circus and 42 cars from the Johnny J. Jones carnival that wintered in Orlando



Circus World Museum

and had arrived the day before.⁹⁷ After a matinee performance in Orlando, Jacksonville was next, followed by Waycross, Georgia, the same town where the show had closed early the previous October because of the flu epidemic, one of several factors that led to the merger of the two circuses.

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows ended its inaugural season in Savannah, Georgia on November 21, having visited 144 different cities.⁹⁸ From both an artistic and financial perspective, the tour was a tremendous success.

Total revenue for the 1919 season was \$3,499,959 (about \$47.5 million in 2019), a 5% increase over the \$3,311,009 earned by both shows in 1918.⁹⁹ However, that is only part of the story, as profits were no doubt significantly higher, considering the fact that the combined circus had cut expenses significantly for personnel, transportation, food and animals.

For the next 50 years *The Greatest Show on Earth* was defined by one show, melded together in 1919 through the talent, resources and reputations of Barnum & Bailey and Ringling Bros., and despite outside factors including wars, depressions and disasters, for five decades the circus was able to evolve along with America's changing entertainment appetite and options.

A half century after the Ringling brothers combined their two large circuses, a new generation of showmen, led by Irvin Feld, announced that exactly 50 years after the two operations had merged, a second unit would again take to the rails in 1969, with both shows under the banner of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

The two circuses of 1969 visited 56 cities, up from 36 in 1968. New arenas that were opening across the country provided the opportunity to return to cities and towns that had not been on the route since the show moved indoors more than a decade before. The decision to start a second unit immediately began paying dividends. For the first nine months of 1969 revenues for the circus increased 40% over the same period in 1968, generating a record-breaking \$13,256,130 (\$88,900,000 in 2019), compared to \$9,493,627 the previous season when only one circus was touring.¹⁰⁰

To quote Shakespeare, "the wheel had come full circle." Financial circumstances that had driven the two circuses to merge in 1919 had evolved to the point where two separate shows could once again generate more revenue than one. In the coming decades, Feld Entertainment created additional circus companies, along with Las Vegas productions, ice revues and arena shows that are now estimated to generate more than \$1.3 billion in gross revenues each year.¹⁰¹

On May 21, 2017, 98 years after the debut of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, in an arena only 25 miles from where John and Charles Ringling ushered in the era of the Super Circus, the longest running show in American history closed. According to chief executive officer Kenneth Feld, declining ticket sales, "coupled with high

operating costs, made the circus an unsustainable business for the company."¹⁰²

For over a century, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey had treated millions of Americans to a parade of the best circus performers in the world. Generations had applauded the exploits of Leitzel and Gaona, thrilled to the daring of the Wallendas and Gebel-Williams, and laughed at the antics of Jacobs, Griebing and Adler. But sadly, the words uttered by the wardrobe mistress prior to that first performance at Madison Square Garden 100 years ago now had new meaning. "There is no more Ringling. No Barnum & Bailey."

One hundred years ago an anonymous reporter wrote about what he saw at the circus on a summer day in 1919, and in doing so summed up the magic of *The Greatest Show on Earth*:

"The circus is for boys and girls and the old folks who don't ever want to grow up. The Super Circus, with its wonderful music, its tinsel, its score and ten clowns, its 35 elephants, its man-eating tigers, proud old lions, the giraffes, and the endless ballyhoo, yes even the sweat, the dust and the steaming throng, takes you away from the humdrum of life and that is the big reason the circus is, a never ending institution in American life."¹⁰³

And that will never change. **BW**

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