

held in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1940, the Association bestowed on me the title "Saviour of the American Circus."

May, 1941.

McGregor and The Ringlings

By JAMES D. ALLEN

August Ringling and his wife were residents of McGregor and four of their boys were Iowa born—Alfred in 1861, Charles in 1864, John in 1866, and Henry in 1869. Up Walton hollow in McGregor the streets between the hills are called "hollows." And there the McGregor Historical society has just set up a marker in front of a little house. It reads:

"The Ringling family of circus fame once lived in this house. John Ringling was born here in 1866."

The house, now the humble dwelling of aging Mrs. William Claudy, is beside the highway leading from McGregor to Pike's Peak state park.

GROUNDS ARE NEGLECTED

It is partly hidden by a neglected tangle of bushes and undergrowth. A rickety bridge over a wide ditch leads to the house. The woodshed—remembered by old residents to have had a board in it on which the Ringling boys had cut their initials—is gone, but the house where Mr. and Mrs. August Ringling and six sons lived is little changed.

Ringling was in the harness-making business. He had a struggle to make a living for his large family in competition with two other harness-making establishments.

THE FIRST HARNESS SHOP

The old family home of McGregor's mayor, William Walter, stands on Main street on the site of August Ringling's first harness shop. Ringling later bought a

lot across the street and moved his shop there, and the family lived in a small house on the lot. Shop and house were next door to a furniture factory operated by Mayor Walter's grandfather, Peter Walter, and the Walter children and the Ringling boys were playmates.

The Ringling boys used to give "circuses" on Saturday afternoons. Neighborhood boys helped, but the Ringling brothers were easily the best performers. Ten pins was the admission fee at first for the Ringling Bros. show, but the performance grew to be so popular with the youngsters of the neighborhood, that once a penny was charged.

An old, neglected white horse belonging to a man who lived nearby was a favorite with the Ringling boys and it was on its sway back they attempted their first "bareback" riding. "They used to get the old horse and ride it around and try to perform on it, and the rest of us children would follow them, and cheer them or poke fun at them when they fell off," recalls Mrs. Emma Benjamin, one of the Walter children, now making her home in Cincinnati, Ohio, with a daughter.

BOYS HELPED IN THE SHOP

As Al and the older boys grew up they helped father in the harness shop, but the family finally left McGregor because business was so poor. A few years later the older sons came back from Baraboo, Wisconsin, with a little traveling show, the humble beginning of what was to become "the world's greatest."

They pitched a little tent on a vacant lot back of Sam Peterson's drug store. A clothes line to hold the tent in place was borrowed. George Williams, an elderly plasterer who played the fiddle, presented the show's musical program.

WALTER'S BAND

The Walter's Family band had been organized by Peter Walter, and because of old friendship Walter and his sons and daughters volunteered to play a few

pieces outside the tent before the evening performance.

From Alonzo Boyle, Al Ringling borrowed a plow. Al's contribution to the program and the star act of the show was his balancing the plow on his chin in the circus ring. Two other brothers performed on parallel bars. Only twelve to fifteen people attended the first performance.

The Ringlings took their show across the Mississippi to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, three small flat boats carrying all the luggage. The Ringling brothers rowed the boats.

When the Ringlings some time later had progressed to a small wagon show, and came to Iowa again, they had the Walters play for them at several Iowa and Wisconsin towns.

MCGREGOR GIRL BECAME MRS. RINGLING

Al married a McGregor girl who was a good seamstress, and Lou Ringling, as she was known in the circus world in later years, tended to the sewing, patching, and costume-making in the struggling first years of the Ringling Brothers' show.

Years ago, after the Ringlings were well on the road to fame, members of the family used to return to McGregor occasionally, particularly Mrs. Al Ringling who had a sister there; and when McGregor was in hard straits after a flood, the Ringlings sent a generous check.

Should You Come Back

*Should you come back, your room is cleanly swept—
The curtains parted to invite the sun;
The little intimate things you loved are kept
Just as you left them, almost every one.*

*Your handkerchiefs are folded, white as milk;
Suits freshly pressed—ties hung in neat array;
Your gloves are waiting too—and scarves of silk . . .
They wonder why you are so long away.*

—MARGARET E. BRUNER

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