

# THE CIRCUS IN IOWA

By JACOB A. WAGNER

Iowa has generously contributed its part toward the great American amusement, The Circus. It was Miles Orton, whose family homestead is at Ortonville, Iowa, a few miles east of Adel, who was the first bareback rider to carry his son on his shoulders while riding a horse as it raced around the arena. Miles Orton trained his family to become circus performers. Some of his offspring, known as "The Ortons," are still prominent in circle entertainment.

About fifteen years ago, I visited the Orton's winter quarters. Criley Orton, one of the sons of this splendid family, took me to the ring barn and as he opened the door I stopped suddenly, hearing the roar of a male lion. Walking through the barn I saw "Jennie Lockhart," the last survivor of the noted herd of five elephants imported from England by a man named Lockhart that performed at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. Hers was a friendly gesture—for in her outstretched trunk was a partly consumed ear of Iowa corn. It is said that as "Jennie" walked from one town to another as the show moved from place to place and she picked up nails and pebbles in her feet, she would stop and raise her foot until the nail or pebble was removed. Also, as she proceeded along the roadway, she would pause for grass and other green shrubs, practically getting her food as she moved along. It was this practice that finally contributed towards her death.

The Ortons purchased two baby elephants as companions to Jennie. She watched over these babies like a mother over her children, and it was this depriving herself of food so that the younger elephants could have theirs that finally resulted in weakening her and she passed away en route through the state of Kansas.

Mother Orton performed with these elephants, and when she grabbed the hook and stepped before them, "the show was on."

At LeClaire, Iowa, on the banks of the Mississippi river, a young boy sat with the waters of the river trickling between his toes. It was this boy, William F. Cody, who became one of the celebrated Indian scouts in the employ of the government, and it was he who aided in the successful Indian wars. He became a great buffalo hunter and acquired the name of "Buffalo Bill." We pioneers recall his Wild West show, when with an aggregation of Indians, cowboys and Mexican gauchos assembled on the show ground, Buffalo Bill came riding down the arena between this spectacular aggregation of horsemen, with his wide sombrero covering his long hair and his flowing mustache waving in the air. His silver saddle was of an unusual make and his horse one of the most beautiful that could be found in the country.

#### THE RINGLINGS OF IOWA

The name "RINGLING" is a household word to this day. Ringling Brothers were born "Rungling" at McGregor, Iowa. The name was changed to Ringling because it was more euphonious. They became circus-minded while quite young and local history tells of their hitching the dog or the goat to their little four-wheel wagon and forming their first circus parade. They gave performances in the hayloft, admission being paid in pins, and from this youthful beginning the great Ringling Brothers name continues to this time. Among their playmates was F. H. Luthe, now a resident of Des Moines; also his brother and sister.

The first year of their railroad show was 1888, and they showed at Malvern, Iowa, on May 25 of that year. I was then agent of the Burlington railroad at Malvern and one day there appeared a man, dressed in the latest mode, topped with a high hat, distributing handbills on the streets. I was fortunate in meeting this man, for he proved to be John Ringling, who be-

came the greatest route agent of his time. It is said en route with the show he could extend his hand from the window of his car and tell the country he was passing through.

The Burlington railroad owned a large space of level ground near the depot at Malvern and I offered John Ringling a place for the show to exhibit. My offer was accepted. The show was given in a large one-top canvas, the menagerie and circus performers were all under this one big top. This proffer of a lot was the beginning of a wonderful friendship between the Ringling Brothers and myself.

When the Ringlings began their circus career, Yankee Robinson was their mentor and aided in their beginnings, and finally when Yankee Robinson passed away, the Ringling Brothers gave him burial in the cemetery at Jefferson, Iowa. Thus, Iowa soil shelters the remains of this great circus clown and pioneer circus manager.

#### RINGLINGS ROSE RAPIDLY

The Ringlings' rise in the circus world came during the time that Barnum and Bailey made their famous tour abroad, thus Ringling Brothers had a wide field in which to travel without competition. They were given the title of the "Sunday School Circus," for they permitted no grafters around their show. When Barnum and Bailey returned to the United States, Mr. Bailey conceived the idea of building a new parade, new wagons, new harness, and Bailey to head this show, so as to bring the Barnum and Bailey circus before the people by the construction of this unusual parade equipment. He titled this new parade "The Golden Age of Circusdom."

This was soon after the Battleship Oregon had made its famous voyage around the Horn, and had participated in the Battle of Santiago. Bailey conceived the thought of having a replica of the Battleship Oregon to lead this new parade. It was found impractical, so he conceived the idea of having a band wagon con-

structed that would depict the travels of the Barnum and Bailey show. He named the wagon "The Two Hemispheres" band wagon. This wagon was constructed at a cost of \$40,000. It weighs sixteen tons. It was hauled through the cities of the country by forty bay horses, driven by that celebrated horseman, Tom Lynch, who is spending his remaining years near Los Angeles, California. This wagon later came into the possession of Fred Buchanan of Des Moines, whose winter quarters were for years at Granger, Iowa.

The Two Hemispheres band wagon was presented to the Palmer museum, Davenport, Iowa. The wagon was secured by Buchanan from Ringling Brothers and when the latter learned the Circus Fans of Iowa had it in their possession they sent canvas which drapes the wagon while not on exhibition and new wheels which make it possible to head special parades.

#### THE YANKEE ROBINSON CIRCUS

Des Moines was the home of two Scotch brothers. Their names were Fred and William Buchanan. William was a newspaper man and as such was the managing editor of the *Daily Iowa Capital*, under the ownership of Senator Lafayette Young. Fred at one time had charge of Ingersoll park (now the site of some of the best homes in Des Moines), an amusement park operated by the Des Moines Street Railway Company. One day Fred, as manager, came into possession of an elephant, a tusker, having but one eye and a very bad disposition. Periodically "Old Tom" would go on a rampage, but he was a drawing attraction for the park.

Through the aid of John Ringling, Fred acquired second-hand cages and other circus equipment and wagons, among which was the Two Hemispheres band wagon. He established winter quarters for what he titled "The Yankee Robinson Circus" at Granger, Iowa, about twenty miles from Des Moines. These winter quarters were visited daily during the season by men, women and children, who watched the six- and eight-horse drivers train the beautiful draft horses into six-,

eight- and ten-horse teams as they prepared to start on their summer tour. Their harness was made by Christy, the Des Moines harness and leather man.

Little by little Fred accumulated other animals, beginning as a "mud show," then put on rails, enlarging until it was the third largest circus traveling the country and giving splendid parades. During the years of the depression Fred abandoned his circus activities.

#### ADLER THE CIRCUS CLOWN

Clinton, Iowa, was the birthplace of Felix Adler, the most celebrated clown traveling today, being a star in the spectacle of Mother Goose, the pageant of this year's Ringling Brothers-Barnum and Bailey show.

At the annual banquet of the Circus Fans Association of America, held in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1934, the circus performers of Ringling Brothers were guests of the Association at the banquet. I shall never forget the remarks of Felix Adler, when called upon at the banquet. He told of his early endeavors to become a clown and closed thusly: "Here tonight you see Felix Adler, the man. In my trunk out on the lot is Felix Adler, the clown."

The Circus Fans Association was organized in Washington, D.C., in 1926. Iowa was represented by Louis M. Latta, a lumber merchant of Indianola, Iowa, and a descendant of a prominent pioneer family of the state. After the organization was completed, a reception was given at the White House. President Coolidge welcomed the members, and stated that he had always been a lover of the circus.

The object of the Circus Fans Association was to perpetuate the greatest American amusement—the circus. The motto of the Association, "We Pay as We Go. We Fight Everything that Fights the Circus." The various states of the Union are organized into Tops. Iowa was the first state to organize, taking the name of Ringling Top No. 1. Among the members were prominent men and women of the state, with Governors Hammill, Turner and Kraschel. Laura Bell Richard-

son, an English teacher of Marshalltown, Iowa, was the first woman member admitted to the Association. The Most Reverend Thomas Drumm of the Des Moines Diocese was the first chaplain.

At the third annual convention held in Chicago, in 1929, I was elected president of the Association, and being in favor of one year terms, I declined reelection at the end of the year.

#### STRIKE OF THE ROUSTABOUTS

Among circus employees are men who put up and take down the tents, called roustabouts. The records show that this class of men remain with the circus an average of nine days, using the circus as a means of transportation to various parts of the county. We recall the strike of these men in 1938, at Scranton, Pennsylvania, on account of which Ringling Brothers found it advisable to return to their winter quarters at Sarasota, Florida.

The National Convention of our Association was held at Madison, Wisconsin, in August of that year. The slogan was "Save the American Circus." I was selected chairman of a committee to bring about a settlement if possible.

Living in Des Moines, my neighbor was Chauncey A. Weaver, a prominent member of the American Federation of Labor and member of the executive committee of the National Musicians Union. At my solicitation, Mr. Weaver aided us in securing a conference with William Green, President of the American Federation of Labor, at Atlantic City, New Jersey.

It was our contention, at this conference with Mr. Green, that inasmuch as property men, musicians and performers belonged to their individual unions, these roustabouts, who spent so little time with the circus, ought not to be organized. With this in mind, a settlement was reached at the National Convention of the A. F. of L. in Houston, Texas, in October, 1938. At the next convention of the Circus Fans Association

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

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## 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

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