

The Ringlings of McGregor

"Stand back, everybody! The elephants are coming!"

It is circus day and the parade is starting! Thousands of Iowans have thrilled to those magic words and craned their necks to see the giant pachyderms in their red velvet and gilt trappings come swinging down Main Street, stared wide-eyed in wonderment at the red and gold massive circus wagons with their pacing lions and tigers within, felt the heart quicken and the blood flow faster as they watched the daring feats of the aerialists under the 'big top', laughed uproariously at the antics of the clowns, and gazed incredulously at the side-show freaks. And at mention of the circus, the name of Ringling is suggested, for the two are almost synonymous in the minds of many people. Yet probably few Iowans are aware that the Ringling brothers, founders of "the greatest show on earth", staged their first performance at McGregor.

This is how it all began.

A bustling river port after 1855, McGregor was a typical frontier town of that era. Grain and hogs were shipped by steamboat from this strate-

gically located market. It was a common sight to see wagons loaded with produce, drawn by horses or oxen, lined up for a mile awaiting their turn at the city scales where buyers would bid on the produce. While many settlers bought farm land from the government at \$1.25 per acre, others settled in McGregor to engage in business, with the result that the population of McGregor increased from 280 persons in 1857 to 4000 in 1875. The town grew like a mushroom and its reputation spread far and wide. In sharp contrast to the rougher element in the town, some cultured families maintained their standards of gracious living. Rapidly increasing fortunes were invested in beautiful furniture, paintings, diamonds, and blooded horses. A few of the older living residents, among them C. F. Spaulding, can still recall the beautiful horses and equipages paraded on Main Street each Saturday evening.

To this promising young boom town of the Midwest, possibly in 1860 though too late to be counted in the census, came August Ringling, harness maker, bringing his wife and children, then consisting of three sons, Albert (Al), August (Gus), and Otto, to open a harness shop. The first definite evidence of the Ringlings in McGregor is an advertisement on December 10, 1862, in the *North Iowa Times* that "A. Ringling has

moved his harness shop from Arnold's corner, opposite the Western House, to his new building two doors below Walter and Brother." This location, according to J. J. Schlicher, "was on the northwest side of Main Street, about the middle of the block between Fourth and Fifth streets." Apparently August Ringling had enough confidence in the future of the harness business in McGregor to own his own shop.

Perhaps convenience was a factor in moving to the new building, for the Ringlings were living in a house on the same lot. Whether this was their first residence is not certain. Miss Gretchen Daubenberger, daughter of a pioneer Iowa lumberman, remembers that her mother called on Mrs. Ringling in a frame house near the Congregational Church, which could have been the same.

The kind McGregor neighbors soon welcomed the Ringling family in the community. When a Lutheran Church was organized in 1862, August Ringling was one of the charter members. The early record books, in German script, preserved by St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church of McGregor, contain the names of Mr. and Mrs. Ringling and the two oldest boys as communicant members. A new constitution drafted on June 1, 1870, was signed by ten of the original charter members, and the name of August Ringling ap-

pears on this list also. It seems that he was a prominent and active member of the church while he lived in McGregor.

Competition in the harness business was keen. Though August Ringling was a master of the trade, he had rivals in the community. The local demand for fancy hand-made harness was seriously depressed by the war, and the cost of living was high. By the end of 1862 there were four boys in the family, the youngest, Alfred, less than two years old and the oldest only ten. Whatever the causes may have been, Ringling sold his new shop building for \$100 early in 1863 and went to work in the larger shop of William Koss. He was probably employed as a master craftsman at good wages.

That August Ringling was proud of his skill is apparent from a notice published in October, 1863. He and five fellow workmen in the Koss "Establishment" offered to bet \$100 that they could make a better set of harness and collars of any style than J. Peickart and his two men. The challenge was not accepted. But the day of hand-tailored gear for horses was passing. Koss sold out in 1865 and two years later, when Ringling left the shop, it was owned by Hartwig and Peickart.

According to an advertisement in the *North*

Iowa Times on October 2, 1867, August Ringling had resumed the operation of his own harness business. "A. Ringling — Half Way up Main Street", he explained, "is turning out some of the handsomest as well as the most substantial harness that McGregor Citizens or Visitors ever looked upon or used. None but the best workmen are employed and only the best material used in manufacture. For Harness, Collars, Saddles, Bridles, and repairing of all kinds — Go to A. Ringling — nearly opposite the Murray House." His characteristic pride of craftsmanship is obvious and apparently he had accumulated some capital. The house and half lot where he had lived for several years was purchased in the name of Mrs. Ringling in 1864 and in 1867 he bought an adjoining half lot, according to the county records.

Meanwhile, his family had grown. Charles was born in 1863 and John in 1866. The two oldest boys were nearing the age when they would have to quit school and learn a trade. If they went to work in their father's shop they could serve their apprenticeship and contribute to the family income. According to the census of 1870, when Al was seventeen and Gus was fifteen, they were actually so employed. The capital investment in the shop that year was reported to be \$600 and

the annual value of materials used in manufacture was estimated to be \$2000.

And yet the Ringlings were not as prosperous as the census seemed to indicate. The two heavily mortgaged half lots they had owned were sold in 1868. Before that time, they had moved to a place up Walton Hollow which is still known as the Ringling house. In May, 1870, they seem to have been living above the harness shop in a two-story building "opposite Walter Brothers". By that time there were seven boys in the family, Henry having been born in 1869.

Miss Gretchen Daubenberger remembers when the town's practical nurse and midwife came to see her mother who was baking bread. "Mrs. Daubenberger," she exclaimed, "the Ringlings up the Hollow have just had another baby. There isn't a second sheet for the mother's bed, nor a stitch of clothing for the new babe. It is a pitiful state of affairs."

"My mother was ever generous to a fault," Miss Daubenberger reminisces, and so, when the nurse left, "she took with her a generous roll of baby clothes we children had all worn, fresh bed linen, and most of the morning's baking for the Ringling family, and mother set to work to 'sponge down' another batch of bread."

Traveling circuses were numerous in this pe-

riod of American history. Following the close of the Civil War, both the North and the South longed for amusement, and enterprising show managers took advantage of this fact. Some circuses traveled by rail, some in horse-drawn vehicles, and others by steamboat, stopping at the towns along the Mississippi between New Orleans and St. Paul. With money flowing freely and with a large floating population, McGregor was a mecca for these traveling shows. Careful perusal of the early files of the *North Iowa Times* will attest this fact, for, during the summer of 1866, McGregor residents were privileged to witness the Consolidation Circus; Mike Lipman's Colossal Combination of Circus and Trained Animals with acting bears, sacred bulls, performing buffalo, plus a troupe of Bedouin Arabs arrayed in the wild fantastic garments of their native race; and Dan Castello's Great Show, Moral Exhibition, and Wonderful Wild Animals. In 1867 circus lovers were enthralled by Maginley, Carroll and Company's Great Consolidated Circus in June, Haight & Chambers' Colossal Circus and Ames' New Southern Menagerie in July, and Orton Brothers Great American Circus in August.

That audiences obtained their money's worth is evident if the following announcement by an advance man in the June 13, 1866, issue of the *Times*

was a criterion. "Dan Castello's TRIUMPHANT PROCESSION, Surpasses in point of grandeur, extent and real worth, any gratuitous display gotten up. Its magnificence approximates more closely to one of those Pageants of Royalty and Chivalry of the Glorious Golden Days of the 17th Century than any attempt to emulate Regal Splendor ever undertaken by managerial effort, or indeed by proprietary liberality."

It was in such an environment, pregnant with action, excitement, glamour, color, and adventure that the Ringling boys spent their youth. In 1869, Al and Gus, with twelve other boys of their age, formed a club of Young Fantastics to participate in the celebration of the Fourth of July. Clad in fancy costumes, some rode and others led the horses that pulled the "bouquet wagon" in the parade. On the platform was a dome surmounted by two figures representing Liberty and Washington. Around the base were thirty-seven girls in white dresses depicting the States. "It was the most attractive wagon that anyone ever saw."

The Ringling boys were interested in acrobatics. Al in particular spent many hours practicing feats of balancing, rope walking, and juggling. One day in 1870, according to a well-known anecdote, the boys rushed into the harness shop to describe the wonders of Dan Rice's Great Paris

Pavillion Circus which had unloaded from a steamboat early in the morning. Presently the cannon ball juggler and pole balancer came into the shop. The leather belt and socket, with which he held the pole while an acrobat performed at the upper end, was broken. Learning that the circus man was a former McGregor boy, Mr. Ringling refused payment for mending the belt, whereupon the juggler gave him and his family a pass to the circus. The joyous anticipation of the boys was exceeded only by their spell-bound admiration of the performance. According to the story their destiny was then and there determined.

On the following day, the young Ringlings commandeered all the horse blankets and the old rag carpets available in the neighborhood. Yards of discarded rolls of wall paper were decorated with Bluebeards, Little Red Riding Hoods, Tom Thumbs, and Robinson Crusoes, mounted on rollers, and wound from one to the other by a crank, while Al prepared a lecture on the characters depicted. Costumes were fashioned from old curtains and cast-off clothing. Billy Rainbow, an aged billy goat, and the neighborhood dogs were borrowed, and a tent was erected with the horse blankets and old carpet.

Finally, the great day for the premiere ar-

rived! It was to be the first performance of Ringling Brothers' Circus! Neighborhood children thronged to the tent and Alf, Charley, and John collected ten pins, the admission price, from each youthful customer. Al "lectured" on the painted nursery-rhyme and story characters as Otto turned the crank and all the boys turned somersaults and other acrobatics to the limit of their ability.

A heart-warming story about that first circus was told often by the late Miss Ida Townsend, former teacher in the McGregor public schools. Eager to attend the show the Ringling boys were giving on the lot now occupied by the Herman Coobs Blacksmith Shop, Ida presented herself promptly with ten pins clutched tightly in her small fist. Very often, however, young boys are unpredictable in their actions and she was told that because she had holes in her stockings they would not admit her. Heartbroken, she returned home, weeping.

Many years later, so Miss Townsend related, the Ringling circus was scheduled to appear at LaCrosse, Wisconsin, and, eager to see the "greatest show on earth", she went to LaCrosse to attend. Seeing Alf and John on the lot, she went up to shake hands and to congratulate them on their success. The conversation turned to the

early days in McGregor, and the three laughed over the time she had been turned away from their show because of the holes in her stockings. She assured them that her stockings were quite without holes, and she hoped they would not prevent her attendance at their performance a second time, since she had come to LaCrosse for that very purpose. To Miss Townsend's dismay, Alf told her gravely that, holes in her stockings or not, for the second time, they would have to refuse to sell her a ticket of admission. However, he told her, with a twinkle in his eye, she might attend the performance on one condition — that she would be their guest for the afternoon and the best seat under the big tent would be hers!

It was the late Dr. John A. Walter, veteran Iowa dentist and mayor of McGregor for many terms, who, as a young man, played the cornet in the Ringling Brothers' Band. Dr. Walter liked to talk about the old days when he and Al Ringling were pals. "It was Al who really started the Ringling Brothers' Circus", Dr. Walter explained. "When the show started on the road, there were but three people in it and Al used to go out front and do his tight-rope walking and that would draw a crowd. I played with the Ringling band for quite a spell when I was a young man, but I didn't like it very well. We had to sleep in the

bandwagon and when we got stuck in the deep mud, and the roads were pretty bad in those days, the band boys would have to get out and heave the wagon out of the mud. It was when the Ringlings lived up Walton Hollow that the boys put up swings and a trapeze on top of a knoll and practiced there. In their first shows, they had trained pigs and other domestic animals, and Al balanced a plow on his chin, and I can recall a man by the name of Gaffney who performed with cannon balls."

The Ringling circus did not, of course, develop at once from the childish show of 1870. Al practiced bareback riding and plow balancing, Gus went to work at his trade away from home, and Charles and Alfred who were musically inclined played their instruments for their own amusement. The family moved across the river to Prairie du Chien, thence to Stillwater, Minnesota, and finally returned to Baraboo, Wisconsin, in the fall of 1875. Meanwhile, Al had begun traveling as a juggler and rope walker with small shows. By the end of the seventies he was managing a little troupe. In November, 1882, Alfred and Charles helped their older brother form the Ringling Brothers' Classic and Comic Concert Company. John became a member in December, and Otto joined the troupe in the following spring to tour

with the "Carnival of Fun". The circus was organized in 1884.

In a diary kept by Miss Fannie Cone of McGregor is the following entry in her delicate handwriting. It is dated July 31, 1890, from Berlin, Wisconsin. "The weather is very warm but we could not go to the lake till after 'The Circus' that had to be taken in by all. The Ringling Brothers were brought up in McGregor, so I felt an interest in seeing what they have attained to in all these years. They are self-made men, and have succeeded. Everything pertaining to their business is managed in the most perfect manner. No loud talking is heard, each person knows just what he is to do and does it. They employ one hundred and fifty men, have over one hundred fine horses. Their R. R. train is a long one. Al, Alf, John, Charles, and Otto are the names of the boys. I made myself known to Al, the eldest, and he seemed glad to see me, and gave me a pass for myself and friends to attend the evening performance. Mary went with me and when he saw me, he took us to the Reserved seats. On our way home, we saw him and his wife, whose name was Morris. I remember the family. So, I had a chance to thank him for his courtesy and say goodbye. I could say truthfully that I had enjoyed the entertainment. John Ringling gave an

exhibition in balancing first on a chair placed on glass bottles on a high stand. He placed his hands on the back of the chair, then threw his body straight up in the air. This was repeated on three additional chairs, he going from one to another as he balanced them. At last, hurdles were given him and he balanced on those too. His brother, Alf, was near us, and I noticed that he kept his eye on John during the whole time till he was through."

McGregor is proud of the fame and fortune of the Ringling Brothers who had their humble beginnings here. Two years ago, the McGregor Historical Society began gathering data, incidents, and stories about the Ringlings from old residents who had known the family, for careful preservation in the files at the McGregor Museum. Tentative plans to place markers at the various Ringling sites — the spot where the first circus was staged, the Ringling home, the site of the August Ringling Harness Shop — have been made by the Historical Society, so that visitors may become acquainted with these historical facts.

Meanwhile, each summer in McGregor, another amateur circus is staged in Bill's or Freddie's or Junior's backyard by the younger generation.

MARIAN CARROLL RISCHMUELLER