

When the Prodigal Circus Returned

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

In most American towns during the Depression, news that the Ringling Circus was coming to town was met with great anticipation and a warm welcome. This was particularly true in hard times, when one could view beautiful women and death-defying acts for a modest sum.

Not so in Baraboo in 1933, at least not at first. The occasion would be the 50th anniversary of the circus, founded of course in Baraboo. The home town boys had organized it in 1883, and first ventured forth in 1884. Now it was retuning to its roots, and you might think it would be an occasion for celebration.

Mixed Reactions

The mixed reaction had some validity. True, it was a home town show by brothers who had "made good" on the international scene. The trouble was that only fifteen years ago, in 1918, the show had abruptly ditched the Baraboo winter quarters for those of the Barnum and Bailey unit in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

No goodbyes. No "Sorry's". Not even an unhappy breakup scene. The Ringling circus simply did not return in 1918 after the summer tour. Baraboo's, bank had supported the circus in difficult times. Its population had ignored the roars of lions and tolerated camels and elephant parading through its streets with their inevitable droppings. Its citizen had welcomed and tolerated circus personalities with widely different

cultures. Now Baraboo had been jilted. Discarded. Dumped.

Fortunately, wiser heads prevailed. Baraboo was still the origin of the greatest circus in the world, whose sons from a poor family had conquered the circus entertainment venue and enjoyed world-wide fame. The circus was now truly like the Prodigal Son, luxurious, extravagant, wasteful, and now was returning home, even for just a day.

Besides, the Ringling had left their mark on Baraboo. Al's magnificent theatre graced the square, evoking awe and wonder from visitors—it still does today. Alf. T's home had been donated to a hospital. The organ now reverberated in the Catholic Church. Charlie's and Al's homes were resplendent, the former an Elk's Cub and the latter still a family home. There was even some thought about a circus museum.

The Circus is Welcomed

John, the only surviving brother, ill and in financial straits, was not coming. The old unwritten pact of the brothers, one for all and all for one, had expired, with descendant family members at odds over management and ownership, but many would attend. Home town pride swelled, and Baraboo rose to the occasion. Committees were appointed, plans developed, and the Depression set aside for a time.

Mayor Prothero quickly appointed a planning committee of eight leading citizens. Among family members coming would be two influential widows, Lou (Al.) Ringling and Edith (Charles) Ringling. Robert Gollmar was invited to speak. Someone influential in matters of weather must have intervened, for August 3 1933 was a perfect summer day, following a light rain that had settled the dust.

And what a gala day it was, as the 90 car circus train disgorged its exotic contents. The rickety High Bridge



had served the Ringlings in the old days, but now the parade of wagons crossed the new Broadway Bridge, up Broadway, and then East on Fourth Street to the fairgrounds. Many of those wagons now reside at Baraboo's Circus World, the world's largest wagon and circus artifacts museum, but only dreamed of then.

There was no Circus Parade, however, for congestion in the city was so great that a return downtown was impossible. Merle Evans and the circus band did make it to the Courthouse Square for a performance. Record crowds viewed both the matinee and evening performances, priced at 50 cents, and 25 cents for children. Bleacher seats were 18 rows deep, and the days receipts were \$25,504.09. Baraboo and Sauk County had indeed welcomed this remarkable creation by the famous brothers.

Circus Fans of America

Circus fans are numerous and legendary even today, and a remarkable example is the Circus Fans of America. Local groups, called Tents, are numerous and are named after a local circus connection. It was no problem to name Sauk County's Circus Fans chapter the Ringling-Gollmar-Moeller Tent. The local tent meets regularly and is a significant contributor to Circus World.

In 1933 the national Circus Fans of America held its sixth national convention in Baraboo in combination with the circus 50th anniversary. They were royally entertained by Lou and Edith Ringling. Additional events included local sightseeing, including a suggestion that members see the Al. Ringling Theatre, for "the interior will astound you".

Other locations to visit were to be the cemetery mausoleums, and the Ringling summer home on Mirror Lake. One Puzzle: The national Circus Fans of America lists a meeting at the Baraboo Elks Club (Al's home) for the KooKooKlub.

No explanation is given for what apparently is an offshoot of the national group, and a search of the internet (which knows everything) failed to elicit an explanation. Are there KooKooKlub members in Baraboo today? Please let us know.