

The Four Circuses of Baraboo, Part II

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

This article is the continuation of a previous one, chronicling Baraboo as the home of four major circuses. We have already discussed the Ringling operation, the Gollmar Circus, and John Kelly's Fun On The Farm Circus. But there is a fourth, lesser known but significant circus which originated in Baraboo.

Recently Sharon Hillmer gave me her copy of June Coates' history of the Wilbur Deppe Circus enterprise. Wilbur was the often under-publicized benefactor of the early days of Circus World. He was prominent in the efforts begun in 1952 to establish the museum, which began its existence on paper in 1954. It opened to the public in 1959.

It was then that he really caught the fever, evidently from the legendary Chappie Fox. Their somewhat tentative first meeting developed into a firm and beneficial friendship, to the benefit of not only all of us but to the world of circus in general.

Deppe's contributions to the new and struggling Circus World Museum of 1960 were invaluable. Without state funding, and with limited help from the city, behind the scenes contributions from Wilbur Deppe were essential--indeed some may never be known. Other articles have made some headway in denoting some of the major contributions, and a future story is under consideration.

Bertha, the Elephant

But this article is about the Deppe Classic Circus. It all began, it seems, when Wilbur decided that the Circus Museum needed an elephant. In typical Deppe boldness, he just went out and bought one in 1961. A small circus with an elephant had gone bankrupt in Beaver Dam.

Its trainer Jena Smaha, had foreseen the bankruptcy and left, but Dave Deppe says it was heartwarming to see the elephant's excitement and love when Smaha was located and returned. Dates are a little uncertain, but Wilbur designed a platform which not only revolved, but did so on a trailer obtained from the he Anheuser-Busch Company, on which Bertha could travel.

She was trained to stand on front legs only, the rear feet in the air, while the platform revolved. Ed Sullivan, TV's premier impresario, heard of the trick and Dave Deppe took Bertha to New York to perform on his show. This was invaluable publicity for the little Circus World museum.

Deppe's Circus Holdings Grow

Sold to the Golden Nugget Casino in Las Vegas, Bertha was replaced with three small elephants which were trained by Tony Smaha. He was a relative of Jenda, who went with Bertha to Vegas. One good thing led to another, and soon the Deppe menagerie included 12 ponies (including Snowball), two horses, eight trained dogs, Guanaco the llama, and January the Mule.

Circus World now had a significant summer attraction and, under the leadership of the diligent Chappie Fox, became a major attraction in the area. It also re-identified Baraboo with its significant past as the home of five talented young men who had the audacity to start a circus. Within two



The Herriots and three friends

decades they had purchased Barnum and Bailey, and were indeed the Greatest Show on Earth.

The inventive Deppe now devised a large trailer with quarters for all of the animals. One section held the three elephants, and parts of the remaining double deck trailer were for the other animals. There was room for large bales of hay, a performing ring, and even human quarters for Frank Braun.

The Deppe Classic Circus

Here's where the Deppe Classic Circus comes in. When the local season closed, Wilbur took or sent all of this on the road, and we do mean on the road. Not only state fairs and grandstands, their bookings took then not only to New York but New Brunswick, Canada, and Puerto Rico.

After seven seasons, and in failing health, Wilbur determined to sell the circus. The local venue was due for a change, so he sold his entire circus to Ringling Brothers, a recognition of its quality. With it went John Herriot, who went on to become the personnel director of the Red unit of the Ringling operation.

The famous Gunther Goebel-Williams act absorbed the three elephants, now nearly grown. Under the ever diligent direction of Chappie Fox, the rapidly expanding local operation now contracted other performers for an entirely new show each season.

The Deppe Classic Circus was no more, and Herriot and Smaha went on to other significant venues in the entertainment business, seasoned by their training in Baraboo. World class acts followed at the historic grounds on Water Street in Baraboo.