

The Four Local Circuses of Baraboo

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Yes, you know about the Ringling Brothers circus. But FOUR circuses originating in Baraboo? Actually there are probably more, but these are all that this writer knows of, they all originated in Baraboo, and they all had a run of at least a season. Moreover, one local circus is rather recent!

For newcomers to town, a very brief reminder that the Ringling Brothers Circus at one time held undisputed national if not world domination after it purchased the famed Barnum and Bailey Circus in about 1907. They were home town boys from a rather poor family, but highly talented, and became some of the most famous men in the world.

The Ringlings, of Course

Besides their flair for entertainment, they possessed another trait—the honesty and integrity of their German Lutheran heritage, traits unique in the rough and tumble world of the circus. Their relentless pursuit of the money-changing artists common to other circuses earned them the moniker “Sunday School Circus”, but in the long run it served them well.

Within 6 years of their shaky opening in Baraboo in 1884, they operated by rail—their huge rail shops still exist in Baraboo on the banks of the river west of Broadway. With little more than a handshake, they shared alike in their growing fortunes, despite the different work loads of each man.

Many thousands of pages could easily be written about them, but their fame is so great that this capsule mention is sufficient, leaving room for more complete discussion of the other four Baraboo circuses! See also my previous articles in my books at library.

The Gollmar Circus

Somewhat less famous but rivaling the circus of their Ringling cousins was Gollmar Circus, of which we have written two stories in the past. Noting the resounding success of the Ringlings, the Gollmar boys started their own circus in 1892, soon becoming like their cousins a railroad show in 1903, and rated by some as third largest circus in the country.

In a previous story I told of their close encounter with a tornado in New Richmond. As cousins they and the Ringlings were friendly competitors. Unfortunately the Gollmars sold their circus more or less piecemeal in 1916, so there are far fewer artifacts at the Circus Museum, than there are of other major circuses.

The Ringlings and Gollmars had another set of cousins, the Moellers, who should be mentioned. They were wagon makers, and contracted with most of the major circuses in the country for the elaborate circus wagons we see today being restored Circus World, located naturally in Baraboo.

The only surviving descendant of the Moellers was Alma Waite, the outstanding donor of the million dollar fund operated by the city in her name. This was in addition to sizeable grants to the entertainment world, not just circuses, in her day.

BIG HITTERS. Babe Ruth (right) hit .625 during the '28 World Series. Boxers Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey (below in 1926) retired in '28.



Kelly is reported to have had many prominent persons of the day as his guests, presumably at the home, grounds, and pool just off County W Southeast of town. Could Babe Ruth be riding the green bull?

Fun on the Farm Circus

We can devote more space here, since this circus was less known. To know about it, however, you must first know about John Kelly. A local attorney, he was drafted into the Ringling operation in 1905 by Charlie Ringling, who trusted him over more famous national lawyers. Kelly did not graduate from Portage H.S. but he did later earn a law degree in Madison.

In a circus career that lasted until 1935, Kelly kept the tax-shy Ringling operation out of trouble, but at a great personal sacrifice beyond the call of duty. In the 1950's John was the driving force in establishing Baraboo's Circus World, with his fog-horn voice and hooded eyelids. For those who want more, I have three articles about Kelly in my recently published three volume set.

The Third largest circus to come out of Baraboo, John's 1924 Fun on the Farm Circus played 40 mid-west towns and a State Fair. It featured, with some hyperbole perhaps, 20 clowns, and 50 performers and workers. There was bull roping, but also chariot races. Staging must have been on his farm where the Baraboo grade and high school buildings stand today. Perhaps the University campus was part also.

A one-time owner of Alf.T's 1898 Baraboo bluffs home (now gone), where many a game of chance was said to occur, John Kelly and Alf T. Ringling's wives were sisters. Alf T. and Della were divorced before the time of John's circus, but the men maintained business and personal relations.

John became a somewhat important national figure, said to be the personal attorney for Tom Mix and Bill Cody. As can be seen in the attached photo Babe Ruth visited John, apparently in Baraboo, and once rode the famed "green Bull" which John featured in his show. Whitewash tinted green was said to account for the bull's Irish identity.

Well, we promised four local circus ventures, and have run out of space. A future article will chronicle a lesser known but significant enterprise in circus world, which also originated in Baraboo.