

The Ringling Brothers

From Baraboo to Barnum, Bailey and Bridgeport

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HISTORY 489

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ABSTRACT

The Ringling Brothers is arguably the most well-known name in the circus business. This paper explores the nature of their success from 1882-1918, beginning with their first venture in their hometown of Baraboo, Wisconsin to the acquiring of Barnum & Bailey and eventually the moving of their winter quarters from Baraboo, Wisconsin to Bridgeport, Connecticut. Using a plethora of primary sources pulled from newspaper articles, oral interviews and autobiographies, this paper argues that the Ringlings did not appear in a vacuum. Wisconsin was already an established circus state. Moreover, the Ringling Brothers were ultimately able to becoming a global success because they were able to grow and adapt to new venues and changes in their industry while at the same time maintaining the fundamental characteristics of a family business that first led to their success as a small rural circus in Wisconsin.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Up to and around the turn of the 19th century, the young state of Wisconsin was rapidly expanding in population. With new land to acquire and audiences to entertain, it is not surprising that the circus, already a widely popular form of entertainment on the east coast, became extremely popular. Whether by seasoned circus men immigrating from the East, or the sons of farmers deciding to try their hand at a new exotic trade, Wisconsin became a bonafide circus state. From the late 1840s onwards, one would not have to travel far to find a show in Wisconsin, large or small. In 1882, a new act began in Baraboo, Wisconsin that would change the face of the circus forever. The Ringling Brothers circus for over a century has been a household name; a tradition that is often considered an American pastime and “The Greatest Show on Earth.”

The seven Ringling brothers were bitten by the circus bug at a young age. This paper focuses on how, in a state that was already heavy with circus life and other family-owned entertainments did this particular group of brothers become the best known and most successful circus of all time? It argues that the Ringling Brothers Circus did not appear out of nowhere. Wisconsin was clearly established as a circus state in the mid-1800s. The Ringling Brothers later expansion and international fame was due to their ability to grow and adapt to new venues and changes in their industry while at the same time maintaining the fundamental characteristics of a family business that had first led to their success as a small rural circus in Wisconsin.

The historiography of the American circus is relatively new. Although there have been various versions of menageries and circuses throughout Europe since the Roman Empire, they only started making their way to the United States around the early-to-mid-1800s. In general terms, a circus is a travelling company of entertainers; including trained animals.

One of the first documented circuses in U.S. history toured in 1793, and farmers began showing menageries in the 1830s. P.T. Barnum, another successful innovator whose business ultimately merged with the Ringling brothers, didn't start his circus until 1872. Given the moderately recent origin dates of the American circus, it is understandable that a significant historiography did not substantially develop until the 20th century. The earliest literature available is a book titled *Old Wagon Show Days*, written by Gil Robinson and printed in 1925. It is currently out of print and very rare. When it comes to the Ringlings specifically, they did not begin their circus shows until 1883, and though they became wildly successful in a comparatively short amount of time, it was not until the turn of the 20th century that their name became nationally known.

One of the best general histories on the circus in the United States is *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (2002) by Janet M. Davis. Her book is widely acclaimed by her peers and extensively researched Davis' main argument is that "the circus is a dazzling mirror of larger historical processes. In the United States, the circus's growth and development closely chronicled that of the nation, because the circus- a traveling amusement- was dependent on the same transportation networks that helped facilitate U.S. expansion. With this argument in mind, Davis provides information to explain the intense demand for circus entertainment at the turn of the century and why it was so wildly popular during the reign of the Ringling brothers. Davis' work also supports the idea that people affiliated with the circus business become a family within themselves. She quotes a woman married to a Ringling Brothers/Barnum & Bailey manager, stating, "The domestic instinct is very strong among circus women, for the reason that they are deprived of home life a great part of every year. She finds an outlet in many little ways, one of which is an appeal to the chef in charge of the dining car to be

allowed to bake a cake...”¹ This shows that for many circus employees, their home was the traveling circus trains.

There is also a more modest literature on the many circuses formed in Wisconsin in the nineteenth century. In his book *Badger State Showmen: A History of Wisconsin's Circus Heritage*, Fred Dahlinger, Jr. argues that Wisconsin has a very unique and abundant legacy in the circus business. Dahlinger is a highly-regarded circus historian and his work serves as an encyclopedia of circuses based out of Wisconsin. It is full of details on numerous circuses, going in chronological order and with entire chapters dedicated to single circuses (including the Ringling Brothers). He uses route book entries, inventory bills, advertisements and personal correspondence so his work is exceedingly well-researched.

A more modern work that starts to focus solely on the Ringling Brothers is *Ringlingville USA: The Stupendous Story of Seven Siblings and Their Stunning Circus Success* (2004) by Jerry Apps. This is very similar to Davis' book as it is a history of the circus, but differs in the fact that it is much more focused on the Ringlings. A local historian, Apps provides a history of the Ringling brothers, arguing that they “through perseverance, hard work, careful attention to detail, tremendous business savvy, and some luck, created the greatest circus in the world.”² Though it is clear Apps has much knowledge on Wisconsin and Baraboo, he focuses less on the aspect of family and continuing the small-town ideals of Baraboo throughout their success; instead he stresses the chronology and narrative during which their circus grew.

An older but equally important source focusing on the Ringlings is *A Ticket to the Circus: A Pictorial History of the Incredible Ringlings* (1959) by Charles Philip Fox. Fox was a circus historian and spent much of his time researching the Ringling brothers. The central

¹ Janet Davis, *The Circus Age*, 98

² Jerry Apps, *Ringlingville USA: The Stupendous Story of Seven Siblings and Their Stunning Circus Success* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2004),

argument of this book is not only that the Ringlings were possibly the most important name in circus history, but also a history of their circus itself in general, stating “This is the story of seven incredible brothers named Ringling, but in the broader sense it is the story of the Circus itself... This is so because to generations of Americans, Ringling Brothers has *meant* the Circus.”³ The book is divided into sections dedicated to different aspects of the circus, including tragedies and how the Ringlings handled them, attesting to their management and business style. True to the title, it is a pictorial history, but the pictures supply evidence themselves, as many of them are rare and without this book, the opportunity to see them would not be there. On page 29, for example, Fox shows two photos, one of Al Ringling training dogs and the other of him training horses during the early years with the caption, “These two rare photos shows the industrious Al Ringling in 1887 actually training animals. In these early formative days no job was beneath the boys if it helped to keep their circus going.”⁴ Many of the other pictures are scans of newspaper articles and poster bills. It is also helpful because the history of the circus is a visual one in itself. Fox also includes excerpts from route books, tour sheets and testimonies and letters written by the brothers themselves and their family members, such as Alice Ringling, Gus’ daughter.

Another secondary source on the Ringling Brothers is Gene Plowden’s book, *Those Amazing Ringlings and Their Circus*. (1967) Written in a much different style than Fox’s work, Plowden relays his research in the form of a novel, complete with dialogue and story-like scenarios, much like the introduction in which he reveals his essential argument. It is that the Ringlings are the kings of the circus world, and Plowden does something that differs from the

³ Charles Philip Fox. *A Ticket to the Circus: A Pictorial History of the Incredible Ringlings*. (New York: Bramhall House, 1959), 11.

⁴ Fox, *A Ticket to the Circus*, 29.

other sources thus far: he places emphasis on John Ringling as the life force of the Ringling moral success, quoting a message from him:

“To the public: I shall always endeavor to conduct a very high class, pure and moral circus. Nothing in the speech or manner of the attaches of my vast organization that will in any way be offensive to the most fastidious will be tolerated under any circumstances.”⁵

Also, Plowden shifts much of his focus to the “Florida years” of the Ringlings, after much of the family moved to Sarasota, where the winter quarters of the circus were eventually moved. Despite its unusual format, Plowden is seen cited as a source for some historians. An introduction by Roland Butler, who was the general press representative of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus for more than 30 years. He calls Plowden’s book “the first completely authentic history of the Ringlings and their circus ever put on paper.”⁶ Plowden was also a close friend and confidant of John Ringling, giving him much credibility.

Finally, the book is that perhaps most cited by circus historians is *Circus Kings; Our Ringling Family Story* by Henry Ringling North. The central argument of this book is simply to relay the history of his uncles, the original Ringlings, and also his brother, John Ringling North, when the torch was passed to him. The first half of North’s book provides an early history of the original Ringling brothers; most interestingly, however, he also writes about his uncles’ interaction with him when he was a boy, and recounts the times that he helped his brother run the circus in the later years. While this book does not have any “evidence” in the scholarly sense to back it up since it was one of the earlier works written on the brothers, it’s scholarly authenticity

⁵ Gene Plowden, *Those Amazing Ringlings and Their Circus*. (Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1967), 9-10.

⁶ Roland Butler, introduction in *Those Amazing Ringlings*, vii.

derives from North's direct contact with his family members, and his access to family records such as oral histories, route books, letters, etc.⁷

This paper argues that the ability to adapt and grow to new venues while maintaining the fundamental characteristics of a family business and adhering to the values of the audiences they were entertaining at the time ultimately led to the success of the Ringlings, even though they came from a state full of competition, already thriving with circuses. This argument is supported with primary sources that include numerous newspaper articles that were printed from 1882 to 1918. These articles provide proof that the Ringlings grew and moved to new locations while maintaining their "moral" show, which appealed to the audiences of the time. Oral interviews and autobiographies are used that provide background information on their aptitude for keeping their business in the family and remaining close to Baraboo and their small-town roots. Using these primary sources, the paper has been divided into four parts: the establishment of Wisconsin as a circus state, the years of the Ringlings from their first wagon show to the start of their circus on the rails, their growth from the railroad to the purchase of Barnum & Bailey, and ultimately, their move from Baraboo to Bridgeport.

DELAVAN AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A "CIRCUS COLONY"

"I think the oldest circus town in Wisconsin though is Delavan. I think Delavan is where they had circuses there long before the Ringlings was in the business."

-Fred Gollmar

There are two clear reasons why it is not a mystery that Delavan quickly became the hubcap of the Wisconsin circus industry during the 19th century. Though it was south of both cities, it was nearly right in the middle of Madison and Milwaukee. Wisconsin was a fairly

⁷ Henry Ringling North and Alden Hatch, *Circus Kings: Our Ringling Family Story*. (New York: Doubleday, 1960).

young state and these cities were newly developed and not nearly what they are today. However, with Milwaukee County boasting an 1850 population around 31,000 and Dane 16,639, they clearly outranked the other, rural settlements whose populations often did not exceed 2500.⁸

Even though Delavan was moderately close to these two cities, it retained its abundance of natural beauty that it boasted, including a copious grassland and a lake. According to Edmund Mabie, It was considered perfect land for winter quarters as their horses could graze.⁹

The second reason that Delavan swiftly sprang to life as a circus town was that of sheer practicality. During this time, it was not uncommon for people to drift from town to town, looking for employment within their local industries. Dahlinger wrote “If the Mabies had been wagon builders, they would have attracted carpenters, wheelwrights, and blacksmiths. Since they were circus owners they brought in their wake performers, trainer, grooms and the like.”¹⁰ Some workers would arrive in the summer to join traveling tours. As performers, they would often fall in love with the energy of the circus, branch out and start up their own venues. Also, it was very common for children to carry on the tradition of the business of their parents. The culmination of all these factors was the reason that Delavan grew into such a circus community.

The three principle families that put Delavan on the radar as such a strong circus “colony” were the Mabies, the Buckleys and the Hollands, all of which were intertwined with each other at one point or another. The Mabie brothers were the first to create an established circus originating in Wisconsin, thus earning them recognition as the circus pioneers of the state. The Mabies created a legacy of not only one of the most successful circuses in Wisconsin, but perhaps the nation at this time, and they introduced many popular circus innovations. However,

⁸ Madison is found in Dane County. County Census, Milwaukee and Dane County, Wisconsin, U.S. Census of Population, 1850. <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/php/county.php>

⁹ Fred Dahlinger, Jr. and Stuart Thayer. *Badger State Showmen: A History of Wisconsin's Circus Heritage*. (Baraboo: Circus World Museum, 1998), 1.

¹⁰ Dahlinger, *Badger State Showmen*, 13.

the history of the Mabie shows is also a tangled and sometimes confusing one. The name of their venue changed frequently as they bought from, sold to and partnered with different people. This shows that the Mabies did not stay nearly as involved in the day-to-day aspects as the Ringling Brothers did. This is possibly the reason why their circus, while extremely successful during its time, lasted only fifteen years.

The Mabies hailed from New York. In June of 1847, Edmund purchased land in Wisconsin to set up winter quarters. This was a smart move, for the West was unchartered territory and while it was unknown and slightly hazardous, it offered rural areas of untouched audiences in which a circus could become the first established. While other shows traveled west as well, it was impossible for them to get there as early as the Mabies could each season by holding their winter quarters in the Midwest. This is arguably the principle reason behind the Mabies' decision to relocate. In 1849, Jeremiah took over the management as Edmund was busy settling the property in Delavan, Wisconsin. It was during this year that it became clear that they spent much less time actually traveling with the company and managing its daily affairs.¹¹

By 1850, the management had passed back to Edmund's hands. Many changes were made to the Mabies' circus in 1852, and it was only the beginning. Pardon A. Older, a man who had no experience in the circus business, had traded his mill for one-third of the ownership of the Mabie show in 1849. By 1852, he had been spending much time learning and honing his skills. He became manager that year, and the name changed to the Great United States Circus of Older & Co. This shows that the Mabies did not even have their name in the title at this point. In November, the Mabies entered into contract with leading menagerie entrepreneur James Raymond. This was once again a smart move, for menageries and they now had an elephant. The name became the bulky Mabie & Co.'s United States Circus and Raymond & Co. and

¹¹ Dahlinger, *Badger State Showmen*, 3.

Driesbach & Co.'s Menageries Combined. Though Older was still the manager, the show had once again taken on its Mabie namesake. The show continued on like this for a number of years, often changing management and title. By 1855, the Mabies had acquired four elephants that they had bought from an auction by Seth B. Howes, their former partner. This was a great accomplishment; with the addition of elephants which are considered one of the most important circus installments, their once-modest Wisconsin show had grown to the point where it could compete with large eastern shows.¹²

During their years on the road, the Mabies had an incredible impact on circus history. In 1858, they introduced the cookhouse and sleeping facilities on the grounds, which became imperative fixtures while on the road, which combined along with horse tents became a “camp outfit” (a term also coined by a Mabie employee). Slightly less important but still and culturally significant is Peter Conklin, a peanut and lemonade stand operator, who claimed to have invented pink lemonade by pouring water that had been stained pink from an equestrienne’s tights into his lemonade tub while traveling with their circus. While the Mabie brothers’ show did not last as long as perhaps P.T. Barnum or the Ringling Brothers and their involvement was considerably less, no one would counter their business savvy and their role in putting Wisconsin on the map and paving its way to becoming a full-on circus state.¹³

Matthew Buckley was a performer with the Howes & Mabie company and one of the first performers to move to the Delavan area. He moved with his wife, two daughters and two sons. Another son was later born in Delavan. Buckley retired in 1849, but the days of the appearance of his name in the circus world were far from over.

At this point, it was not difficult to coordinate a circus in the Delavan area. Horses were in

¹² Dahlinger, *Badger State Showmen*, 5.

¹³ Dahlinger, *Badger State Showmen*, 11.

plentiful supply and finding workmen was an easy task. In a rural state such as Wisconsin, migrant farm workers were in abundance. Often, workers such as these would make their way into Delavan during the spring, and on occasion residents from Delavan would join for a season, just to experience the life.

On May 3rd, 1856, Harry Buckley debuted his circus, which he had dubbed H. Buckley & Co.'s National Circus.¹⁴ He traveled with a show under this name until 1860, when he returned to Delavan. He then changed the name to the Great Buckley Show. According to Dahlinger, he advertised as being “‘The largest, most popular, best and cheapest.’” However, it “‘did not appear to have been any of those things, but traveling show advertising has never been held strictly to the truth.’”¹⁵

In 1874, Buckley started what both Dahlinger and Conover believe to be his biggest venture, as well as the reason for his demise. Buckley decided to follow in the footsteps of Barnum and concoct a traveling show which he coined the “Roman Hippodrome and Universal Fair.” It was his grandest attempt, boasting “One Hundred and Fifty Ladies and Gentlemen and One Hundred English Thoroughbred Race Horses, Elephants and Camels will be admitted at one time on the great Hippodromatic Oval Race Avenue, one-half mile in circumference.”¹⁶ It was considered a great failure and ended Buckley’s career as a showman.¹⁷

As mentioned before, the Holland family had a strong hand in the establishment of Delavan’s circus history. John Holland was an English acrobat that made his way to America in 1847 and was sent to the Mabies for their summer tour in 1848. That winter, Holland was sold 120 acres in Delavan by Edmund and stayed there for the rest of his life. As many circus

¹⁴ Harry Buckley was a son of Matthew Buckley.

¹⁵ Dahlinger, *Badger State Showmen*, 15.

¹⁶ *The Daily Republican* (Decatur, Illinois), 25 May 1874, p. 4.

¹⁷ Dahlinger, *Badger State Showmen*, 16.

performers did, Holland had dreams of being a show owner. He joined with a man named J.E. Mosher and they initiated Holland & Mosher's Great American Circus and Theatre. The first performance was held in Delavan, precisely one year after the debut of Buckley's show. A very modest yet polite advertisement from the *Whitewater Register* reads:

“The ‘boys’ will no doubt be gratified to learn that the Circus Company of Messrs. Holland & Mosher will be here on the 8th of June next. They are said to have a very good Company, and as the Circus is a standing amusement they will of course, be well patronized.”¹⁸

A gallant attempt but by no means as successful as circuses before it or yet to come, it folded after four months. The Holland family soon returned to performing with the Buckleys.¹⁹

This is not to say that the Holland & Mosher Circus was the last time the Holland name was in the headlines. True to the “family industry” argument, John's children arguably had longer and perhaps more successful lives in circus performing and leadership. His eldest son George was an incredibly talented rider and participated in the family act until 1872. He entered into partnerships twice; the first attempt was in 1885. Along with his brother Edward, he joined with John and Charles McMahan, forming the Holland-McMahan Circus. However, the immense amount of grift in the show eventually got to Holland and he left the show in 1888.²⁰ This shows the commonality with grift in the circus world.

Edward Holland, though not as talented as his brother, certainly had a longer career in the circus business. He performed with his family until 1872, when his father retired. He instigated the E.G. Holland & Co. Railroad Circus, which was the last to come from Delavan in 1894. This ended a 47-year run of circuses from the Delavan area. He eventually left Delavan to manage

¹⁸ *Whitewater Register* (Whitewater, Wisconsin). 30 May 1857, p. 3.

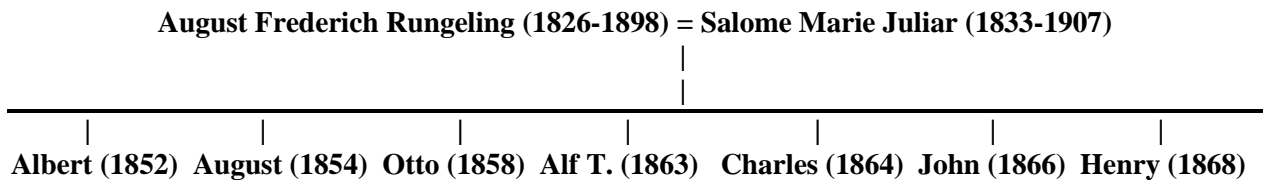
¹⁹ Dahlinger, *Badger State Showmen*, 17.

²⁰ “Grift” is a term that indicates “cheating, shortchanging and operating crooked games.” Dahlinger, *Badger State Showmen*, 21.

the New York Hippodrome in New Jersey, where he died. His circus career lasted nearly 80 years and is debatably one of the longest to date.²¹ It is the hard work and perseverance of these three families, among many others later to come, that strongly established Wisconsin as a circus state.

HALL AND WAGON SHOW DAYS: STARTING IN BARABOO AND STAYING REGIONAL (1882-1890)

“I don’t think they started in the real circus business until they came to Baraboo”
-Ida Palmer Ringling



Though the Ringling Brothers are known to have launched their circus from the small rural town of Baraboo, their initial desire to be part of show business started long before they settled there. Their father, August Rungeling²², arrived in Milwaukee in 1848. He was a quick learner of English and soon became a harness-maker. The family moved a handful of times, including Chicago, where Albert was born, Milwaukee again, where August was born, and Baraboo for the first time, where Otto – the only brother to lay claim to being born in Baraboo- was born. Soon after Otto’s birth, August learned of the high demand for harness-makers in McGregor, Iowa – so to McGregor they went. The remaining four sons were born in McGregor, and much of their childhood was spent there. It was in McGregor that the boys began to feel the

²¹ Dahlinger, *Badger State Showmen*, 19.

²² Soon after August’s arrival to Wisconsin, he changed his name to “Ringling,” which was easier to pronounce and spell.

“sawdust in their shoes”²³ that would linger throughout the young adulthood that they spent in school or in other professions. During an early-morning visit to Dan Rice’s riverboat circus, they caught the fever. An interview with John M. Kelley disputes this, claiming:

“Their playtime antics at Macgregor, Iowa, never was the base of the circus beginnings. Those who write about them fail to give the respective ages of the boys at that time who were left at home, which ranged perhaps, from about eleven to two years of age. They could scarcely be credited with the capacity of building a circus.”²⁴

However, his claim is highly interesting because it has been argued that it was at this point that the brothers became enthralled with the shows. It was only Henry, at two years of age, who was too young to attend. Even Alf T., in his novel *Life Story of the Ringling Brothers*, attributes Rice’s steamboat circus to the foundation of their later lives in the circus, including descriptions and illustrations of the small parades they would put on down the roads of McGregor, showcasing homemade instruments, dogs and even a goat.²⁵

Getting The Show on the Road

It was in 1882 when the original partners really started to get a taste of the traveling show world. This span of eight years, until 1890 when they became a railroad show, were years full of firsts, turning points and hardships that tested their gusto and established a reputation. With Gus off working in another town and Henry still too young, Al, Alf T. and Charles set out to do something much different than harness making. They initiated a hall show, which they coined “Ringling Bros. Classic and Comic Concert Company.” Aside from four other actor-musicians, the performers for the most part consisted of the brothers themselves, and their first performance was in the small farming town of Mazomanie. Though they were undoubtedly brave for trying

²³ The term “sawdust in their shoes” is a circus term that refers to one gaining enthusiasm for the shows, or having the circus “in their blood.” Cited in Ringling North’s *Circus Kings*, 29.

²⁴ John M. Kelley, interview by Wisconsin State Historical Society (14 May 1960).

²⁵ Alfred T. Ringling, *Life Story of the Ringling Brothers*. Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons, 1900, p. 29

the circus in the first place, they showed they were human and not without nerves. According to Charles, “You can imagine how we felt when we had to go out and face the audience singlehanded and alone to perform our specialties...a real healthy feeling of stage fright. Why, when I came off after my so-called, act my tongue and throat were actually parched from the fever of the excitement that was raging within me...”²⁶ At only sixteen, John joined them. He had already started to become skilled as a performer and had gotten a glimpse at what it was like to work in show business, as he had appeared with Al in Dr. Morrison’s Coliseum Show in 1879. John would later become one of the Ringling Brothers’ star performers, and then the advance man for the show and one of the main reasons why it became nationally-renowned.

The first season closed in Viroqua, Wisconsin on February 27th, 1883. Though their trek was hard and their audiences were small, they had undoubtedly taken a monumental stride in their journey to success. They had made little profit if any, and they played in cold, drafty halls that they were often snowed into and out of. They were determined and traveled by trains, buggies, horses and foot if they had to. The fact that they endured this life for little money and were ready to head out for more the next year showed the work ethic behind the boys, and the willpower one often had to have in order to make their way in rural surroundings such as Wisconsin at the time. Also, they proved they were not dumb. Instead of trying their hand at the bigger towns where the money might have been more plentiful, they knew to go to the smaller towns in which the inhabitants were strapped for entertainment, but expected less and therefore the performers would be able to polish their skills. This included towns such as Fulda, Minnesota and Sheldon, Iowa. Each had but only a few hundred people, if that. The experience they gained during their first season on the road was invaluable.²⁷

²⁶ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 65.

²⁷ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 65-68.

The summer of 1883 was spent in Baraboo for most of the brothers, gathering more funds and experience while planning for the next winter. It was unusual that they planned their show to travel during the winter, as most circuses spent summers on the road. It was also more treacherous due to the sometimes-dreadful weather of Midwest winters, but the Ringlings also knew it would be their best bet to set their show out at that point, when the crops were in at rural towns; people had their planting money at hand and a lot more free time to spend at shows.²⁸

As was the first season, the 1883-1884 year was very helpful in gaining their foothold in the show world for the Ringlings. Many important events happened that they would take with them throughout their later circus years. First of all, they made their first executive move that became their jumping-off point to represent themselves as a highly moral circus. The circus was a form of entertainment that was not treated with much respect during this late Victorian Era.

David Carolyon states in his article, “Self-anointed arbiters of morality condemned the circus.”²⁹

According to Henry Ringling North:

“Very early in their careers the Ringlings decided to have an honest show...they believed that honesty was really a better business; that if they acquired a reputation for giving entertainment at a fair price and protecting their patrons, they would prosper accordingly.”³⁰

As mentioned before, when traveling the roads and stopping in various towns, the circus was vulnerable to picking up grift. Also, with the hard work and long days, it was not hard for employees to succumb to heavy drinking – which is what became of the Ringlings’ first troupe. Alf T. wrote in his memoir that the employees at this point were forming habits of drinking and “attending to their duties” poorly.³¹ In November, the problems became too much and they fired

²⁸ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 71.

²⁹ Dan Carolyon, “Wisconsin Circus Woes and the Great Dan Rice,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* (2005): 18-27

³⁰ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 103.

³¹ Ringling, *Life Story of the Ringling Brothers*. p. 134.

their entire troupe. Admiringly, they carried on without them. This was an enormous attribution to the great personal investment each brother had with the success of their circus. Amazingly, “The Ringling Bros. Grand Carnival of Fun,” as it was called at this point played an impressive total of 185 shows, more than half of which were put on by only five members, in the most remote farming towns and without any kind of menagerie.³²

Two more important steps for the Ringlings happened during the 1883-1884 season. Al Ringling married Eliza “Lou” Morris in December. As he did this between shows, she was immediately swept along on the road and contributes to the notion that their circus was a tight-knit, family business. Not only did she jump on board without complaint, she became a rock behind the workings of the show:

“To the names of men who made the Ringling circus must be added the name of a woman. That woman was Mrs. Al Ringling, familiarly known as Lou. Wagon show years were lean and poverty held its curb on a development and expansion. Often, it was during those years, that the brothers bitterly battled and disagreed in method and means of circus planned development. And just so often did Lou intervene, to sooth tempers and preserve unity.”³³

Lou Ringling became a staple in the affairs of the Ringlings. It was she who soothed tempers when disputes over business endeavors arose. She also spent years of hard work on the circus, whether behind the scenes or in front of the crowd. She performed as a snake charmer, sewed outfits for performers and even drove teams when needed. All of this was done without her name ever appearing on payroll. This showed the extraordinary loyalty in the family business that was the Ringling Brothers circus.³⁴

The First of Many Business Partnerships

³² During this season, the brothers ventured into Nebraska for the first time, but stayed with the small towns on the eastern side. Cited in Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 73.

³³ John M. Kelley, interview by Wisconsin State Historical Society (14 May 1960).

³⁴ John M. Kelley, interview by Wisconsin State Historical Society (14 May 1960).

Also in 1884, the Ringling Brothers pulled another move that illustrated their already-blossoming business savvy. Aching to start a full-scale traveling circus, they knew they had to hire some seasoned employees. Having worked for “Yankee” Robinson in the summer of 1883, Al was able to convince him to join in a partnership. Sixty-six years old and one of the best-known circus men of the time, he agreed to help them form their circus, developing a ninety-minute program and planning a wagon route that would lead them from Baraboo to several towns in Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois. This show would be called “Yankee Robinson and Ringling Bros. Great Double Shows, Circus and Caravan” and Robinson would appear in every performance, despite ailing health. It would also be the only time that someone else’s name would appear before that of the brothers.³⁵

The 1884 season started in Baraboo as planned. It was very common for towns and cities to require proprietors to pay a circus license fee, which could cost anywhere from twenty-five to a few hundred dollars. Since the Ringlings were considered “home artists” of Baraboo, they performed their opening show without being charged. During that show, Robinson passed his first test of how valuable an asset he would be that season. The Brothers’ first tent was small, relatively speaking, being forty-five by ninety feet and designed to hold six hundred viewers.³⁶ The Baraboo spectators warmly welcomed their peers’ show and while crowding under the pavilion, a seating section collapsed:

“Yankee Robinson gave the brothers their money’s worth right there. He shot over to the scene of the catastrophe, cracking jokes like a string of firecrackers, helping people up, soothing children, putting everybody back in genial humor. For such services and the use of his name, his compensation was one third of the after-show concert’s receipts.”³⁷

³⁵ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 77.

³⁶ Two measurements indicate a rectangular, not round, tent.

³⁷ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 79-80.

The “Great Double Shows, Circus and Caravan” played over 114 shows that season in four states, even though it was hardly any more sophisticated than the show the boys had started out with two years ago. However, on September 4th, Robinson died suddenly on the way to Jefferson, Iowa. Robinson’s death was a turning point for the brothers.³⁸ Audiences were for the most part unfamiliar with the Ringlings and came to see a name they knew. Without him, if their circus was going to succeed, it would have to on its own. In November, they set out on the road to perform their winter hall show. Opening in Illinois, the Grand Carnival of Fun played 241 shows that year – the most in the two years it had been running. That was an enormous accomplishment. They proved to largely accommodating audiences their endurance to perform, pack up, travel and do it all over again the next day. Most importantly, they proved once again that they could work together as a great team. They shared duties, managed and performed, and traveled through good and bad weather without destroying their rapport.³⁹

Making it on Their Own and Becoming a Real Circus

The 1885 and 1886 seasons were, for all intents and purposes, without incident. They performed with their circus in the summer and their hall show in the winter to gain funds, as in the rural towns the winter shows were where the money was. Henry, the youngest brother, joined in September of 1886, but as an employee and not as a performer like John, Charles and Alf T.⁴⁰ He was originally sent out ahead to map the parade routes, but he abused his duty and went on a six-week binge that included drinking, selling the horses and carriage, and his fine clothing. He was found in Iowa and stripped of his title as an advance man. Nonetheless, his brothers once again demonstrated their strong desire to keep their business family-oriented as

³⁸ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 82.

³⁹ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 95.

⁴⁰ John was billed as a clown while Charles and Alf T. played “twelve different musical instruments.” Ringling North, *Circus Kings*.

well as clean when they kept him with the show, but “he was put in charge of the front door, where he kept an eye on the ticket takers and the uncles kept an eye on him.”⁴¹

In 1887, the Ringlings ventured farther than they had ever attempted before. They showed in Kansas and Missouri, indicating expansion, but still stayed as local as wagons would allow them and performed in rural cities. They were aware that their winter shows were greatly adding to their profit and they now had enough employees to send out two companies for the season.⁴²

The year 1888 brought more excitement and crossroads for the brothers. Unfortunately, it was a mix of a sanction and a curse. From the grueling seasons they had pushed through before, both summer and winter with nary a day off, their show had grown enough that they were at the point where they could double admission without complaint from the attendees. Adult admission was now fifty cents; twenty-five for children. With this, they gained somewhat of a financial surplus, and they knew exactly what to do with it. Though their menagerie was already impressive, it was a known fact that the time that a circus was not a circus without an elephant, and the Ringling Brothers had been without an elephant. Until now. In February 1888, they purchased two elephants. A newspaper article chronicled, “Ringling Bros, are the owners of 'Babylon' the largest elephant in the world, also "Fannie" the only baby elephant in America.”⁴³ Their circus could now be considered “complete,” though it was far from done growing.⁴⁴

As stated above, though 1888 brought great things, it also had its downfalls. It was the year with the worst weather thus far. The rain was torrential and often did not let up for days.

⁴¹ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 85.

⁴² Company One consisted of Alf T., Charles, John, Henry and five others. Company Two contained Al and Lou Ringling, as well as five others. Company One performed from December to February and Company Two performed from December to March. Cited in Apps, *Ringlingville*, 29-30.

⁴³ *The Sumner Gazette* (Sumner, Iowa) 20 September 1888

⁴⁴ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 86.

The animals became sick, and the roads were habitually impassable. As was per usual with country circuses, the Ringlings enlisted and relied on farm boys and their additional wagons. These hired workers were in charge of setting up and taking down the tents and loading the equipment. As is understandable, though, these employees would from time to time get exhausted and homesick; during this year it was especially bad. Though they tried tactics to keep the boys on as best as they could, some always ended up taking their horses and heading for home. The Ringlings had a choice. They could give in to the weather and fold, or they could push on. And push on they did. In a letter to the Bank of Baraboo on May 15th in request of a \$1,000 loan, Otto wrote “We have had the worst experience in business since we started the past ten days. It has been raining and the roads have been in terrible condition.”⁴⁵ After being granted their loan, though, the brothers once again showed their willpower and resolve to stay honest and ahead of the game by sending a letter that stated “we have not used the money you sent us yet. Are trying our *utmost not* to.”⁴⁶ Within a month, the weather had cleared and they were able to start paying back their drafts. Otto wrote, “Please find enclosed draft on Chicago for \$1000. We resumed \$.50 admission last Saturday... We have made \$3,000 in one week and one day...N.B. We didn’t touch the 1,000 dollars you sent us, but we got down to 122 dollars cash on hand besides your remittance. That was the low watermark.”⁴⁷ Their ability to repay a loan and then some within one week showed how well the Ringlings were doing financially when the going was good. Though 1888 was the first truly hard-hitting season with dreadful weather, lost

⁴⁵ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 87.

⁴⁶ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 89.

⁴⁷ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 90-91.

employees and tragedies, it was also a stepping stone.⁴⁸ The brothers knew that they had the fortitude to be faced with a multitude of factors going against them and still want to carry on.⁴⁹

A further impressive fact is that despite the hardships of the 1888 season, they had still done financially well enough to be able to support themselves performing only one season. From here on out, the Ringlings no longer performed their winter hall shows to the lucrative but slightly uncertain turnout of harvesters. The 1888 season was also the most profitable thus far.⁵⁰

Planning for 1890 started immediately, for they were going to take the biggest and most expensive step they had yet thus far. With solid financial stability and the terrible go of it they had with the miserable weather and muddy roads of 1888 fresh in their minds, they knew what they had to do in order to avoid risking their show again. They had to take to the rails. They offered their equipment for sale and soon discovered that the Adam Forepaugh Circus was having an excess equipment sale as well. Otto was sent to Philadelphia to strike a deal, and returned with eleven roadcars. He also bought a few railcars and a bandwagon from Burr Robbins, a former Janesville circus. They leased land across from the Bassett Factory and began to build a spur line for their cars. When the winter was over, they would be ready to take the show where it had never been before.⁵¹

They knew that the upcoming years would truly make or break them, but the brothers were more confident than ever with their new transition. They had maintained a strong relationship to their hometown and had that support to fall back on. They had built a considerable standing as a rural circus and if they continued to manage and route as well as they had over the years, their opportunities would be infinite.

⁴⁸ On June 23rd in Webster City, IA, a dear friend of the Ringlings and circus performer James Richardson was killed by gunman Thomas Baskett for unknown reasons. Cited in Ringling North's *Circus Kings*, 90.

⁴⁹ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 86-91.

⁵⁰ Apps, *Ringlingville*, 41.

⁵¹ Apps, *Ringlingville*, 41-42.

TAKING THE RAILS TO BARNUM & BAILEY: GOING NATIONWIDE (1890-1907)

“This will be the only large Rail Road Show that will visit Grand Rapids this year. Be in town early and see the magnificent free street parade. Don't forget the date! Wednesday, August 13th”
-The Centralia Enterprise and Tribune, Saturday, August 2, 1890

By 1890, the Ringling Circus had become a circus on rails. This presented new opportunities as well as challenges for them. While they could travel anywhere in the nation that the railroad could take them, they were restricted by the schedules and rules of the trains that they needed to hire to pull their cars. They would also now be thrown into competition against older, larger and more experienced eastern circuses. In the years between 1890 and 1907, the Ringling Brothers grew by expanding their territory farther west and south, opening a winter show in Chicago, and starting to dominate and acquire their competition, ultimately ending in the purchase of Barnum & Bailey's circus. They were faced with the new challenges of competing against emerging entertainment venues such as vaudeville and held their own. They also, however, demonstrated their continuity by staying a strong moral family show throughout a depression and a new century.

In 1890, they called their circus “Ringling Brothers' United Monster Railroad Shows, Menagerie and Museum,” making it blatantly obvious that they were now on the move. The year before, the seventh and final brother, Gus, joined on. This was a point of continuity in their rapidly changing circus, proving that they still strove to stay a family business. However, he was content to be an employee instead of a partner and remained in this role for his entire life. He was put in charge of Advertising Car No. 1 and oversaw the pasting of posters on barns, sheds and various surfaces across the country. They had grown to 225 employees with a 125-foot Big Top and eighteen rail cars. Their menagerie consisted of three elephants, three camels, a

“Bovalapus,” a zebra, a zebu, their first hippopotamus, monkeys, deer, two wolves and a few boa constrictors. They were a force to be reckoned with.⁵²

The Ringlings picked a year to expand in which expansion was not uncommon. The Oklahoma Territory was formed on May 2nd, and Montana, the Dakotas, Washington, Idaho and Wyoming had recently been given statehood. Even the rural communities in which the brothers were used to performing were changing their technologies. The entire nation was on the move, and it was up to them to keep up. John was in charge of routing the circus at this point, as well as occasionally performing with the show, and he was starting to perfect his skills at picking the right locations. He was quickly losing his connection to Baraboo and yearned to get out, which would benefit the brothers in the long run because he would insist on expanding their spectacle to larger cities. His brothers would keep the connection to Wisconsin.⁵³

As always before, the circus opened in Baraboo.⁵⁴ That year, they played to wildly popular audiences in Wisconsin; so much so that in some towns they had to add extra sections. While they experienced some foul weather and the season of 1888 no doubt entered their minds, they did not have to worry about it this time. The locomotives powered forward, rain or no. By September, they entered new territory, including Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia. However, they showed their continuity through savvy for sticking to small neglected towns “by means of John Ringling’s skillful routing.”⁵⁵ They did not know quite what to expect but were pleasantly surprised that they were able to sell tickets to the “refined” eastern audiences with almost as much ease as the Midwesterners. The Indiana County Gazette in Pennsylvania raved, “The press in the towns where they have appeared speak highly

⁵² Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 98.

⁵³ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 98.

⁵⁴ Whether or not they were expanding, the brothers always gave their hometown the first show.

⁵⁵ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 99.

in their praise and there is no doubt that they will fulfill their promises, as they have done in the past.”⁵⁶ The article also contributed to their continuity as a moral show, claiming that “on Monday, October 6, the date of their great moral shows at Indiana, gambling, etc., will positively be prohibited.”⁵⁷ This was especially noteworthy at this point, as there were a few circuses going out of Wisconsin that were known for their shaky practices, namely the Joseph B. McMahon show. He set records for grift and “hired uncouth men with bad reputations, brought in all sorts of gamblers, and tolerated other unethical practices.”⁵⁸

In November, the brothers dabbled in their second transaction between another circus (the first being the acquisition of the railroad cars). John, hearing of a stranded circus in Great Bend, traveled to Kansas to take part.⁵⁹ He was able to enlarge their menagerie notably, purchasing an African elephant, camels, a llama, a pair of tigers and a pair of hyenas. And, perhaps because of their recent eastern coast expansion, rumors began to swirl this year that they might be leaving their Baraboo winter quarters. Despite this, the Ringlings were back in Baraboo for the winter and would not leave for more than twenty years.

Rolling Along

The Ringlings spent the years of 1891-1894 greatly increasing their show but making it clear that they were not going to forget where they came from. They spent the summers of 1891 and 1892 avoiding the east and sticking again to cities in the Midwest, going as far as the Oklahoma Territory. According to Ida Belle Palmer Ringling, Henry’s wife, they were always more partial to the smaller towns in the West because they would be entertaining audiences that

⁵⁶ *The Indiana County Gazette* (Indiana, PA) 01 October 1890, p. 8

⁵⁷ *The Indiana County Gazette* (Indiana, PA) 01 October 1890, p. 8

⁵⁸ Dahlinger, *Badger State Showmen*, 21.

⁵⁹ A “stranded circus” is one in financial trouble. Cited in Apps’ *Ringlingville*, 49.

did not have much opportunity to see a circus. They liked the East, but found it to be “overly settled” in the beginning.⁶⁰

The winter of 1891 was spent planning an even larger circus. They expanded their menagerie and added a large polar bear, and they turned the former Peck and Cramer Building in Baraboo into a carpenter shop where workmen were hired to build new seats for the big top and leather crafters made harnesses. They did this under the supervision of August Ringling. This garnered a great deal of admiration and respect from their Baraboo peers, as they were giving back to the community by offering jobs to locals. As their winter quarters grew and expanded, Baraboo was becoming a “magical circus city.”⁶¹

During the summer of 1892, the Ringlings displayed their continuity. They performed in only thirteen states, keeping within the Midwest, making sure to perform in the towns that had brought them to where they were. They were also practicing their staying power as an honest show, which greatly pleased the rural audiences and they were noticed for it. An article in Eau Claire claimed:

“Ringling Bros, proprietors and managers of Ringling Bros.' Colossal R. R. Shows, wish to announce to the people of Eau Claire county and the surrounding country that on Wednesday, Aug. 20, the date of their great moral shows at Eau Claire, gambling, etc., will positively be prohibited. The press in the towns where they have appeared speak highly in their praise and there is no doubt that they will fulfill their promises, as they have done in the past.”⁶²

The Ringlings did whatever they could to maintain their reputation as an ethical show, even assisting local authorities in nabbing pickpockets, thieves and crooked gamblers when needed.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ida Belle Palmer Ringling, interview by Wisconsin State Historical Society (1960).

⁶¹ John M. Kelley, interview by Wisconsin State Historical Society (14 May 1960).

⁶² *The Eau Claire Weekly Leader* (Eau Claire, WI) 04 August 1890, p. 2

⁶³ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 103.

The season of 1893 was a mixed bag. The Ringlings spent another winter planning for an even larger summer than before and employing local residents.⁶⁴ Coming up was the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which was an international exhibition that displayed the wonders of technology. It was rumored that people would choose to forgo run-of-the-mill circuses in favor of this event. Also, the country soon entered one of the cruelest economic depressions in its history.⁶⁵ With these two factors to consider, it was expected that the Ringlings would play it safe and ride out the season staying in winter quarters. True to form, though, the Ringlings did the unexpected and decided to go on with their show no matter what. It was clear from newspaper articles that circuses were not in abundance that year, with one asserting:

“Ringling Bros. World's Greatest show, which has the reputation of being the best all around legitimate circus now before the public, is to exhibit in Logansport Thursday, August 31. This is the only big show that will exhibit here this season and naturally there will be considerable curiosity to see a circus that has created so strong an impression elsewhere.”⁶⁶

However, despite their economic afflictions, the spectators still came in droves. The Ringling Brothers quickly found out that no matter their financial situation or depression, people still needed entertainment. Perhaps they needed an escape from their less-than-perfect everyday lives. No matter what it was, the Ringlings saw audiences that year that were just as large as any. Their decision to tour had been a good one. Without ticket profits to cover the expenses of taking care of their circus, there is a good chance they might have even folded.

The depression continued, and would into 1897, but it had proven not to hinder the circus at all. In 1894, they branched downwards. They had been as far as Kansas and Oklahoma

⁶⁴ Local contractor Carl Isenberg built several buildings for Ringlingville, including new car and paint shops. Cited in Apps' *Ringlingville*, 61.

⁶⁵ Apps, *Ringlingville*, 61.

⁶⁶ *Logansport Reporter* (Logansport, IN) 04 August 1893, p. 3

before, but never to the Deep South. The route of 1894 included Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi for the first time. Naturally, this was slightly nerve-wracking as they would be dealing with a different type of audience than they were used to in the Midwest. However, they were optimistic due to the positive result of their ventures out east. Their reputation had preceded them and in an announcement that they would soon be playing there, a San Antonio newspaper wrote:

“Naturally there is a great deal of curiosity in regard to the Ringling Brothers, whose big circus exhibits in San Antonio for the first time October 30. Among showmen they are recognized as the most phenomenally successful circus managers that this country has ever produced. The reason for their great success can be readily explained...Courtesy and honest dealing is a prerequisite for employment. Bills are always paid promptly. Gambling is not tolerated in any form, and that dishonest class known as "grafters"⁶⁷ who frequently follow shows and virtually rob the unsuspecting, are never found in the vicinity of this big institution. The management secures their arrest whenever detected. All this has served to give the Ringling show a distinct character, and wherever it is shown it is popular with the people.”⁶⁸

The Ringlings did not disappoint. In a review following the October 30th show, the same reporter showered them with praise, exclaiming,

“The Ringling Brothers circus has come and gone, and if crowds of people, unlimited applause and expressions of satisfaction are to be taken as any criterion it certainly has pleased the people to the highest degree. This show has never appeared in this city before, and at first the people were skeptical as to its merits, but judicious merits and splendid notices from all over the State were sufficient, and this coupled with the fact that it was the first circus of the season, served to draw a concourse of people that exceeded any such similar gathering in this city.”⁶⁹

It was a stroke of genius on their part to visit Texas, for their venues were sold out, even with extra seats. There were those who had heard of their show and were eager to see it, and those who had heard of their show and were curious, even skeptical, of the exhibition. Either way, it was a selling point that proved very successful in the end.

⁶⁷ This term is synonymous with grifters, as it is the term Alf T. Ringling uses in his book.

⁶⁸ *The San Antonio Daily Light* (San Antonio, TX) 13 October 1894, p. 2.

⁶⁹ *The San Antonio Daily Light* (San Antonio, TX) 31 October 1894, p. 5.

Along with traveling to states they had never performed in before, the 1893 and 1894 seasons brought on another aspect of show business that the Ringlings had never encountered before: the non-compete agreement.⁷⁰ These contracts were completely routine among circuses, but before going nationwide, the brothers had never had to worry about them. Though the owners of shows in their personal lives held competing shows in high regard, when it came to their advertising, it was a no hold's bar battle. It was the strongest form of combat between shows that would be overlapping their performances in cities. Posting employees would place their bills right on top of those of a competing circus, and Alf T. wrote in his book about how the papers would often become inches thick due to all of the layers.⁷¹ Also, defamation and slander in the form of exaggeration was not infrequent. The Ringlings experienced this with the Sells Brothers Circus, which it met in 1893 in Sumner, Iowa. Their inventory bill read:

“RINGLINGS CLAIMS: The Ringlings call themselves the ‘World’s Greatest Show.’
THE TRUTH: They have a 22-car train. We travel in 45 cars. RINGLINGS CLAIMS:
They claim that Zip is the largest elephant in captivity. THE TRUTH: Zip is really a
runt. We have ten elephants that are bigger...”⁷²

Such was characteristic of an inventory bill. Nonetheless, the performances spoke for themselves and, despite their efforts, the Ringlings out-showed the Sells. They had become such a giant in the Midwest that they threatened experienced circuses such as the Adam Forepaugh Show, and even Barnum & Bailey, which was entirely unprecedented for them. In 1893, The brothers signed non-compete agreements with both of these circuses.⁷³ They had reached a point where they were negotiating with some of the largest shows in the country. They returned to

⁷⁰ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 116.

⁷¹ Ringling, *Life Story*, 211.

⁷² Inventory bill from the Sells Brothers Circus. Cited in Ringling North's *Circus Kings*, 110.

⁷³ In 1894, they struck a deal with Barnum & Bailey. The Ringlings agreed not to perform in a specified list of towns in Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota and Missouri. Barnum in turn gave up rights to perform certain towns in the same states, but also included Kansas and Nebraska. In New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, the Ringlings could perform but were not allowed to circulate any advertisements that might slander the Barnum & Bailey show. Cited in Apps' *Ringlingville*, 66.

Baraboo that winter as heroes. Not only had they gained national recognition, they were still keeping the economy in their hometown booming with the local employees.

Big City, Bright Lights – Expanding Their Territory

The years 1895-1898 brought perhaps more change than continuity, and at this point it was all motivated by the fact that the Ringlings saw Barnum & Bailey as their biggest competitor. With Barnum performing in its “Monster Hippodrome,”⁷⁴ they wondered if they should look to a stationary, indoor show as well. Their financial situation had grown enough to afford to lease a building, and an indoor hall show, much like their early winter ones, would allow them to gain extra funds for the summer season, and this time they would not even have to worry about travel expenses. It would be a great opportunity to show their extensive menagerie, which was their big selling point. They announced in February that they would be leasing Tattersall’s Building in Chicago, where they would be putting on a three-week show, from April 6th-28th. They had never played in Chicago before and this would be their first time in front of an audience of “city-dwellers.”⁷⁵ As always, though, they were optimistic. An announcement in a Waukesha paper confirmed:

“What is now conceded to be the greatest menagerie and circus in the world, Ringling Bros.. will show for three weeks at Tatersall's. 16th and State St. beginning Saturday, April 6th. Siberate's band of 60 pieces will give an hour's concert each day and this alone is claimed to be worth the price of admission.”⁷⁶

The success of the hall show at the Tattersall building proved to the Ringlings that they could be successful among large city patrons that were used to seasoned circuses. They spent the seasons of 1896 and 1897 the same way; opening in Chicago in April, playing for three weeks and then heading out. These were the first seasons in their thirteen years on the road that they

⁷⁴ This building would later become Madison Square Garden.

⁷⁵ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 112.

⁷⁶ *The Waukesha Freeman* (Waukesha, Wisconsin), 11 April 1895, p. 2.

did not give Baraboo the first performance. In 1896, led by Otto, the brothers made their first transaction between another circus that did not simply consist of animals and supplies. They bought an entire circus. They knew that in order for their circus to keep growing, it also meant that they would have to eliminate their competition. Many big circuses owned smaller ones; big circuses like Barnum & Bailey.

They started slowly. William B. Reynolds' show was a small railroad circus that started in 1891. Like the Ringlings, they started small, but unfortunately they were not stable enough when the depression of 1893 hit and they had to sell out. It was bold moves such as these that confirmed their ability to contend with the big boys, and it was clear that the big boys felt the heat. That same year, Bailey joined two of the smaller shows he owned – The Adam Forepaugh Circus and Sells' Brothers Circus – together to form the Forepaugh-Sells Circus, solely based on the fact that he was growing wary of the competition the Ringlings were producing.⁷⁷

The season of 1898 was very similar to that of 1897, except that the Ringlings expanded their territory yet again and traveled farther west than they had ever been before. They stopped in Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and Montana, once again playing to small rural audiences, including ones they had not had much previous experience with; the Mormons. They would come in lumber wagons and sit on boards, with the women dressed head to toe in bonnets and dresses.⁷⁸ Not surprisingly, these crowds completely played in to their strict adherence to give a “clean” showing. A rave review in Salt Lake City gushed:

“The Ringling show is distinctively a Western institution, inaugurated by Western men and managed by them exclusively. There is no Eastern capital in it, and it has advanced from a small wagon show ten years ago to what is now believed to be the largest and most perfect amusement organization extant... The parade was the brightest, cleanest, best arranged and best displayed circus pageant ever seen in this city.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Apps, *Ringlingville*, 74.

⁷⁸ Ida Belle Palmer Ringling, interview by Wisconsin State Historical Society (1960).

⁷⁹ *The Salt Lake City Tribune* (Salt Lake City, UT) 24 May 1897, p. 2.

While the Ringling show was not indeed an original Western institution, this claim showed the brilliance of their establishment of a reputation as a highly moral show. Everyone wanted to think of themselves and their towns and cities as highly moral, and therefore felt they could relate to the huge circus that had evolved from a small-town dream.

Also in 1897, the Ringlings made a smart move by introducing the “black tent,” which was tent painted or dyed black with a moving picture machine. It was a great way to deal with silent movies, which were quickly becoming one of the biggest competitors of the circus. They entered and played in Wisconsin in July; performing in Baraboo for the first time in two years, which was unprecedented. The Janesville Daily Gazette wrote “Ringling Brothers Big Show – Wisconsin’s own circus – is in town, and so are ten or twelve thousand people who want to see the show is carrying the fame of the Badger state to every nook and corner of Uncle Sam’s domain.”⁸⁰ This showed their continuity as a Wisconsin circus.

In their typical fashion, the Ringlings innovated in 1898 in a way that they had not before. The main enhancement they made was sending out two shows. This would enable them to bring in double the profits. Their smaller show was the John Robinson Greatest of All American Shows, which they leased. It would show in the Midwest at smaller rural towns, just like the earlier Ringling show had. As always keeping it in the family, it was managed by Henry and Charles oversaw the first twelve weeks of establishment.⁸¹

1899 was a year more of continuity than it was change and illustrated the Ringlings’ desire to maintain this continuity along with their innovations. They chose to go mostly to cities they had already played and coast on their good reputation. They presented their main show only, the John Robinson show going out on its own that year. They traveled as far as

⁸⁰ *Janesville Daily Gazette* (Janesville, Wisconsin), 16 July 1897.

⁸¹ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 116.

Washington state and Oregon, which was new to them, but other than that, they did few new things.

A New Century

The turn of the century brought a lot of changes. Vaudeville and silent films were becoming increasingly more popular, the first automobiles appeared, and baseball was growing in prominence. McKinley still held office as a president who highly regarded big business and therefore the Ringlings highly regarded him. They were, after all, growing to become one of the biggest businesses of the nation.

The Barnum & Bailey show had gone to Europe in 1898 and stay until 1902. Without that competition concerning them, the Ringlings made some bold moves during their 1900 season. With Barnum gone, they could go wherever they pleased without having to worry about a non-compete agreement, which became their drawing strength.⁸² They even had the fortitude to perform in Bridgeport, Connecticut, home of the winter quarters of Barnum & Bailey and traveled as far west as California for the first time. A reporter in Woodland stated:

“Although Ringling Brothers' circus is unfamiliar to the people of this locality, it is a big show, in fact, the largest combined circus, menagerie and hippodrome in the United States. An idea of its size and scope may be gained from the fact that the show owns and operates sixty-five double-length railroad cars, has 500 horses, 300 performers and a great zoological display, including twenty-five elephants. This is Ringling Brothers' first visit to the coast, and the show is expected to create a sensation.”⁸³

And create a sensation they did. While performing in San Francisco and Los Angeles, they had to turn people away by the thousands.

Barnum & Bailey Returns

By 1903, the driving force behind the planning of the upcoming seasons was how to compete with Barnum & Bailey. Bailey had returned with the circus and they had met in 1902 to

⁸² Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 117.

⁸³ *Woodland Daily Democrat* (Woodland, CA) 22 August 1900, p. 1

discuss route arrangements in order to avoid overlap. The show had become the only one that the Ringlings saw to be a true threat, and they did whatever they could to keep up.⁸⁴

Another impending threat was vaudeville, which was quickly becoming one of the most popular forms of entertainment. In order to combat this, the Ringlings added a new act to their show, entitled the “Libretto of the Sublime Spectacle Jerusalem and the Crusades.” It was a three-part musical play that told the story of the battle of the ramparts of Jerusalem. Including a ballet troupe of ninety-five women, this would make the circus the largest it had been yet. The spectacle proved to be wildly successful, and one favorable announcement declared:

“The crowning feature of these almost unlimited additions is the grand spectacular and pantomimic production of Jerusalem and the Crusades, in which are shown twelve hundred characters, magnificent costumes, fifteen carloads of special scenery, and an enormous triple strength cathedral pipe organ of rare volume, power and sweetness of tone.”⁸⁵

With this new act, the Ringlings were able to stifle the critics who said they had hit a plateau and were repeating what they had always done. Moreover, the Barnum & Bailey shows after their return from Europe had not flourished as they had before. Despite adding several expensive parade wagons, its worn infrastructure shone through and it was clear that it had lost its competitive edge. Bailey had a great show as well as one that was almost as honest as the Ringlings, but lacked one marketing advantage. He didn’t show in the small towns that that they did, and according to historian Richard J. Reynolds, “New Yorkers and other sophisticated easterners were probably blasé about the matter whereas it would have been a big deal to the God-fearing and righteous folks of mid-America where the Ringlings focused.”⁸⁶ His show was

⁸⁴ They even corresponded with Hagenbeck’s, the German animal dealer, in order to find out which animals Bailey had ordered for the 1903 season and what they should considering purchasing themselves in order to contend. Cited in Apps’ *Ringlingville*, 106.

⁸⁵ *Oakland Tribune* (Oakland, California) 02 September 1903, p.5

⁸⁶ Cited in Apps’ *Ringlingville*, 113.

in decline while the Ringlings were at their peak. They were rapidly becoming the most successful circus in the nation.

The 1904 season carried on much like the year before, with the Crusades of Jerusalem continuing to be a huge hit. It was in January of 1905 when news hit that stunned the circus world: the Forepaugh-Sells Circus was going to be sold at auction. The Ringlings knew what they had to do in order to keep growing. They were going to buy into a show that had once been one of their fiercest competitors and Henry was going to be the manager.⁸⁷ The *Coshocton Daily Age* reported:

“James A. Bailey, who purchased the Forepaugh-Sells circus and menagerie, said he had leased the present winter quarters and would continue to make Columbus headquarters for the shows. "The property is now controlled by myself and Ringling Brothers," he said "After I purchased the shows for \$150,000, I sold a half interest to the Ringlings. We will operate them jointly.”⁸⁸

This unexpected sale only emphasized the success the Ringling show had become. However, they refused to let the success go to their heads and retained their business savvy. Forepaugh-Sells had a solid reputation and recognition went along with the name, so together Bailey and the Ringlings decided that it would continue to tour under the same name it always had. In fact, few even knew it was Ringling-owned. Though they were competitive when they had to be, the Ringling brothers were truly fair businessmen, which had always reflected in their circus and was now reflecting in their cooperation with Bailey. They met with him to map the routes of the three shows, and it was decided that the Ringlings would cover the eastern part of the nation and the Midwest, Barnum & Bailey the west, and Forepaugh-Sells the North and South. It was also decided that New York would be Barnum & Bailey territory, while Chicago

⁸⁷ The Ringlings bought half of the circus. The other half was still owned by James Bailey, whose health was ailing. Cited in Ringling North's *Circus Kings*, 125.

⁸⁸ *Coshocton Daily Age* (Coshocton, OH) 11 January 1905, p. 6

would solely belong to the Ringlings. Not only had they expanded their size, they had also managed to secure Chicago as their own, one of the biggest cities in the nation.⁸⁹

The next year, the Ringlings found themselves presented with another chance to grow even larger, a prospect that seemed impossible with all of their recent development. James Bailey succumbed to his poor health and died. Naturally, it was the Ringlings who Bailey's widow had in mind for the sale of the rest of the Forepaugh-Sells show, and Henry was sent to seal the deal. The two circuses still toured separately, much like their season with the John Robinson show in 1898. The acquisition of a second circus proved to be a smart move. Despite the fact that the opportunities at their fingertips were nearly boundless, the Ringlings still showed their connection to their roots. They still sent any wagons they needed repaired or painted to Moeller & Sons in Baraboo, and in 1905 they had hired a Wisconsin lawyer. John M. Kelley, a Portage native, did such a good job representing them that they hired him full time in 1906 and he was the first lawyer on their payroll. They were nearly unstoppable.

FROM BARNUM TO BRIDGEPORT (1907-1918)

“Perhaps this drive to keep growing resulted from a childhood spent in poverty. Perhaps it grew out of their competitive nature. Or maybe the Brothers simply felt as businessmen that there was no such thing as standing still: to succeed, they had to grow.”

-Jerry Apps, circus historian

At this point, the Ringling Brothers had become one of the most dominant circuses in America. However, of course, they were not done growing. From 1907 to 1918, they made some of the biggest changes to their show as of yet. They shocked the nation with the acquisition of Barnum & Bailey, ventured to Europe, adding new acts to compete with the automobile, and

⁸⁹ Apps, *Ringlingville*, 116.

managed three shows on the road. As always, they balanced their change with continuity.

During this time, the brothers and original partners began to die – but their shares were passed to

other family members. They also showed their strength by facing the struggles brought by

RINGLINGS BUY OUT BARNUM & BAILEY

“Greatest Show on Earth”
Sold to Rivals in the
Circus World.

PRICE PAID WAS \$410,000

English Stockholders Agree to Term
Made by Mrs. James A. Bailey—
Old Name Is to Continue.

The Barnum & Bailey Circus was purchased yesterday by Ringling Brothers for \$410,000, and to-day the famous old property, with all its animals and paraphernalia will be turned over to the new owners at Bridgeport, Conn., where the show has already gone into Winter quarters.

News of the sale came by cable from London, where the English stockholders, 8,500 in number, met and ratified the sale of the American rights in the show by Mrs. James A. Bailey, widow of one of the men who made the Barnum and Bailey Circus famous. This cabled announcement was verified last night at the Barnum & Bailey offices, at 27 West Twenty-second Street, and by John Ringling, who is stopping at the Waldorf-Astoria.

The purchase of the Barnum & Bailey Show gives the Ringling brothers practically a monopoly of the circus business in America. The Barnum & Bailey Show was their greatest rival. The Ringlings now own outright three of the largest circuses on earth—the Forepaugh-Sells Show, Barnum & Bailey's, and their own Ringling Brothers' Circus. The names of the three shows will remain as they are, and each will tour the country as a separate attraction.

The Ringling Brothers' Career.

The Ringling brothers are John, Otto, Charles, Al, and Alf T. Ringling. Their rise to fame in the show business reads like a romance. Less than twenty-five years ago they were lads in a small Wisconsin town—Baraboo. They were ambitious. They gave “pin money” shows and dreamed of the time when they might be real showmen. Their dreams began to be realized in a modest way when they organized a brass band and concert company and gave entertainments in the villages and towns near Baraboo.

A small, one-ring show was their next step up the ladder of fortune and fame. This was successful and the size of the production was doubled during the following year. It continued to grow, and in 1888 was transformed into a railroad show.

Two years later, when their rolling stock was thirty cars, the Ringlings threw down the gauntlet to Barnum & Bailey, and in two hard-fought battles, in which the two shows appeared simultaneously in two towns, they proved their right to be considered competitors of their great rival.

Since then the growth of the Ringlings' show has been constant. Their first step toward consolidating rival companies was when they bought out the Jack Robinson Circus. This they successfully operated for one season. By this time James A. Bailey had fully recognized in the Ringlings a dangerous competitor for circus honors. There was a meeting and a division of territory was agreed upon. This was followed by the purchase by the Ringlings of a half interest in the Forepaugh-Sells Show, which Mr. Bailey owned. On the death of Mr. Bailey, in the Spring of 1906, the Ringlings took over the entire Forepaugh-Sells Show.

World War I and the influenza outbreak. This was the decade in

which the culmination of their hard work had truly paid off. They

became the “Greatest Show on Earth.” They ultimately made the

biggest change of all: they packed up their winter quarters from

their hometown of Baraboo and moved it to Bridgeport.

Managing Two Gigantic Shows

The Ringlings had shaken the circus world in 1906 with

their purchase of the Forepaugh-Sells circus. It seemed like there

wasn't much they could do to expand their ground any further, but

just when that assumption was setting in, they were approached

with the option to make their biggest development ever. Their 1907

season had gone around uneventfully, but they were facing another

economic depression. While the economy had been good since

1898, it soon took a nosedive. It was a known fact that the Barnum

& Bailey had lost its competitive edge ever since returning from

Europe and had been in decline ever since with the deprived health

of Bailey. After his death in 1906, his wife was the benefactor for

the circus but in the midst of the once-again gloomy economic

situation, she decided it was too much and put it up for sale. Al, Alf

T. and Charles were reluctant to make such a big purchase in an

uncertain market, but Otto, the financial wizard, and John, who never stopped thinking about how to make their circus even bigger, saw beyond the immediate. Eventually, they won and the deal became official on October 22nd, 1907. It was such big news that it was chronicled by the *New York Times* (see inset), in which the reporter briefly tells the Cinderella story that is the success of the Ringlings. The loan needed for the \$410,000 price being asked for the show was bigger than the Bank of Baraboo would be able to handle, so Otto had to do something that he had never done before: he had to look to another bank, and finally found one large enough in New York. It turns out it was amazing foresight on Otto's part to convince his brothers to buy the circus during a time when everyone thought they were crazy for doing so, as he was able to get it at a reduced price and it was just one more way for their venture to keep growing. After the deal was finalized, Otto made the trek to Bridgeport to check out their new holdings. He wrote to his brothers, suggesting the sale of many horses and elephants, as they already had more than enough and as expensive as elephants were, they would be bringing in some more much-needed income to cover the expenses of owning a circus. It showed how far they had come since 1888. Then, they were struggling to buy an elephant; now, they were selling a surplus of them. The Ringlings had come to own three of the biggest shows in the nation.⁹⁰

For the 1908 season, which was their 25th-year anniversary on the road, the Ringlings made a smart decision. It was going to be a difficult feat to have three shows on tour, especially since they did not want to risk them competing with each other and did not have much experience sending out three large circuses, especially with an economy that was still wavering. Because of this, they decided to take Forepaugh-Sells off the circuit for awhile until they felt they had a handle on managing their two bigger shows. Just as they had done with Forepaugh-Sells, they would continue to show Barnum & Bailey under the same name and management, as

⁹⁰ Apps, *Ringlingville*,

it held prestige with its name and its managers were well-seasoned. The Ringling Brothers opened in Chicago and Barnum & Bailey in New York, and with careful overseeing and planning, they did not overlap.⁹¹ Otto once again proved his worth by reinstating the circus parade with the Barnum & Bailey show, which had been missing for some time under Bailey's ownership, but was a weak move on his part because the parade was enormously popular with the viewers and got them hyped up for the show. Despite their 25 years on the road and their climb to unbelievable success, they continued their firm devotion to providing a clean, honest, family-friendly show and their attention to smaller Midwest towns. They also never lost sight of their customers, policing their ticket sellers to make sure of no shortchanging the patrons. An article in an Iowa newspaper commended:

“The greatest circus day in the history of Waterloo will come next Friday with the arrival here of Ringling Brothers' World's Greatest Shows. No show ever enjoyed the popularity of the Ringling Brothers. They revolutionized the circus business and lifted the standard of the profession, introducing a policy of honest and business-like dealings with the public which has been a strong factor in their success.”⁹²

While preparations were taking place for the 1909 season, John Ringling traveled to Europe to scout new acts. This was a move that was practically imperative on the Ringlings' part, because they had no acts to look to in the United States – the three biggest shows belonged to them. John gladly left for Europe while Al, Alf T., Henry and Charles spent much more time in Baraboo. He had much less attachment to their hometown. By this point, he considered himself a city man, was always impeccably dressed and some saw him as pompous. However, others loved him and it was without a doubt that he treated his employees very well. Fred Bradna, equestrian with the Ringlings for forty years, claimed of John, “If I ever loved a man, he

⁹¹ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 125-126.

⁹² *Semi-Weekly Reporter* (Waterloo, Iowa) 25 August 1908, p. 8.

was Mr. John Ringling.”⁹³ Also in 1909, the Ringlings had to incorporate some new acts in order to keep up with the times. The Henry Ford Model T had made its debut and they answered to this by adding a new “thriller” act, which consisted of a “thrilling and dangerous automobile double-somersault made by a mere girl.”⁹⁴ Other than that, they kept their shows mostly the same and focused on once again gaining experience managing two large shows without them colliding with each other. This year, the Ringlings tried their hand at an opening show at Madison Square Garden, which had long been established as belonging to Barnum & Bailey. It was apparent, because the show was a flop at the gate. It seemed the “New Yorkers thought that Barnum & Bailey was the only circus worth seeing.”⁹⁵ Meanwhile, Barnum & Bailey opened in the Ringlings’ territory, Chicago, where it became clear that Chicagoans were just as loyal to the Ringlings, and played the Midwest. After that year, they put each of their shows back in their original opening cities. That winter, they once again stretched their territory in Baraboo, purchasing nine acres of land to build railcar shops on. The shops would be used for maintenance and repair, and their employees were Baraboo locals, as always.

The Ringling “Big Three”

By 1910, the brothers felt they had enough experience and practice under their belt with handling two large circuses on the road and successfully avoided them running into each other. They were aching once again to do something that had never been done before: put three shows on the road under the same ownership. With their Barnum & Bailey and Ringling shows boasting eighty-four cars each and Forepaugh-Sells forty-seven, they had more railcars under

⁹³ Fred Bradna. *Big Top: My Forty Years with the Greatest Show on Earth*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952.

⁹⁴ *Trenton Evening Times* (Trenton, New Jersey) 30 April 1909, p. 16

⁹⁵ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 143.

one circus organization than anyone had been able to claim before or have been since. Even their closest competition fell very short, with forty-five cars.⁹⁶

The Ringlings opened in Chicago, Barnum & Bailey in New York and Forepaugh-Sells in Ohio as planned. As always, meticulous planning kept them from overlapping their locations.⁹⁷ Though there were new forms of entertainment that were beginning to give the circus a run for its money, there were still some that didn't even bother to compete with an institution as big as the Ringlings. Baseball games were often postponed, and vaudeville troupes would plan their routes around the circus so they didn't risk performing in any given town on the same day.

The season of 1911 started out as the 1910 had, but tragically, as soon as the shows left winter quarters, Otto Ringling died. Upon this happening, the trains turned around and returned to Baraboo, where the service was held and he was buried. The brothers were hit hard by this; their master of finances as well as their beloved brother was gone. Even the newspapers knew of Otto's expertise, with one claiming in a front-page obituary, "Otto Ringling, from an early age. Displayed financial genius, and personally conducted the tours of the Ringling Brothers' circus."⁹⁸ The insistence of the Ringlings' desire to keep their business a family one was enforced as Otto's will stated that he left his one-fifth partnership to his brother Henry, who had always been a manager but not an owner. Now, he overtook the duty as the fifth proprietor. The brothers were faced with the necessity of hiring "adjustors" to deal with claims of damages and financial managers to oversee their money situation since none of them had the proficiency that

⁹⁶ The closest competition behind the Ringling Brothers was the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus. Cited in Apps' *Ringlingville*, 163.

⁹⁷ The Ringlings moved East first, then played mostly in the Midwest. Barnum & Bailey opened in the East, went to the Midwest first, then West and South. Forepaugh-Sells opened in the Midwest, then went East and South. Cited in Apps' *Ringlingville*, 165.

⁹⁸ *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern* (Oshkosh, Wisconsin) 01 April 1911, p.1

Otto had, and even these employees could not come close to his skill. Because of this, they decided that operating three shows would just be too much of a risk for failure of some sort. Still savvy, though, they attempted to sell the Forepaugh circus for \$200,000. A deal with an interested party fell through, however, and it ended up being sold off bit by bit.⁹⁹

In 1912, John was once again in Europe, and eagerly wrote his brothers regarding a Joan of Arc show that he had happened upon. Al replied with reluctance because he was afraid that it would be seen as sacrilegious, but John argued it would be the opposite. John eventually won, as Al knew Joan of Arc would allow them to keep their hold over the competition of vaudeville. It met positive announcements, as expected:

“The sublime and dramatic story of Joan of Arc has been made into a beautiful spectacle for the Ringling Brothers who are producing it this season on the biggest stage in the world erected in their main tent. It is offered as an introductory to their performance. It employs 1,200 characters. a ballet of 300 dancing girls, 600 horses, and a trainload of special scenery, costumes and properties. It cost \$500,000.”¹⁰⁰

Regardless of their enormous prestige, it was apparent even almost 20 years later that they still continued to maintain hands-on management and handled the smallest details themselves. When Al became concerned that the third advertising car was not performing up to par with the other two, he and John went on a search for a replacement. While this was a seemingly small task, it proved an involvement that the brothers had with their business that many other circus owners did not.

Barricades and Big Decisions

Starting in 1915, the Ringlings were thrown into some transitional years that ultimately led to their biggest decision since the acquisition of the Barnum & Bailey Circus. In 1914,

⁹⁹ Apps, *Ringlingville*, 172.

¹⁰⁰ *The Waterloo Times-Tribune* (Waterloo, IA), 25 July 1912, p. 8

World War I had broken out with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand. This didn't immediately affect the brothers, but it would come to in the near future.

In 1916, Al, the oldest brother and by far the biggest circus enthusiast and the most experienced of all the brothers, died. He was the program director and knew how to keep a show moving and an audience interested. His home state clearly felt the loss, with the *Grand Rapids Tribune* claiming "Al Ringling was the founder of the circus syndicate which has since grown to great dimensions. Always an eager spectator as a boy at the "one-horse" shows that for him came all too seldom to the village of Baraboo the sawdust ring never lost its allurements for him."¹⁰¹ He was fondest of Baraboo and the glue that held the brothers to their winter quarters there. The brothers had been on the fence for keeping their quarters there for a number of years now, and it was inevitable that it was going to come even more into question with him gone.

The year 1918 would bring a great shift in the way the Ringlings had been running their show for more than thirty years. The war had grown even bigger in Europe and acts were impossible to get. A scarier and more real threat, though, happened back home. An influenza epidemic had broken out and was killing people by the thousands. Audiences were greatly diminished, and along with soaring wages, help was hard to keep. It was the first season since before they became a railroad circus that the Ringlings had to close early. They then made a decision that shocked their hometown: they would be combining their two shows and moving winter quarters to Bridgeport. Though Henry Ringling North claimed that the war and flu outbreak had little to do with the decision, it was speculated that it had more to do with it than let on, as the *Grand Rapids Tribune* also reported, "Owing to the Spanish influenza epidemic in the South the Ringling Brothers' circus closed its season in Georgia, Oct 2, and has gone to Bridgeport,

¹⁰¹ *The Grand Rapids Tribune* (Grand Rapids, Wisconsin) 12 January 1916, p. 13.

Conn., where it will winter this season instead of in Baraboo.”¹⁰² The circus had not done well in 1918 and it was too expensive to keep two shows on the road. Also, John and Charles, who were the only ones left, argued that it would be difficult to manage two shows between just the two of them, and while America still loved the circus, it was no longer the event of the year. Movies had caught up with them and with the invention of the automobile, towns were no longer so isolated and could find entertainment on their own without having to wait for it to come to them. Though many of the details behind the ultimate decision, it was finally set in stone: after thirty-six years supporting the economy of Baraboo and inhabiting it with their magical winter quarters, the Ringlings would be moving to Bridgeport, and the “glory and spectacle that once breathed life into Ringlingville”¹⁰³ would be going with them.

CONCLUSION

The year 1918 was one that catapulted the Ringlings’ circus into a multitude of changes that would bring it to the show it is today. They had packed up and moved their winter quarters to Bridgeport to merge together their Barnum & Bailey and Ringling shows. Surprisingly, there was not much written in the Wisconsin papers about their departure, despite to announce it was doing so because of the influenza epidemic. The *Baraboo Weekly News* announced “On account of scarcity of help and disease the attraction has been laboring under difficulties. Baraboo will miss the presence of the elephants, red wagons and men whose families reside here.”¹⁰⁴ Other than that, there was not much. The lack of newspaper documentation from Baraboo about the Ringlings since the purchase of Barnum & Bailey suggests that Baraboo had become disenchanted with their once-heroes. However, the article above shows that even though the

¹⁰² *The Grand Rapids Tribune* (Grand Rapids, Wisconsin), 24 October 1918, p. 6

¹⁰³ Apps, *Ringlingville*, 206.

¹⁰⁴ *Baraboo Weekly News* (Baraboo, Wisconsin), 17 October 1918. Cited in Apps’ *Ringlingville*, p. 201.

Ringlings had become big enough to leave their hometown, the magic they had produced over the winters since 1882 was going to be missed.

At this point, the brothers had been ailing. In 1936 when John, the last surviving brother died, he stuck strong to the Ringlings' belief that the circus should stay in the family. He passed management on to his nephew, John Ringling North, who was the older brother of Henry. During the depression, the show had been experiencing some financial difficulties, and it was placed in Ringling North's hands in hopes that it would be restored to the glory it had once been. Henry Ringling North claimed, "Thus, in a few hectic weeks John achieved his first great ambition – absolute control of the management of the circus...Johnny never doubted for a moment that he could do it."¹⁰⁵ He did not disappoint, and managed the circus for 30 years, including through WWII. However, the decline of the Big Top was inevitable and by 1967, the Ringling Circus left the hands of the family for good as it was sold to Irvin Feld.

The Ringlings left numerous legacies in their wake. In 1954, the Circus World Museum was established in Baraboo by their personal attorney for 33 years, John M. Kelley. The Museum houses perhaps the largest display of circus artifacts, including over 200 circus wagons and over 9,500 circus posters.¹⁰⁶ The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College was established in 1968. The show is now based out of New York and continues separate nationwide tours, including the Zing Zang Zoom, Over the Top, and Boom A Ring tours.¹⁰⁷ Though it may not be the nation's top entertainment venue as it once was, it is without a doubt still a touring force.

¹⁰⁵ Ringling North, *Circus Kings*, 255.

¹⁰⁶ Wisconsin Historical Society, "A History of Circus World Museum." <http://circusworld.wisconsinhistory.org/About/History.aspx>. (Accessed 30 April, 2009).

¹⁰⁷ Feld Entertainment, Inc. Tour Schedule, <http://www.ringling.com/TourSchedule.aspx>. (Accessed 30 April, 2009).

In conclusion, the Ringlings had made unimaginable progress in their thirty-six years of being a Baraboo circus. They had gone from being a minuscule overland hall show from Wisconsin, with at one point five employees, to the biggest circus conglomerate in the United States that had monopolized the majority of its competitors. They had made the adaptations they needed to in order to expand all the while keeping their connections to their rural roots by keeping their iron perseverance and strong will, participating in the management and day-to-day details, never losing sight of their customers by appeasing to their small-town morals of an honest and decent show, and maintained a strict adherence to keeping their business in the family. It is the culmination of these factors that made the Ringling Brothers the internationally-renowned phenomenon they have been for more than 100 years.

APPENDIX

WISCONSIN: A CIRCUS STATE¹⁰⁸

“Wisconsin was just scattered full of – as I say and – all around pretty near every place you’d turn around was different circuses.”

-Fred Gollmar

1854-1860 – Hiram Orton (Portage)

1860- George Washington “Popcorn George” Hall (Magnolia until 1880, Evansville afterward)

1862-1877 – Dan Castello (Fairplay)

1865- Andrew Haight and George DeHaven (Beaver Dam)

1867-1868 – Herman A. Fistler (Milwaukee)

1870-1895 – William Cameron Coup (Delavan)

1876- Greenleaf W. Collins (Delavan)

1879- Dr. George Morrison (Delavan)

¹⁰⁸ This list is compiled from the various chapters in Dahlinger’s *Badger State Showmen*

1881 and 1883- Joe Parson and Frank Roy (Darlington)

1884-1911 – The Skerbeck Family (Dorchester)

1888-1902 – Eph Williams (Appleton)

1889-1915 – Harry Castello

1889- Gibbons & Chapman (Janesville)

1889- Charles C. McDonald (Milwaukee)

1889-1891 – The Miller Brothers (Beaver Dam)

1889 and 1894- L.J. Rodicue/Rodriguez (Milwaukee)

1889-1913 – The Wintermute Brothers (Whitewater)

1890- The Gollmar Brothers (Baraboo)

1892 and 1897- The Stang Brothers (Burlington)

1893-1897 – The Holloway Brothers (Birnamwood)

1894- Anthony White (Milwaukee)

1896-1899 – The Marshall Brothers (Avoca)

1897- William J. Ash (Racine)

1897- Herbert L. Marshall (Milwaukee)

1900-1095 – F.W. Burns (Antigo)

1902-1906 – Robert V. Hall (Fond du Lac)

1903-1916 – Emil Seibel (Watertown)

1905-1914 – George E. Wagner (Milwaukee)

1908- Carl M. Dalton (La Crosse)

1909-1910 – Dode Fisk (Wonewoc)

1911- Corliss Bulger and Dudley Cheney (Sparta)

1914- The Beverung Brothers (Milwaukee)
1915- Albert Hodgini (Baraboo)
1919-1922 – H.R.J. Miller (Wilton)
1920-1941 – The Engford Family (Milwaukee)
1920-1923 – The Lindemann Brothers (Sheboygan)
1922-1926 – E.E. Bonham (Prairie du Sac)
1924- Alvin Miller and Elisha Ayers (Sheboygan)
1927-1928 - Eli Nelson and Walter Picotte (Chippewa Falls)
1927-1956 - William G. Schultz (Manitowoc)
1957-1965 – William A. Griffith (Appleton)
1961-1967 – Wilbur W. Deppe (Baraboo)
1971 - Murray Hill (Elkhorn)
1974-1997 – Wayne Franzen (Stevens Point)
1979-1997 – Ronald J. Kelroy (Trevor)

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