THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – EAU CLAIRE

“FLIRTING AND BOISTEROUS CONDUCT PROHIBITED”: WOMEN’S WORK IN WISCONSIN CIRCUSES: 1890-1930

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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Because I was born a member of the so-called weaker sex and had to work out some kind of career for myself…

-Mabel Stark, tiger trainer

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GLOSSARY

ballyhoo. A sideshow performer that came out of the sideshow tent to entice marks; often a scantily clad woman, either a snake charmer or tattooed lady.

ballet girl. A young woman who appeared in the opening spectacle or parade. Little dancing skill was required of ballet girls, as their primary job was to look pretty and entice customers to buy a ticket to the circus. Also called chorus girls and oriental dancers, the ballet girl was one of the lowest paid workers in the circus.

blow off. Usually a display of one or more women, nude or semi-nude, often dancing or flexing their muscles for male audience marks who had paid an extra fee to see them. The blow off was the final act in the sideshow tent, and was not open to women or children.

butcher. Vendor; located on the midway, butchers sold lemonade, food, souvenirs, etc.

cooch show. A sexually suggestive or explicit dance, with roots in bellydancing; included in many sideshows. Also called cootch or hootchy-kootchy.

freak. A member of the sideshow. This included born freaks, who suffered from a physical deformity, and made freaks, who had altered their bodies or who performed an unusual act. Tattooed women and snake charmers are examples of made freaks.

girl show. Similar to the cooch show, but not necessarily including dance.

grift. A means of taking money through dishonest means, including short changing and selling goods or services that didn't exist.

kid show. Circus lingo for the sideshow, a separate tent housing an average of ten to fifteen freaks; also called a ten-in-one.

kinker. Acrobat.

mark. An audience member that the talker or sideshow act tried to sell an additional ticket to. Usually male, the mark was often sold a ticket to the cooch show.

midway. Usually located between the main tent and the sideshow tent, the midway was home to games and food stands. Often, sideshow talkers lured marks into the sideshow tent from the midway.

roustabout. A circus laborer who erected or took down the tents, cared for animals, etc.

rube. Also called outsiders or gillies, rubes were non-circus people.

winter quarters. A circus' home base, where the animals and equipment were stored during the non-show season, and where many acts trained for the following year.

talker. The person or persons (typically male) who announced aspects of the circus, including the sideshow and the cooch show. Also called the speiler. Sometimes erroneously referred to as the barker by those outside the circus.

ABSTRACT

Wisconsin was home to more than one hundred circuses, more than any other state. From 1890-1930, the height of circus' popularity, Wisconsin's circuses employed hundreds, perhaps thousands of women. Although their lives and work were vastly different from non-circus women, they were still ruled by regulation and tradition. This paper examines those structures, along with women's roles in the circus, salaries, living conditions and family life. Big top and sideshow performers are discussed, along with their portrayal in popular media, their costumes, and their hobbies. The circus' relation to vaudeville and burlesque is also discussed, along with an analysis of the cooch show and female nudity.

Step Right Up!

As long as there have been circuses, there have been circus women. On July 15, 1899, Oshkosh's *Daily Northwestern* reported that the graves of two female circus riders, 1700 years old, had been unearthed in Egypt at the site of a Roman governor's former "rest." Their costumes were fashioned of silk, with decorative tassels, braiding and embroidery. Their saddles were notably "not…side-saddle[s]."[1] The appeal of costumed women in circus performance, then, has long held sway with the public. Women's more liberated roles in the circus have long intrigued their audiences, as evidenced by the preceding description of the saddles buried with the performers' corpses. Whether ancient horsewomen usually rode side or straight saddle is irrelevant. The point is that the audience of 1899 found it important that *these* women, circus riders, rode astride. This is the very essence of what made circus women so appealing: their differences from ordinary women. Traveling most of the year, living in cramped quarters, and, for some, performing most days in front of large crowds of strangers, they lived a life unimaginable to most and undesirable to many. Presented in the popular media either as wild women or virtuous homemakers, their real lives were more complicated.

There was no definitive "circus woman." As is true of any group, they were all individuals, and therefore all had unique experiences. However, there were some common bonds between these women, instituted through regulation, tradition and practicality. There is also truth to the idea that some common personal traits encouraged and supported such lives. Wisconsin, as the hotbed of the American circus, employed many women in the circus industry, and their records have formed a collective picture of their experience.

[1] *The Daily Northwestern* (Oshkosh, WI), Saturday, July 15, 1899.

As an institution, circuses have a special connection with this state. By the time Edmund Mabie brought the first circus to Wisconsin territory in 1847, the northeast was so overrun by traveling shows "that they were almost creating traffic jams."[2] Soon, Wisconsin would become well-known for its circuses as additional troupes moved in and sprang up, with more than one hundred such shows eventually calling the state home, and more circuses conceived and born in Wisconsin than anywhere else in the country.[3] Women, of course, played a vital role in the business and culture of the circus, just as they did in the country as a whole. As performers, workers and spectators, they built the circus empire right alongside men. They have, however, largely been ignored in the formal history of the circus, with fleeting attention paid only to those whose names drew crowds, the rest left to molder in archives collections.

Circuses by their nature left behind a rich collection of evidence and research material. Promotional posters, route books and employment records, along with newspaper and magazine articles and personal accounts from circus people themselves have blended together to create a collective memory of life under the big top. Historians have pulled evidence from this collection for decades, assembling it in ways that explain not only the how of the circus, but the why. Their approaches have changed slightly over the years as the circus has changed from recent to distant memory.

In 1932, after the Great Depression bankrupted the careers of many great showmen and ended "the circus age," Earl Chapin May published a complete history of the circus starting in

[2] Dean Jensen, *The Biggest, the Smallest, the Longest, the Shortest: A Chronicle of the American Circus from its Heartland* (Madison: Wisconsin House Book Publishers, 1975), 1

[3] Jensen, ii.

pagan Rome.[4] Before May's birth, his father was a "circus man," and his influence created a child who dreamed about starting his own circus and who eventually spent a few years on the road with various troupes.[5] May's history is written from a true fan perspective, leaving intact the mystery and wonderment that made the circus spectacle so appealing, while still revealing the behind-the-tent dealings that made circuses profitable. Although his first few chapters outline circus history with broad strokes, his subsequent chapters fill in the tiny crevices of this framework. Some chapters read as mini-biographies of important figures in the industry, from Dan Rice to P.T. Barnum to the seven Ringling brothers, which includes important insight into the importance of Wisconsin in the formation of the circus industry.[6] The essential components of the circus are carefully examined, with entire chapters devoted to clowning, elephants, acrobats and equestrian acts. May explains the functions and methods of advertising and organization, and even includes a chapter entitled: "How Circus Executives Get That Way" that illuminates the business elements of successful circuses. May is so complete in his history of the circus that he even included a chapter on women of the circus at a time when women's historical study was in its infancy.

May devoted a few chapters to the Ringling brothers and their enormous impact on circus history, but almost thirty years later, in 1960, Henry Ringling North and Alden Hatch penned an entire book on the history of the Ringling brothers.[7] Drawing on documents, family stories and personal experiences, North and Hatch provide a unique look into the lives that created the Ringling Brothers' Circus. Much attention is paid to the brothers' marriages and personal lives,

[4] Earl Chapin May, *The Circus: From Rome to Ringling* (New York: Dover Publications, 1963).

[5] May, iv.

[6] May, 136-175.

[7] Henry Ringling North was the second son of Henry W. North and Ida Ringling, who was sister to the seven Ringling brothers. Henry Ringling North's son, John Ringling North II, in turn married a Barnum.

with special focus aimed at their hobbies and interests outside the circus. With regard to their families, North and Hatch explore the personalities of each of the Ringling brothers' wives, which offers an enlightening view on the involvement of women in the business of the circus. Also, the fact that North was connected to the Ringling brothers through his mother Ida, their sister, creates a somewhat feminist bent to the book. Although her sons traveled with the circus and therefore experienced circus life away from her, their formative years were spent at her side, where they learned about their family history and business from her perspective. This viewpoint is useful to the study of circus women, as it allows for the inclusion of more anecdotes about them than perhaps would have otherwise been mentioned. In addition, the family relations of the author to his subjects, although they likely result in some bias, have the advantage of allowing access to material that would otherwise not be accessible to the public.

In 1967, another book about the Ringling brothers and their circus was published. *Those Amazing Ringlings and Their Circus* was written by Gene Plowden, who traveled with the show for thirty years and had personal access to John Ringling.[8] The book is incredibly detailed at over three hundred pages, and covers the Ringling Brother's Circus from its conception, with all its peaks and valleys illuminated. Since Plowden traveled with the troupe, he includes direct quotations and records entire conversations, lending a great deal of realism and excitement to the somewhat dry data about politics and finances. Like May's book, Plowden's lacks only one thing: a discussion of women's roles in the show. Other than a few famous performers and the wives of the Ringling brothers, women are completely ignored.

In 1975, Dean Jensen published a book that took the focus off the Ringling brothers and put in on their home state: Wisconsin. Jensen not only tries to pay heed to all major circuses

[8] Gene Plowden, *Those Amazing Ringlings and Their Circus* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1967), i.

born in Wisconsin, but also explains the culture that bred and fed them. He uses a chronological approach to shed light on the various stages of development that Wisconsin's show heritage experienced. Jensen does periodically diverge from this organization, however, to elaborate on subjects that are universal among all Wisconsin circuses. One such diversion deals with the accidental deaths that are par for the course in the circus business.[9] Jensen's book features many photographs and show posters, some in full color, that literally paint a picture of the circus experience. Perhaps most useful, though, is his inclusion of a list of over one hundred Wisconsin circuses, organized by city.[10]

A recent and well-received circus history is Janet Davis' *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top.* Davis takes a very different approach with her book than her predecessors. Rather than formulate a timeline of circus history, she explores the "cultural processes" the circus involves. Clearly a social historian, Davis gives much attention to the working men and women of the circus. She not only discusses their work environment and day to day lives, but also includes information on wages and labor hours. She contrasts this data with figures from life in mainstream society.[11] Thoroughly modern, Davis tackles subjects not previously addressed, at least not all in one place. She discusses not only gender, but race, "human oddities," and cross-dressers. She also discusses the use of tasteful nudity in the circus and examines the social structure that allowed scantily clad women on the trapeze, but not on advertisements for the trapeze act.[12] Davis' coverage of gender roles, rules and regulations

[9] Jensen, 93-99.

[10] See appendix for this same list, reorganized chronologically.

[11] Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 7-10.

[12] Davis, 105-109.

within circus culture is groundbreaking, particularly her examination of women who act "male" and men who act "female." These modern subjects of gender identity could not have been discussed in earlier histories. Her book is all the more useful because she does not use it as a platform to rehash old information or make judgments, but rather to fill in the gaps in circus history, allowing her readers to draw their own conclusions.

Davis's book has made great strides toward creating a social history of the circus as workplace and as entertainment forum. However, it is grand in its scope, and is therefore unable to examine the minutiae of the circus: in a particular place, at a particular time, for one gender. Perhaps a better way to gauge what working conditions were for women in the circus is to narrow the scope of study.

Wisconsin: Center of the Circus World

At the turn of the twentieth century, Wisconsin was nearly overrun with circuses. In 1847, before it was officially a state, Wisconsin was home to the Grand Olympic Arena and United States Circus, which the Mabie brothers had moved from Brewster, New York, as the east coast was quickly becoming overcrowded with such shows.[13] Soon, more circuses sprang up in Wisconsin, bringing the popular entertainment to the Midwest. Although circuses were nomadic, they each established a home base. This home base was usually the home town of the circus' owners(s), and influenced the personnel makeup of the show. Circus performers came from all over the world, and often moved from show to show as their contracts expired. Headlining acts moved depending on how much money they were offered, and even those that remained faithful to one show during the show season often spent the non-traveling season in

[13] Jensen, 1.

Europe, performing in stationary shows. For these people, a circus' home may have been less important, as they earned enough money to change employers on a regular basis. However, people with roots in the Midwest often stayed with Midwestern circuses, as they often owned property locally. Additionally, secondary performers and ordinary circus workers were most often culled from local communities, as they did not earn enough to move, and unskilled labor was readily available everywhere. For many workers in Wisconsin circuses, then, *Wisconsin* was key.

Unfortunately, records for these bit players and behind the scenes workers are hard to find. Circus workers were paid in cash, often at a standard rate, and records for what seamstresses, for instance, might have earned are scarce. However, there are enough records left behind to at least paint a picture of what working conditions might have been like for many Wisconsin circus women, including primary and secondary performers. For this purpose, then, what is a Wisconsin circus woman? Primarily nomadic, often transplanted from other states or countries, Wisconsin circus women were those who were born or raised in Wisconsin before joining a Wisconsin circus, or who found their fame or long-term employment in a Wisconsin-owned circus.

How Many Women?

In the early days, circuses traveled in horse-drawn wagons. Because conditions could be rough and muddy along the dirt roads that were standard at the time, these early circuses were referred to as "mud shows."[14] By 1889, railroad circuses were quickly replacing mud shows,

[14] Charles Philip Fox, *A Ticket to the Circus: A Pictorial History of the Incredible Ringlings* (New York: Bramhall House, 1959), 21.

and the Ringling Brothers of Baraboo were in the thick of the new trend.[15] The 1890 Route Book for the Ringling Brothers' United Monster Railroad Shows, Menagerie and Museum lists a large staff, proof that the rail system had revolutionized the circus. To the seventeen male star performers listed, there were five females. The musical department had twenty-eight members, who were all male except the notable "Miss Nellie Coupe, Bugler ahead of Parade and Lady Cornetist." Miss Coupe is listed apart from the rest of the band members, her name typeset in prominent capital letters.

Of the nine sideshow performers in the 1890 season, six were women, though the Sideshow and Museum managers, lecturers, talkers and ticket-takers were all men. Under the Concert heading are listed eight individuals or groups. Here we find Nellie Coupe again, here listed as a couple with George Coupe, who was likely her husband. Little Nellie Coupe is listed separately, and it is unclear whether she was George and Nellie Coupe's daughter, or if she was indeed Nellie Coupe, listed differently in order to play a different role in the show. Additionally, a Flora Leonhart and a Fanny Clifford are listed, along with Billie Clayton and Billie Clifford. The spelling of the name "Billie" appears feminine, but may indeed have been masculine. Either way, women had a prominent place in the Concert.[16] Of the more than one hundred other employees listed, none were women. It is worth noting, however, that less-prominent positions were left entirely out of the publication. For example, the wardrobe department and the menagerie each only listed two employees when there were undoubtedly more. In the wardrobe department these likely included women. Regardless, there were clearly fewer female circus

[15] Fox, 24. Fox identifies eleven rail shows in the United States in 1899: "Barnum & Bailey, The Great Wallace Show, Sells Bros. Circus, John Robinson Circus, Adam Forepaugh's Great Shows, Wm. L. Main Circus, Leman Bros. Circus, Frank A. Robbins Circus, Bob Hunting Circus, W.H. Harris Nickel Plate Shows, and Miles Orton Circus."

[16] Ringling Brothers' United Monster Railroad Shows, Menagerie and Museum Route Book, Season of 1890, 4-9.

employees than male, and it is notable that they were excluded completely from most departments.

Ten years later, in 1900, the Ringling Bros.' World's Greatest Shows still listed few women, but didn't shy away from giving female performers top billing. Here, though, it is interesting to note the difference in title assigned to women in different positions. Most star female performers were referred to as "miss": Miss Minnie Fisher, iron jaw act; Miss Nettie Carroll, slack wire; Miss Jessie Leon, wire walking; Miss Belle Carmen, high wire; Miss Lizzie Rooney, Miss Julia Lowanda, Miss Elena Ryland and Miss Emeline Fredericks, equestriennes; Miss Ida Miaco, hand-balancing and contortion; and Miss Allie Jackson, Miss Minnie Johnson, and Madame Noble, horsewomen. There was no reference to age, but one presumes Madame Noble was older than the other performers, and was perhaps a widow, given her title. A Mr. and Mrs. Schadle, double-riders, were also listed, and it is notable that both Mr. and Mrs. Lost their first names by dint of their status as a couple, just as Madame Noble lost hers, ostensibly due to her age. In addition, a double ladder act by "Hagahara and Daughter" was listed. No mention of Hagahara's gender was made, but it would be more usual for a woman to perform with her daughter than a man. Their only identifying description listed them as "experts from the Mikado Empire." If Hagahara was in fact a woman, one wonders whether her ethnicity had any bearing on her not being given a title, and her daughter remaining unnamed. More clues about Hagahara are found in an October 6, 1900 *Billboard* article called "The Circus Woman," where "Oko Hagahara, the little nine-year-old Japanese tumbler" was mentioned. Since this article was published the same year as the route book in question, Oko Hagahara was doubtless the daughter named in the act. This proves another interesting point: that her mother was referred to only by her last name. Whether Hagahara was a first or last name would not have been clear without this

additional information. In addition to the performers named and listed above, half of the shows one dozen sideshow performers were women.[17]

The Gollmar Bros. left significantly less detailed route books and programs than the Ringling Bros., but their 1900 route book does list four female performers out of about twenty named. Several of these include groups of performers whose gender makeup is unclear.[18] By 1913, their Souvenir Route Books included a little more information, and nineteen women were listed, eleven in the "Big Show," one in the wardrobe department, and seven in the Sideshow, including three women listed as "Dancers."[19]

Circus Women in Popular Media

Newspaper accounts from the early part of the twentieth century painted circus women in a remarkably flattering light. Articles about the nomadic yet wholesome lifestyle of these women focused on their domestic abilities and feminine sensibilities. Although they read more like advertisements for virtue than actual pieces of journalism, they still provide insight into the world that circus women occupied and the general attitude of the public toward their chosen profession. The *Janesville Daily Gazette* from Saturday, June 13, 1914, reported that there was no "social subject" more misunderstood than the lives of circus people in general, and women in particular. The article is essentially an advertisement for a show that would be in town, and sought to reassure the public about the character of the people that would soon be descending upon their land. In the largely rural Wisconsin, the article took pains to point out that most

[17] "Lulu Baum, tattooed lady; Zelda, snake charmer; Gertie Platt, fat lady;…Marie [one member of the Beyrouth Trope of Arabs]…; Millie Taylor, Long Haired Lady; Bertha Carnihan, midget;…"
Ringling Bros.' World's Greatest Shows Route Book, Season 1900.

[18] "Official Daily Review and Magazine of Zoology of Gollmar Bros. Great American Shows, 1910.

[19] Gollmar Bros. Greatest of American Shows, Souvenir Route Book, Season 1913.

circus women avoided large cities, preferring instead to make their homes in rural areas and small towns. It adds that they were largely Christians, living in a way so as to achieve heaven should they die in an accident owing to their dangerous occupations.[20] The article also provided a statistic that nine out of ten circus women were born into circus families, and the remaining ten percent married into the show. Only in rare circumstances would a circus hire on a single woman.[21] In Arthur W. Brown's "Circus Folks," published in the *Eau Claire Sunday Leader* on June 26, 1910, Brown wrote that most circus people, performers specifically, were born into circus families, and that they remained in a different class from those who joined on their own. In a discussion of the virtues of circus people, he wrote:

> The morals of circus folk are of the highest, and in comparison to a comic opera troupe, they are like a big Sunday-school class…. About the greatest dissipation the men indulge in is cigarettes, and the women have none which I can think unless it is ice-cream soda…. It is easy to see the reason for this when you consider the clear head and steady nerves needed for what they have to do twice a day.[22]

Countless articles like these existed, where circus women were celebrated for their beauty, morals and work ethic, along with their femininity. "The bravest of them will scream at the appearance of a mouse…. And the pluckiest of the women chariot riders is morbidly nervous when a cat is in the room."[23]

Circus Propaganda?

Often, almost identical articles were published in several newspapers, casting some doubt on whether they were journalistic accounts or circus propaganda. As important as the

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[20] *The Eau Claire Leader*, Saturday, June 7, 1919.

[21] *Janesville Daily Gazette*, Saturday, June 13, 1914.

[22] Arthur W. Brown, "Circus Folks," *Eau Claire Sunday Leader*, Sunday, June 26, 1910.

[23] *The Daily Northwestern* (Oshkosh, WI), Saturday Evening, August 11, 1906.

descriptions of circus women afforded by these articles is, the expressed reasons for such articles are equally striking. The *Janesville Daily Gazette* article began with: "There is probably no social subject upon which there is such a general misconception as the domestic life of the people of the circus."[24] *Billboard*'s "The Circus Woman" used harsher language in its attack on people who would think ill of female circus performers. An unnamed author, after observing Ringling Bros. circus women at work, wrote, "There dwelt a companion piece to the social outlaw…in the minds of mammas of eligible sons. And this bogey was labeled 'The Circus Woman….'"[25] The author goes on to address the reasons this notion of the circus woman was erroneous:

> Last week I met the circus woman. And she isn't the circus woman at all. She's a child: a simple, unaffected, amiable little creature, pleased at a small compliment as a child would be, and lacking – delightfully lacking – in the veiled, sophisticated sarcasm with which the clever actress meets her natural enemy, the interviewer, or the unbounded, fatuous vanity which the stupid one displays…. As a sensation, I warn you, the circus woman is a failure.[26]

This notion that circus women were either scandalous or childlike and naïve was widespread. Almost every Wisconsin newspaper article concerning circus women at the turn of the twentieth century focused on their virtue and simplicity, although few employed the blatantly condescending tone of "The Circus Woman."[27]

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[24] *Janesville Daily Gazette*, Saturday, June 13, 1914.

[25] "The Circus Woman," The Billboard, October 6, 1900, 5.

[26] "The Circus Woman."

[27] Fiction about circus women also encouraged stereotypes of seduction, virtue and naïveté. For example, the novel *Polly of the Circus* (Margaret Mayo, 1907) involves a young equestrienne who lost her parents in circus accidents and who finds herself in need of rescuing after suffering a fall herself. The book has overtones of misappropriated sexuality and heathenness, and Polly's salvation is found not within herself or among her circus peers, but in the person of a minister, who educates and Christianizes her.* Turned into two popular films, *Polly of the Circus* (1917, 1932) painted a very different picture of performing circus women than did *Freaks* (1932), which focused on the seediness of the circus establishment.

"The Circus Girl is Industrious"

Much was made of the industriousness of circus women, especially considering the care they took in feminine pursuits like sewing, laundering and housekeeping. A common thread connecting most articles was the mention of the sewing circus women did while they waited on site and traveled between shows. "The circus women are great at sewing. They are working at it every spare moment. After supper, every wagon tongue has a woman seated on it, working away for dear life at some sort of embroidery or crocheting which will eventually find a place in their winter homes."[28] This focus on sewing and handiwork was not a tool of propaganda, as there is much evidence to suggest its truth, but it was doubtless covered so thoroughly in the media in order to make the lives of circus women seem wholesome and ordinary to a wary public.[29]

Circus women's positions as authorities on domestic matters was evidenced by pseudo-journalistic spots in popular publications and show programs that discussed their techniques for clothing care, beauty regimens and housekeeping secrets. "The Circus Girl is Industrious," for example, outlined nine rules for the care of silk stockings, employed by "circus girls." The article appeared next to an advertisement for Lux soap, apparently used by the wardrobe department to keep costumes looking like new.[30] Female circus performers often appeared in programs and popular show magazines advertising health and beauty aids. The "Circus Magazine: Wild West and Animal Review" sold at Sterling Bros. Circus and Capt. Wm. Seils Trained Wild Animal Shows contained advertisements for Yeast-Foam Tablets, Leigh, Inc.

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*As a side note, Margaret Mayo, who wrote *Polly of the Circus*, was a stage actress, a career which was often pitted against circus performing.

[28] Brown.

[29] For more information on the importance of sewing for circus women, see sources concerning Mayme Ward and *The Daily Northwestern*, Saturday Evening, August 11, 1906.

[30] "The Circus Girl is Industrious."

various beauty treatments and cosmetics, and Fruit-a-Lives Laxatives, all endorsed by female performers.[31]

Notable Circus Woman: Mayme Ward

Born into a non-circus family in Oshkosh, WI, Mayme Harvey began a career as an acrobat and trapeze artist after losing her mother at age ten and going to live with a cousin whose husband ran the Hines-Kimball Acrobatic Troupe. Mayme performed with her cousin Jennie Rooney under the name The Kimball Sisters. When she married Eddie Ward in 1912, the two created a trapeze act that quickly made them famous. By 1913, their act included six people, including Eddie's sister Jennie. The Flying Wards performed with various circuses throughout the United States, and ran a trapeze training center in Bloomington, Illinois, Eddie's hometown, during the winter season. The Wards had three children, and Mayme worked throughout her pregnancies. "I worked until I was seven and a half months pregnant with each child. Then, when they were a couple of weeks old, I went back on the trapeze."[32] Eddie died in 1929, having never recovered from injuries he sustained in the 1918 Hagenbeck-Wallace train wreck in Ivanhoe, Indiana. Four days later, a widow with three children, Mayme took her husband's position as catcher, a job typically reserved for men. When

Figure 1. Mayme Ward, catcher

[31] Sterling Bros. Circus and Capt. Wm. Seils Trained Wild Animal Shows, "Circus Magazine: Wild West and Animal Review," date unknown, Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center, vertical file.

[32] "Mayme Ward – Elephant Couturiere," *White Tops*, May/June 1965.

she was 48, at the insistence of her son, Mayme Ward quit working as a catcher and began a second career as a costume seamstress, having perfected her sewing skills as a young woman passing time between performances. She spent many years working on various shows, but ultimately returned to her native Wisconsin, designing elephant costumes and heading Circus World Museum's wardrobe department.[33]

Sunday School Show

As much as the virtue and femininity of circus women may have been exaggerated in the media, rules regarding their behavior certainly supported the notion of a "Sunday school" atmosphere. "Suggestions and Rules" distributed to the employees of the Ringling Bros. Circus by Charles Ringling at the turn of the twentieth century were remarkably strict and exacting. Forty-three rules were set in writing "not to limit the employees in the enjoyment of their rights, but rather to promote harmony and goodwill…." Not only among employees was this harmonious atmosphere important, but it was vital in regard to "the impression [made] on the public."[34] Notable rules included:

> 3. No employee will be permitted to loan money to other employees and receive any profit from the transaction.
> 4. Gambling, especially in the cars or near the cars, on or near the show ground, is strictly prohibited.
> 12. Coats must be worn in the dining room at meal time.
> 19. Take the same care of company wardrobe as you do of your own; do not sit on dirty boxes, pedestals, wagons, the ground, etc., while wearing spectacle costumes.
> 20. Ladies must return bundled wardrobe to wardrobe mistress as soon as possible.

[33] Information gathered from:
J.D. Draper, "Mayme Ward," *Bandwagon*, Jan/Feb 1973, 18-19.
"Mayme Ward – Elephant Couturiere."
Fred Stafford, "Mayme Ward," *Hobby-Bandwagon*, Aug/Sept 1951, 4.
Bob Tabor, "The Famous Flying Wards," White Tops, Jan/Feb 1965, 3-6.

[34] Ringling Bros. Circus, "Suggestions and Rules Employees Ringling Brothers," vertical file, Robert L. Parkinson Library, Baraboo, WI.

28. Male performers are not to visit with the ballet girls. The excuse of "accidental" meetings on Sunday, in parks, at picture shows, etc., will not be accepted.
29. The use of alcohol or gasoline irons for pressing is strictly prohibited on show grounds or in the cars.
32. Do not change positions of trunks as placed in the dressing room.
36. Do not sit "cross-legged" on floats or tableaux wagons.
37. Button up coats, etc.
42. Do not nod to friends or acquaintances who may be in the audience.[35]

In addition to this exhaustive list of rules pertaining to all employees, Ballet Girls were subject to eight more:

1. Do not dress in a flashy, loud style; be neat and modest in appearance.
2. You are required to be in the sleeping car and register your name not later than 11 P.M. and not to leave car after registering.
3. Girls must not stop at Hotels at anytime.
4. You are not permitted to visit with relatives, etc., in cities where show appears without permission from Ballet Master.
5. You are not permitted to talk or visit with male members of the Show Company, excepting the management, and under no circumstances with residents of the cities visited.
6. The excuse of "accidental" meetings will not be accepted.
7. You must be in the ballet dressing room at 1 o'clock for matinee and at 7 o'clock P.M. for night performance.
8. You must not go into the big dressing room.[36]

Following this addendum was a "note" reassuring that the additional rules existed "to protect the girls in every possible way."[37] A contract for Kathryn Edwards of Baraboo, WI, dated October 1, 1912 and effective until 1914 outlined even more "Rules Concerning Ballet Girls: Supplementary to Contract." These rules essentially repeat the rules outlined in the main publication above, but additionally specified trunk size and forbade "flirting and boisterous conduct."[38] Clearly, for as much as the media advertised the virtue of circus women, circus management did not take any chances on impropriety.

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[35] Ringling Bros., "Suggestions."

[36] Ringling Bros., "Suggestions."

[37] Ringling Bros., "Suggestions."

Family Connections

This "Sunday School" atmosphere, encouraged through rules and regulations, had at its base a foundation of family. Just as the popular media extolled the virtues of the circus as an employer of married couples and women born into show families, real family connections often did form the backbone of the circus. In Wisconsin, particularly, family connections built the circus empire. Wisconsin's two largest circuses, Ringling Brothers and Gollmar Brothers, trace their roots to a common family tree. The three Juliar sisters of Baraboo, Wisconsin, literally gave birth to Wisconsin's most famous circuses. Marie Salome Juliar, Mary Magdelina Juliar and Katherine Juliar each married and produced children that would expand Wisconsin's circus influence. Marie Juliar married August Ringling and gave birth to the seven Ringling Brothers and one Ringling sister. Mary Juliar married Gottlieb Gollmar. Their five sons formed Gollmar Brothers Circus in 1891. Katherine Juliar's husband Henry Moeller and their two sons ran a wagon and carriage shop that provided wagons for the family's two circuses.

Although popular statistics that nine of ten circus women were born into circus families appear to be inaccurate, as at the very least they don't account for the hundreds of single ballet girls hired onto a show each season, there is a great deal of truth to the notion that circuses were family institutions. In Wisconsin, at least, the largest circuses were literally birthed by sisters.

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[38] Kathryn Edwards Employment Contract, Ringling Brothers Small Collections, Employment Contracts 17-5-2, Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center, Baraboo, WI. The additional rules are as follows:

1. No trunks carried larger than 15x18x24.
2. No intoxicants of any kind permitted in sleeping cars, dressing rooms, or show grounds.
3. Ladies should be in sleeping cars at reasonable hour after the night performance, as per instructions from Ballet Master.
4. Board and sleeping accommodations being furnished by Ringling Bros., all ladies are expected regularly and orderly to avail themselves of same.
5. Male companions during hours when not on duty, strictly prohibited.
6. Flirting and boisterous conduct at all times and places, prohibited.

Notable Circus Women: The Rooneys

Jenny Smith, Mayme Ward's orphan cousin, who had worked with Ward on the trapeze, married into Baraboo's Rooney family. Her husband Edward, an accomplished aerialist and equestrian, joined her on the trapeze for many years while they worked for Ringling Bros. Circus. Edward Rooney was one of the fifteen children of three male Rooney cousins. Of these fifteen children and their eventual spouses, most became professional circus people, including six women, three of whom, like Jenny, married into the family. What is most incredible about the Rooneys is not that so many women in the family performed, but that so many of them became circus greats.

Figure 2. Lizzie Rooney, 1898.

Carrie Goldsmith, who married John Rooney, was already an accomplished Equestrienne by the time she joined the Rooney family. Before the turn of the century, she had performed with the Habana Leon Sisters. After her marriage in 1902, Carrie Rooney appeared with her husband in a double horse act. Ten years later, she switched her focus to the high wire and headed the Fanchon Sisters act.

Lizzie Rooney, easily the most famous of all the Rooneys, had a career as a principal equestrienne that spanned sixteen years, most of which she spent with the Wisconsin circuses of the Ringling and Gollmar brothers. After the death of her first husband, William de Van, also a rider, Lizzie married a young ticket seller in the Gollmar Bros. Circus, who also played a horn in the band. Her new husband was a medical student during the winter season, and upon

graduation, became the circus physician. In 1912, in his capacity as a doctor, he earned eighteen dollars a week, contrasted with the thirty-five dollars a week his wife earned thirteen years prior.

Minnie Rooney Ethridge, sister to Carrie Goldsmith's brother John, was a musician, prima donna and wire walker with Ringling Bros. Circus. In 1929 she worked the slack wire with the Vanderburg Bros. Show out of Whitewater, Wisconsin.

Another of John Rooney's sisters, Elizabeth Rooney Romig, was a bareback rider, tight rope walker, swinging ladder aerialist and an animal trainer. In addition, she performed in horse mounted comedy acts.

Minnie Hogdini Rooney, who married Charles Rooney, another sibling of John, Minnie and Elizabeth Rooney, had moved to Wisconsin from England to perform with the Dode Fisk Circus in 1910. In 1916, after the death of her first husband, Minnie married Charles, an equestrian and horse trainer, and joined him in his Riding Rooney Act, which they performed together until 1935.[39]

Bare Legs and Bloomers

In direct contrast to the family atmosphere that existed within the circus and that was emphasized in the media, partial and full female nudity was an essential component of the circus' appeal. Although short, formfitting costumes were *du rigueur* for most female performers, they were considered scandalous by many, and prevailing fashions at the turn of the twentieth century created a demand for long skirts and formal dress. Significantly more dangerous than short costumes because they limited mobility, long skirts created a sensation when they were introduced. An article from 1906, addressing the recent trend in circus costuming, said "It was

[39] John Daniel Draper, "The Other Cousins From Baraboo: The Rooney Families," *Bandwagon*, July/August 1992, 4-12.

not so much the cleverness of these girls that excited the circus world – it was the fact that they did their work in skirts…. It was a novelty that the public took kindly to, and moreover, it afforded new ideas for the pictorial 'billing' of the show."[40] Ringling Bros.' Route Book from 1900 reflected this trend, as it listed The Dacoma Family: "a Troupe of Male and Female Acrobats attired in Full Evening Dress executing the Most Difficult Feats."[41]

As circus women's virtues were highlighted in the media, the public perception of their costumes shifted to an understanding attitude about the safety and necessity of "bare" costumes. A great deal of this acceptance was based in the female circus performers' status as athletes. Although they had previously been compared to actresses and burlesque performers, circus women's public image was eventually elevated above their theatrical counterparts. Contributing to this increased respectability were the various rules that circus women were expected to follow, including that they should never appear outside the ring or the dressing tent without being completely covered in modest dress.[42]

Vaudeville and Burlesque

Aside from athleticism, the female circus performer's separation from burlesque came in the form of silence. While burlesque performers "talked and leered openly" at those that paid to see them, circus women performed "sight acts," that kept them at a respectable distance from their audiences and relied on flashy costumes to draw attention.[43] As circuses gained in

[40] *The Daily Northwestern*, Saturday Evening, August 11, 1906.

[41] Ringling Bros.' World's Greatest Shows, Route Book 1900, 34.

[42] Davis, 105.

[43] Davis, 87; M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 148.

popularity and approval, vaudeville actresses employed some of the circus women's techniques to gain respectability without losing their sexual appeal. Acrobatic acts were introduced onto vaudeville stages in the early twentieth century. Although they employed a great deal of "masculine strength," these acrobatic acts were primarily appealing for their feminine costumes and glimpses of semi-nudity. In fact, male acrobats frequently dressed in women's costumes in order to sell more tickets.[44]

Although the media treated circus women with more respect than vaudeville women, stage performers felt insulted at the comparison to circus acts. Because "sight acts" were often confined to the start and end of a show, when the audience made noise arriving and leaving, acrobatic performers felt slighted. Non-speaking roles were considered "low" in vaudeville, and were associated with the filth of the traveling circus, that often set up tents in muddy or dusty rural fields.[45] Circus managers likewise resented their association with burlesque and vaudeville. Press agents emphasized the silence with which their "ladies" performed, not jeering at their audience like their theatrical counterparts.[46] As much as vaudeville performers resented the circus and considered it low brow, vaudeville was actually cheap entertainment compared to the circus. At the turn of the twentieth century, tickets to a vaudeville performance cost ten cents to one dollar, burlesque cost ten to thirty cents, and a ticket to the circus, not including the sideshow or the blow off, cost anywhere from twenty-five cents to two dollars.[47]

[44] Kibler 148-149.

[45] Kibler, 152.

[46] Davis, 108.

[47] Davis, 34. 2009 equivalents: vaudeville: $2.54-$25.45; burlesque: $2.54-$7.63; circus: $6.36-$50.89.

Hoochie Coochie Girls and Grifters

The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 introduced "cooch" dancing. Essentially belly dancing, cooch caught on quickly, and soon most burlesque shows and circuses had cooch dancers.[48] Disguised as an ethnic phenomenon, cooch dancing transformed women's sexuality into an ethnic characteristic.[49] At the 1893 St. Louis Fair, Omeena, a cooch dancer, transformed the performance into what it ultimately became: a striptease for male audiences only.[50] In the early 1900s, cooch joined the American circus sideshow. The sights inside the sideshow tent were distinct from the Big Top. Based on appearance rather than performance, sideshow freaks were essentially laid bare for their audience. It was a small step, then, to add a cooch show in the final "blow off." Those rubes already in the sideshow tent were appealed to by the talker to pay an additional fee to see one final exhibit. The blow off was 'promoted as "for adult males only,"' which convinced people that they were going to see female nudity. Frequently, this was only grift, a trick to earn the circus more money.[51] A "code of honor" prevented talkers from grifting women, children, the elderly, the infirm or the mentally deficient, so the promise of a show for men only fit into circus ethics.[52] Sometimes, though, cooch dancers really were behind the curtain, and, depending on the circus, provided their audience with various degrees of nudity. Larger, "Sunday School" circuses, if they participated in cooch at all, usually only allowed their dancers to strip down to G-string, or they allowed total nudity, but

[48] Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 225.

[49] Allen, 229.

[50] Allen, 230.

[51] Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 140.

[52] Bogdan, 91.

only briefly before the dancer left the stage. Smaller, seedier shows, though, sometimes had cooch shows that culminated in a "gynecological anatomy lesson." Either way, male audiences were shown what they "couldn't see at home."[53]

Cooch and "girl shows" became so popular and were such high earners for circuses that advertisements in trade magazines cropped up offering to help circuses set up their own. One such advertisement, found in Billboard magazine, announced: "How to Produce a Girl Show…. If you do not have the girls, you need this information, for girls are not required in this ideal organization plan….this is information that every red-blooded organization should have."[54] This advertisement makes it clear that grift was an essential and normal part of the girl show, but also that audiences demanded them and that there was money to be made off sexual desire.

Freaks

Just as girl shows had the appeal of the "other," or the unfamiliar, sideshow performers, or freaks, were fascinating because of their difference from the ordinary. Women, particularly, made interesting subjects for scrutiny, since they were usually protected form public dissection by dint of their status as the "fairer" sex. In fact, the reason cooch dancers were included in the side show is that they were, essentially, freaks. Different than ordinary women, willing to expose their bodies and express their sexuality, they were as far removed from the norm as giantesses and bearded ladies.[55] In fact, their heightened womanliness ran parallel to the constructed images of female sideshow performers, whose femininity was encouraged or

[53] Allen, 235-236.

[54] "How to Produce a Girl show," *Billboard*, date unknown.

[55] Allen, 234-235.

exaggerated. The aforementioned giantesses and bearded ladies, in particular, were dressed in flowing and frilly gowns as the talkers told stories about their domestic prowess and romantic involvements.[56] Fat ladies, too, were praised for their beauty and femininity in advertising booklets. However, these women were not present in the mainstream media the way headlining performers were. With few exceptions, they earned less, too, but their jobs also involved considerably less risk.

Perhaps the two most sexually titillating types of sideshow performers were tattooed ladies and snake charmers. Neither required a great deal of skill, but becoming a tattooed lady certainly required commitment. Snake charmers wore very little, both to showcase the snakes against their skin and to keep the creatures out of folds of fabric. Advertisements for snake charmers used thinly veiled sexual language to describe the act. Often, circus managers' wives became snake charmers, as it was the only way they could secure free room and board to travel with their husbands. In the late nineteenth century, Lou Ringling, who had married Al Ringling, became a snake charmer in her husband's circus, employing the stage name Inez Morris.[57] Earlier, in the first years of the Ringling Bros. Circus, she had earned her keep by sewing costumes.

By 1890, most larger circus sideshows were comprised of twelve to fifteen exhibits plus a sideshow band, typically composed of black musicians.[58] Female performers could make up half or more of this contingent, as they held more appeal with audiences. When tattooed women came on the scene, particularly, they quickly eclipsed their male counterparts in popularity. In

[56] Davis, 121-122.

[57] Davis, 124.

[58] Bogdan, 44.

the 1880s, when tattooed women first made an appearance on the sideshow stage, they immediately and completely upstaged tattooed men. The reasons were simple: although tattoos were generally rare, they were particularly unusual on women, and they had to expose body parts that were normally kept under wraps in order to showcase their artwork.[59] Tattooed ladies routinely showed their arms, shoulders, chests and legs, and sometimes even showed their stomachs.[60]

Both tattooed ladies and female snake charmers were often chosen for the ballyhoo. They would come out of the sideshow and stand on an elevated platform while a talker encouraged marks to buy tickets to the sideshow. Sideshow performers were typically kept under cover, as their income relied on convincing people to see what they "couldn't see at home," or on the midway for that matter. However, it was customary for a ballyhoo to give a sneak peek at what waited inside the tent.[61]

City on a Train

Regardless of a woman's position in the circus, whether star performer, freak or seamstress, she lived and traveled according to a strict system and hierarchy. Life on the circus trains was nothing if not organized. Each sleeper car was named or numbered prominently on the outside so it was identifiable in the dark after the evening show.[62] For example, the Ringling Brothers' World's Greatest Shows Route Book for the season of 1900 listed porters for sleeping

[59] Bogdan, 251.

[60] Amelia Klem, "A Life of Her Own Choosing: Anna Gibbons' Fifty Years as a Tattooed Lady," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 89, no. 3 (2006): 34.

[61] Bogdan, 102.

[62] Rose Collier, Oral history interview with Rose Collier, 1959, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

cars named "Caledonia," "New York," "Boston" and "Arcadia," with a dining car called "Chicago."[63] Each employee had their own stateroom or berth in their car that was theirs for the entire season. A rigid hierarchy existed within the train cars, as in all areas of circus life. One's position, however, had little to do with race or gender, as it did in the world outside the circus, but rather depended on position within the show, whether it be as manager, butcher, freak, or roustabout.[64] As Robert Gollmar wrote in My Father Owned a Circus, "A colored performer slept closer to the center of the train than a white candy butcher." The center train cars were of course, the safest for travel, as they were protected in case of accident from the front or the rear.[65] Single men and women bunked in separate cars. Married couples shared a car, but sometimes slept in separate berths. State rooms were reserved for owners, managers and star performers.[66] A 1917 photograph of May and Stella Wirth in their family compartment aboard the Ringling Bros. Circus train shows drapes at the windows, artwork on the walls, and fresh flowers on the table, along with a chair and a full size bed covered with a quilted coverlet.[67] Most performers and employees were not considered worthy of such accommodations. The Single Ladies' Car sometimes contained twice the number of berths it was designed to hold, and the women who lived in these cars had to wear men's style pajamas to avoid overexposure as they climbed in and out of their tiny berths.[68] Bathing and bathroom privileges in these cramped cars were limited, as the doors were removed from the facilities to prevent employees from

[63] Ringling Bros.' World's Greatest Shows, Route Book 1900, 7.

[64] For more information on circus terms, see glossary.

[65] Robert H. Gollmar, *My Father Owned a Circus* (Caxton, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1965).

[66] Davis, 63.

[67] Stella and May Wirth, photograph, Circus World Museum Collection, reprinted in Mark St. Leon's "May Wirth: An Unbelievable Lady Bareback Rider," *Bandwagon* 34.3 (May/June 1990): 9.

[68] Davis, 64.

overusing them.[69] Regardless of its size and level of luxury, each car had a porter who informed the workers in the morning how far away the lot was and what the best way was to get there.[70]

The Dining Tent

If they wanted breakfast, performers and staff had to get to the lot before nine in the morning while the cookhouse flag was up. Although the rest of the train would be unloaded throughout the morning, the cookhouse tent was the first unloaded and assembled. Inside the tent, a partition separated the performers and the workers. Performers dined with the ticket agents and staff, including trainers and other skilled positions. The "boss" sat on the workers' side. Each department within the show had its own table. Sideshow performers, who were served first so they could get to their posts, ate at one table, equestrians at another, animal trainers at a third, and so on. On the workers' side, each department had its own table. Canvas men ate apart from water boys, candy butchers, etc.[71] Even the various circus bands were separated, with the big show musicians sitting apart from the sideshow band.[72] The placement of the tables themselves reinforced the class divisions. Owners, managers and star performers sat at tables near the front of the tent, while less essential members of the troupe sat nearer the back.[73] Single women sat separately from single men or married couples.[74] At each table the seats were assigned. The performers' tables were laid with white tablecloths, the workers' with red.

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[69] Davis, 64.

[70] Collier.

[71] Collier.

[72] Earl Chapin May, "In Route with the Circus Girls," *Pictorial Review* for July, 1926.

[73] Davis, 63.

[74] May.

Waiters served all meals, and each table had the same waiter everyday and for every meal, which were served in the morning, at noon, and immediately after the afternoon matinee.[75] Earl Chapin May, in his 1926 article about the women of the Ringling Brothers Circus, wrote that fifteen hundred employees ate at eight, twelve and five o'clock every day.[76] In 1908, the Eau Claire Daily Telegram, in an article about the Ringling Bros. Circus' visit to the city, noted that 75 people worked in the Ringling kitchen, preparing 3200 meals a day. Two tons of meat and 3600 eggs were used daily.[77] In 1890, according to the Ringling Brothers Route Book from that year, 130 people ate their every meal with the circus.[78] All circus people ate the same fare, served on either china or granite-wear. Employees were expected to tip their waiters[79], and also had the option of buying extra milk with their pay if the rations weren't enough.[80]

Queen's Row

Inside the dressing tents, order reigned as well. Main dressing tents were located adjacent to the big top, so performers in costume could enter directly into the ring without stepping outside. Likewise, sideshow dressing tents were adjacent to the sideshow tent, which kept the acts under cover so they could not be viewed by those who had not paid a separate admission charge to see them. Men's and women's dressing tents were separated by the horse

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[75] Collier.

[76] May.

[77] Davis, quoting from "Ringlings' Great Shows Afternoon and To-Night" in the *Eau Claire Daily Telegram*, 1908 (exact date unknown).

[78] Ringling Brothers', Route Book, 1890, 7.

[79] Joseph R. Greer, Papers 1895-1948, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI. From a letter to "Mom and Dad" from Harry Greer, dated May 8, 1928.

[80] Collier.

tent, or "pad room." Because the dressing tents were placed so close to the main tent, performers could listen to the circus band's music to know how the show was going or if there were any problems with the acts. Particularly in horse acts, the bandleader took his cue from the action in the ring. The band kept time with the horse so that the audience would think the horse was keeping time with the music. If the music began playing very quickly, the performers inside the dressing tent would know the horse was running out of control.[81]

Inside the women's tent, trunks were arranged along the two long sidewalls then formed aisles by being lined up back to back in rows.[82] The first row, closest to the pad room and therefore furthest from the outside wall, was referred to as "Queen's Row," and was the domain of the biggest female stars. Here, they were protected from the weather and the noise that so badly affected the outer perimeter of the tent.[83] The trunks had flat tops, and were therefore used as writing desks, dressing tables, and even ironing boards, with the addition of a pad. According to equestrienne Rose Collier, from Janesville, Wisconsin, women carried gasoline irons and ironed their clothes as needed (in direct violation of Ringling Bros. rule twenty-nine). Each performer had a chair and a water pail set in front of her trunk. The water was hers for the day, to be used for washing or any other necessity. Hot water could be purchased for five to ten cents a pail.[84] Water pails were typically painted with an initial or name so they could be identified. Since pails were easily stolen and painted over, performers often resorted to punching their

[81] Collier.

[82] Collier.

[83] Davis, 65.

[84] Collier.

initials into their pails along the upper edge, preventing the buckets from being easily disguised with paint.[85]

Trunks were organized to hold costumes, toiletries, sewing supplies, correspondence and more. Trunk size depended on the position of the performer. The strict hierarchy evident in so much of the circus was at work when in allotting storage space as well. An Artist's Contract and Release for Lillian Lietzel, dated January 18, 1915, specified trunk sizes for various performers. Notably, all men were assigned one size trunk, while women's covered quite a range: "The following sizes only of trunks will be carried on cars: gentlemen artist size, 18 by 18 by 24; lady artist size, 20 by 22 by 28; lady rider artist size, 20 by 22 by 30; ladies in spectacular ballet, etc., 15 by 18 by 24.[86] Trunk privileges were certainly related to costume necessities, as artists stored their own costumes while Spectacular performers returned theirs to the wardrobe mistress (see rule 20, above). However, it also stands to reason that performers were awarded real estate based on their potential to earn money for the show. A famous acrobat or equestrienne could sell tickets at a much higher rate than an anonymous Ballet Girl.

Typically, a trunk's top tray would house underwear and tights, while the middle tray held beauty essentials like powder, cold cream and makeup, along with a sewing kit and other laundry care items. Within the main body of the trunk, performers stored their costumes, which were folded into dishtowel-size pieces of unbleached muslin with a swatch of fabric pinned to the outside of the bundle. This way, performers could pick out only the costume they wanted, without exposing their other costumes to dust and dirt.[87] Multiple costumes were standard, as

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[85] Collier.

[86] Ringling Brothers World's Greatest Shows, Artist's Contract and Release for Lillian Lietzel, January 18, 1915, Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center.

[87] Collier.

colored costumes were typically worn during the matinee and white costumes were worn during the evening performance in order to reflect the lights under the big top.[88] Some performers, depending on their act, also had hat trunks which housed fancy hats and extra boots. Every day, circus women washed their clothes and hung them to dry on the guy-ropes strung between tents, out of the view of the paying spectators.[89] In particular, circus women were responsible for washing their bodices, tights and underclothes.[90]

Salaries and Wages

As noted earlier, star performers were awarded privileges concerning their living and working quarters. An examination of Lillian Lietzel's work contracts over a number of years shows a steady improvement in her living conditions, along with regular salary increases. In exchange for a "First Class Aerial Ring Act," in 1915 Lietzel was promised a weekly salary of $150 and a stateroom on the circus train. During that year's extended engagement in Chicago, she earned $200 a week.[91] By the following year, her wages during the traveling season had increased to $165 a week, although her pay for the annual Chicago engagement remained the same as the prior year. In addition to her stateroom, she was granted a small private dressing tent.[92] For the 1931 season, Lietzel was again awarded a stateroom and was also allowed to carry a maid and a property man to "properly install the apparatus" used in her performance. Lietzel was responsible for paying their wages, but the circus provided their room and board.

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[88] Collier.

[89] Collier; May.

[90] May.

[91] Lillian Lietzel Artist's Contract and Release, 1915.

[92] Lillian Lietzel Artist's Contract and Release, 1916.

Lietzel also provided her own dressing tent at this time, but her salary was raised to $350 a week.[93] Accounting for inflation, in 2009 her 1915 salary would be $3142.45, her 1916 salary would equal $3212.54, and her 1930 salary would be equivalent to $4454.77 a week.[94] Considering that Lietzel's salary included room and board, these were incredible sums of money. It is no wonder then, that when she fell to her death while performing in Copenhagen in February of 1931, Lillian Lietzel left an estate worth $30,056, which would be worth $419,463.36 today, almost half a million dollars.[95] In contrast, Ballet Girl Kathryn Edwards earned eight dollars a week in 1912 ($175.59 in 2009) for twelve performances a week, standard for the industry, and although her room and board were also included in her wages, her accommodations were significantly less comfortable than Lietzel's.

The Wisconsin State Journal, on April 22, 1914, declared "Circus Women High Paid." Reprinted from a Chicago source, the short entry read: "Circus women receive better wages and work under better moral environment than factory employees, reported Factory Inspector O'Malley after inspecting a circus here."[96] Evidence proves this observation right. The 1913 Commission on Prostitution and Vice gathered data from Superior, WI, to study working conditions for prostitutes as compared to other working women. Their findings are applicable to a comparison with circus women as well. In 1913, a female store clerk in Superior earned about nine dollars a week, working six long days ($192.91 in 2009). A glove factory seamstress earned about six or seven dollars weekly, depending on her production speed, and a telephone operator also earned about seven dollars a week (six dollars is equivalent to $128.61, seven to

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[93] Lillian Lietzel Artist's Contract and Release, 1931.

[94] Calculations courtesy of The Inflation Calculator <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/>

[95] *Greater Show World* 13.9, September 30, 1931.

[96] *The Wisconsin State Journal*, Madison, WI, Wednesday, April 22, 1914, 11.

$150.04). Although these wages appear comparable to the wages of a lowly ballet girl in the circus, they do not include room and board, and are therefore significantly lower. Prostitutes in Superior earned between fifteen and forty dollars a week in 1913. In 2009 dollars, that is equivalent to $321.51-$857.37.[97] Although prostitutes out earned many circus women, they were not nearly so well paid as the star performers, they didn't have the benefits of paid room and board, and they faced the dangers inherent in such a profession. Comparatively speaking, then, Wisconsin circus women's working conditions and salaries were much better than could be found outside the circus. According to Rose Collier, when average wages for women were eighteen or twenty dollars a week, a good equestrienne could easily earn one hundred dollars.[98]

Likewise, in 1900, a thoroughly tattooed lady in a large circus earned between one and two hundred dollars a week ($2544.68-$5089.36). In the same year, teachers in Milwaukee earned seven dollars a week ($178.13), including room and board, while male factory laborers in the same city in 1893 earned five to eleven dollars a week ($117.87-$259.31). Even within the circus, women frequently out earned men. A male clown in 1910 could expect to be paid twenty dollars a week ($454.78). While that was certainly good money, it was not nearly what a skilled woman could expect to earn. These figures are especially impressive when looked at in contrast with what a working class family in Wisconsin earned in 1900: seven to ten dollars a week, for a total of $300 to $500 a year ($7634.04-$12,723.40 per year in 2009).[99]

Of course, these figures are only applicable to women who worked independently in the circus. Many women performed as part of a troupe, often including male family members or

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[97] All Superior wage information is taken from Victoria Brown, "Uncommon Lives of Common Women: The Missing Half of Wisconsin History," originally published 1975, reissued online at http://wiwomensnetwork.org/w/001/images/0000/0189/ul2003.pdf.

[98] Collier.

[99] Klem, 33.

husbands, which subcontracted to the circus. Typically, these women were paid as part of the troupe, with a lump sum being paid to the head of the group and divided among the members. Joseph Greer and his son Harry, who, along with their wives Edna and May owned a rodeo riding outfit called Greer's Western Rodeo and Society Circus, which provided horses and riders to Ringling Bros., Gollmar Bros. and Sells-Floto circuses, among others. Based out of Bloomington, WI, the Greers were trick riders, with Edna and May performing additional horse-free acts. Edna Greer at one time performed an iron jaw act, and May performed as part of an aerobatics act. The Greers were paid one lump sum and were responsible for paying their employees' wages and covering many of their own expenses.

When Harry and May Greer took over the business from Joseph and Edna, they kept careful records of the financial hardships involved in running the business. Financial ledgers indicate wages for the single men with the show, but group couples together. Although it is impossible to tell what women earned when they were paid as a couple, it is notable that married couples typically earned more than twice what a single man did. For example, Carl Strong was paid forty dollars a week, Ed Miller earned fifteen dollars a week, and Jack Kirk's wages ranged from five to thirty dollars a week. Other employees earned similar amounts, with the exception of two men who were each paid one hundred dollars a week, ostensibly due to the difficulty of their stunts. The three married couples in the show, Harry and May Greer included, were each paid a salary of one hundred dollars a week. Notes indicate that room and board for all employees were paid by the Greers, with meals averaging ten dollars a week per person.[100] In a letter to his parents, Harry Greer discusses the financial trouble he and May were in due to the expense of subcontracting:

[100] Greer. Although the ledger book is undated, its accompanying documents date to the 1920s.

> Philadelphia, May 8, 1928
>
> I've kind of figured it up and I don't think we can save $50 a week. We have two horses to tip for, the porter, waiter, coffee-boy and you know around here how it is, if anybody does the least little thing for you they've got their hand out. We have our car fare to figure and our lunches and our cleaning, laundry and pressing bill.[101]

May Greer's fortune was inextricably tied up in her husband's. As his wife and a member of his troupe, she did not reap the benefits of a single girl in the circus. Even her trunk, essential for toting costumes, was her husband's responsibility. On April 21, 1928, Harry wrote to his parents: "I bought May a new 32 inch Taylor trunk. I'm taking her old trunk to use for my clothes…."[102] In many ways, then, single women who worked directly for the circus were at a financial advantage over their sub-contracted sisters. Many women, even if they were married, performed in solo acts, perhaps to earn better wages. Domestic acts were also at an advantage over their foreign counterparts, as foreign performers had to pay agents to secure their contracts.[103]

The Tent, Folded

By the 1920s, the once great circus empire was in serious decline. Competition from amusement parks, motion pictures and theaters that had expanded into smaller towns meant that people didn't have to wait for a once a year spectacle to be entertained. Radio, as well, was gaining in popularity, and people found they could get the information about other cultures that they had once sought from the circus sideshow right in their own homes. During the Great

[101] Greer.

[102] Greer.

[103] Collier.

Depression, many circuses themselves went bankrupt, and many more were forced out of business by a poor public.[104]

The decline of the railroad and the ensuing expense of operating a rail show gave rise to truck shows while simultaneously ending the circus era. Truck shows retained little of the grandeur of the great rail shows, and although they exist to this day, they have never reclaimed the opulence and popularity of the great circus age.[105] Many female performers continued to perform in the new, smaller American circuses. Some moved to Europe, where the circus culture was still alive, and some retired to their homes and families.

Circuses and circus women, though, continue to influence Wisconsin culture and work. Although absent from our history lessons, their legacy as high earning, independent women continues to shape the Wisconsin atmosphere.

[104] Bogdan, 40.

[105] Wilton Eckley, *The American Circus* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 186.

APPENDIX

Wisconsin Circuses, listed chronologically from start year:

1840-1864: Mabie Bros. Grand Olympic Arena and United States Circus, Delavan (transplanted from Brewster, NY in 1847)

1852: Older's Great United Circus, Delavan

1853: Herr Driesbach's Menagerie, Delavan

1854: Dr. Edward Ganung's Menagerie, Delavan

1854: Portage City Circus, Portage

1855-57: Orton's Badger Circus, Portage

1856-57: Buckley's National Circus, Delavan

1858: Holland And Mosher's Circus, Delavan

1858: Mabie Bros. and Crosby's Southern Circus, Delavan

1858-60: Buckley and Babcock's North American Circus, Delavan

1858-61: Orton & Older's Great Southern Circus, Portage

1860-61: Holland and Madden's Circus, Delavan

1863: Castello & Van Vleck's Mammoth Circus, Fairplay

1864: Mabie-Melville Australian Circus, Delavan

1865: Matt Van Vleck's Circus, Fairplay

1865: George W. Hall Sr.'s and John Long's Circus, Madison

1865-66: Phillips and Babcock Circus, Delavan

1865-66: Haight & DeHaven's United States Circus, Beaver Dam

1870: Dan Castello's Great Circus and Egyptian Caravan, Racine

1871: P.T. Barnum's Great Traveling Museum, Caravan and Hippodrome, Delavan (although this circus was not headquartered in Wisconsin, it was the brainchild of W.C. Coup and Dan Castello, both of Wisconsin, and is therefore included in this list)

1871: P.A. Older's Museum, Circus and Menagerie, Delavan

1874: Buckley's Roman Hippodrome and World Festival, Delavan

1874-87: Burr Robbin's Circus, Janesville

1875: Bushnell's Zoolodon, Delavan

1876: G.W. Collin's Menagerie, Delavan

1876: Dan Castello's Centennial Circus, Delavan

1876: Dr. George Morrison's Coliseum Circus, Delavan

1879: Parson's Circus and Menagerie, Darlington

1880-83: Parson's & Roy's Grand Grecian Circus, Darlington

1881-1902: Col. George W. Halls Sr.'s Circus, Evansville

1882: Buckley and Bowker's Menagerie, Delavan

1882: Myers & Shorb's Big United States Circus, Janesville

1884: Yankee Robinson & Ringling Bros. Great Double Shows, Circus and Caravan, Baraboo

1884-1900 (not continuously): Skerbeck Family Circus, Dorchester

1884-1901: Wintermute Bros. New Colossal Shows, Hebron

1885-86: Holland and McMahon's World Circus, Delavan

1885-88: Ferguson and Williams Monster Shows, Appleton

1885-1912 (not continuously): George W. Hall Jr.'s Circus, Evansville

1885-1918: Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows, Baraboo

1888-89: Holland and Gormley's Allied Circus, Delavan

1890: Holland, Bowman & McLaughlin's United Circus, Delavan

1891: Great Van Amburgh Shows, Delavan

1891-95: Charles S. Hall's New All-Feature Shows

1891-1916: Gollmar's Greatest of American Shows, Baraboo

1892: Prof. Black's Wild Animal Exhibition, Delavan

1892: Miller Bros. Circus, Beaver Dam

1892, 1897, and 1908: Stang Bros. Old-Fashioned One-Ring Circus, Burlington

1892-94: E.G. Holland & Co.'s Railroad Circus, Delavan

1895-97: Marshall Bros. United Shows, Avoca

1900-02: Burns, Boldt and Hanus Dog and Pony Show, Antigo

c.1900-1920: Jim Rock and Dr. Cook's Palace and Pavilion Shows, Iola

1901: Gollmar Bros. and Schuman's United Monster Shows, Baraboo

1901-02: Prof. Ephraim Williams' Great Northern Circus, Milwaukee

1901-04: Skerbeck's Great One-Ring Railroad Shows, Dorchester

1902-06: Hall's Big Tent Shows, Fond du Lac

1902-06: Great Melborne Circus, Hebron

c.1902-1920: Holloway Bros. Up-To-Now Shows, Birnamwood

1903-04: Fenn Bros. Mighty Shows, Clintonville

1903-07: F.W. Burns Big One-Ring Railroad Show, Antigo

1903-13 (not continuously): Seibel Bros. World's Greatest Dog & Pony Shows, Watertown

1906-10: Dode Fisk's Shows, Wonewoc

1907: Skerbeck's Wild West and Hippodrome, Dorchester

1907: Wintermute & Black's Circus, Hebron

1907: Harry Castello & Co.'s Circus, Racine

1908: Yankee American Circus, Sheboygan

c.1908: Bodkin Bros. Railroad Circus, Milwaukee

1909: Cooper & Robinson Combined Railroad Shows, Watertown

1909-11: Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Circus, Baraboo

1910-11: Prairie Joe's Wild West Hippodrome & Circus, Dorchester

1911: Bulger and Cheney's Combined Railroad Shows, Sparta

1912-14: Beverung Bros. Circus, Milwaukee

1913: Texas Teague & Monty Meechy's Wild West Shows, Beloit

1913-18: Wintermute Bros. and Hall's New Colossal Shows, Hebron

1914-1928: H.A. Bruce Circus, Evansville

c.1914-c.1930: Charles R. Hall Circus, Evansville

1915-22: H.R.J. Miller's American Trained Animal Circus, Wilton

1919-20: Col. Geo. W. Hall Trained Wild Animal Circus, Evansville

1919- : Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, Baraboo

1920-23: Yankee American and Lindemann Bros. Combined Shows, Sheboygan

1920-36: Engford Family Shows, Plover

1921-29: E.E. Bonham's Greater Shows, Prairie du Sac

1923: Great Danby Shows, Sheboygan

1923-24: Hall Bros. Circus, Evansville

1924: Kelley's Fun on the Farm Circus, Baraboo

1924: Miller-Ayers Shows, Sheboygan

1924: Wilson & Arling Circus, Sheboygan

1924-38: Seils-Sterling Circus, Sheboygan

1926-27: Stark Bros. Circus and Wild Animal Shows, Chippewa Falls

1926-38: Vanderberg Bros. Circus, Whitewater

1933: Hocum-Gollmar Circus, Baraboo

1958-59: Adams Bros. Circus, Appleton

1960: Adams and Sells Circus, Appleton

1961-66: Deppe's Classic Country Circus, Baraboo

1962-63: Sells Bros. Circus, Appleton

1964-65: Birnam Bros. Great 3-Ring Circus, Appleton

1966: Sullivan's Variety Circus, Appleton

1971-?: Murray Hill's Great American Circus, Burlington

1974-?: Franzen Bros. Circus, Nelsonville

*Highlighted circus names indicate those that fall within the 1890-1930 time period.

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