

Circus World, 1959 and 2010

Tales from Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

A full 50 years have passed since Circus World opened its doors. Perhaps it is time for a reminder of its history, especially since it has been making history this past two months. We read locally of recent downsizing in the newspaper, but it was on the internet too.

Internet publicity has come from a circus critic, whom you can reach by Googling Showbiz David. He recently has had three major blogs, including comparisons of our Circus World and the Sarasota museum. Look for the blogs dated December 23, January 5, and February 16. His concerns include the recent drastic downsizing of personnel at Circus World, and particularly the dismissal of the Curator, Erin Foley.

Significance of Circus World

David recognizes the pre-eminent significance of the local museum in the world of circus lore, stating "If any place in this country deserves to host circus history, surely that place is Baraboo". He mentions particularly the work of Chappie Fox, Bob Parkinson, and Fred Dahlinger. Other locals might include Wilbur Deppe, Alma Waite, and so many others.

He notes Circus World as having "a library of unparalleled resources". As a circus critic, though, he finds many faults in the managements of the museum in recent years. This is spelled out in his blog of February 16.

Regarding Sarasota, he criticizes the presence of a circus museum on the Ringling grounds in Sarasota, quoting Henry Ringling North that it never should have happened. With some envy (which we share) he notes that it currently enjoys the munificent largess of a millionaire circus enthusiast.

Mr. Howard Tibbals has generously bankrolled that museum with funds far beyond the fondest dreams of the Baraboo museum's board of directors. But Showbiz David even questions the appropriateness of a circus museum on the Ringling Property!

Beyond that funding, the state of Florida has reportedly spent a reported 13 million (yes, million) dollars renovating just a house (yes, just a house). It was intended as a grandiose reproduction of a Venetian palace and was constructed on adjacent grounds decades earlier by John Ringling—a Baraboo boy, incidentally, though he never had much time for us after he and his brothers made it big.

Showbiz David in Baraboo

Showbiz David has visited in Baraboo, principally at Circus World but he also discovered, to his surprise, the Al. Ringling Theatre. We were introduced thanks to John and Sharon Warner, genial proprietors of the Gollmar House Bed and Breakfast.

As a theatre guide, I spent time with him one day, and we have emailed several times over the years; He has generously given the theatre some national publicity among circus folk readers over that time period.

David and I are in agreement in regretting the dismissal of Erin Foley, for a world class museum calls for a curator above everyone else, in our opinion. In an email after the February 16 blog, however, I



One of many photos at the Sauk County Historical Society. The Circus World Archives contain many more. Scenes such as this were common in Baraboo from 1884 to 1918, the glory days of the circus.

“Showbiz David” Hammerstrom, renowned circus and entertainment critic, wrote: “If any place in this country deserves to host circus history, surely that place is Baraboo”



John Ringling, youngest and last of the Ringling Brothers.

There was no circus museum on the Ringling estates in Sarasota when John and some of his brothers lived there. Their Nephew, Henry Ringling North, said John would never have allowed that to happen.

characterized some of his other comments about Circus World as "broadsides," This he good-humoredly pondered in his reply.

David had recalled drab buildings, and I pointed out that some are old because they were historic and genuine, part of the Ringling history. He also questioned the restoration of so many circus wagons, some with precious few original parts. In some cases the restorations are privately financed.

We should be proud that Baraboo has perhaps 10 or 12 times as many circus wagons as does Sarasota. Some were made in Baraboo by the Moeller cousins. Restorations are accurate and impeccable, and appropriate in my opinion.

Live Shows?

As a museum purist, he questioned the need for live shows. I countered that we were in a major national tourist area, and that at least a little circus history rubbed off on the tourists in their quest for entertainment. He suggested the possibility of adding a carnival museum to the property, noting that no such national repository exists for that industry. It is worth consideration, but would have to be privately funded in the present financial distress.

In a thoughtful letter that I wish I had written, and which David generously posted without comment, former board member Jonathan Lipp gently chided David on some of the matters he had raised. Lipp pointed out a major problem, lack of money, and I agree.

Florida.

Florida does not even have a state income tax—thanks to we Northerners, too many of whom dutifully trek there every winter and spend money we would penny-pinch

back home. I know, I used to do that. Floridians don't generally visit us, or spend money here in return, you'll notice.

Unlike Florida, Wisconsin would not fork over millions of dollars to restore a rich man's house, which serves no purpose other than to display his bounty. Neither has it seen fit to fund the Circus World operation, though there is some building maintenance.

So that is where the discussion stands as of this writing. There is no curator at the world's largest depository of circus memorabilia and artifacts, and a skeleton crew awaits spring and re-opening of the museum. Note: I have not consulted the museum authorities on this matter, nor have they approached me on my previous communication, publicized by Showbiz David.

The local museum was conceived, developed and dedicated in the 1950's by mostly Baraboo people and Baraboo money. We knew them, know their names. It grew to greatness under the well-remembered Chappie Fox, and to international greatness under Parkinson and Dahlinger, all local residents. Some 250 residents have volunteered there at one time.

Circus World will not fail or close, but it needs our support at this critical time. The history, location and vast archives of the circus should be perpetuated, and Circus World has the lion's share of all three, by far.

A benefactor like Sarasota's, even with more modest funds, would be nice indeed!

Nice not just for Circus World in Baraboo, but for true lovers of the world of circus!