

Al. Ringling's Will Long, Complicated

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

This article will discuss someone's Last Will and Testament in some detail. If this seems an intrusion on a private matter, know that the Will was published in the newspaper at the time of death, and has been cussed and discussed for the past 95 years. Thus its provisions are public knowledge.

The Will is that of Al. Ringling, perhaps the most famous and generous of Baraboo's Sons, and a long time resident at the time of his death. The Will is unusual in that it contains a special provision with regard to Al's new theater and its relationship to his wife and family.

Al. died on New Year's Day, 1916. Every member of the family came, even John, plus nearly everyone of prominence in the world of the circus. Baraboo businesses closed for the funeral ceremony at the Lutheran Church, which was mobbed with mourners. Al was recognized as "the creative faculty, the immense vision, the almost superhuman vision of perfect foresight." for his circus management.

Only seven weeks had passed since the gala opening of his opulent movie palace, first of its kind in the country. Built both as a gift to the city and also as a monument to himself, he probably never saw his theater. Although he was present at the opening, he was said to have been blind, and in extremely poor health.

Distributions to Family

Wills were simpler instruments in those days, as was his despite his wealth and vast holdings. It got right down to business after the obligatory "sound mind and memory" opening. Al's first gift, \$325,000, is to his wife. If she declines to accept other provisions made for her, however, there shall be deducted "the sum of one hundred thousand dollars given by me as advancement August 11, 1914"

It appears that Al. and Lou had some stormy days at this time, for there is some evidence of possible move for divorce. The exact sum of \$100,000 given to her the previous year matches almost exactly the anticipated cost of the new theater, suggesting disagreement as to his seemingly grandiose plans for his gift and monument.

The additional provisions for Lou will be found later in the Will, but at this point the Instrument lays out gifts to other members of the family. Getting \$10,000 each were nephews or nieces Richard, Hester, Robert, and Henry Ringling, as well as nephews John and Harry (Henry) North and niece Salome North.

Not mentioned were the daughters of his brother August, who did not participate in the circus ownership. Note that the seven Ringling brothers only produced seven descendants. The North children belonged to his only sister, Ida, who received a generous \$50,000 trust fund. Getting various smaller amounts, from \$3000 to \$10,000 were six friends and employees.

Inheritance of circus

Next came the disposal of his interests in the family-owned circuses, in equal shares, to four remaining brothers. Of the original five, Otto was gone. Young Henry, not an original partner, received an equal share with Charley, Alf. T and John Ringling.



Al. Ringling



Other than the seating, the interior of the Al. Ringling Theatre remains virtuously unchanged from its palatial décor of 1915.

Brother August was never a member of the circus enterprise, and is not mentioned in the Will. He has been long deceased.

Here the question of his wife Lou's interest arises, and the Will appears to state that Lou could, as the widow, legally claim a significant share of the Circus estate. Al provides that the brothers may purchase his interest in the Circuses if she elects to receive it.

However, the following paragraph outlines what she is to receive in lieu of that, namely the Broadway Mansion, the summer home on Mirror Lake, and a farm property. However, upon her death the Mansion shall go to his sister, Ida. In fact, Ida occupied the mansion very soon, perhaps by purchase from Lou, and the boys and sister, Salome, spent much of their youth there.

The Theatre

Not to be forgotten, however, was Al's Theatre, possibly an item of contention between himself and Lou. The Will notes that Al. is "very anxious that it be completed, furnished and equipped in the event of my death".

The sum of \$100,000 was to be set up in a trust fund for that purpose, under the direction of his brothers. However Lou, not the brothers, was to be paid, during her lifetime, all net income from the venture. After her death the brothers would share and share alike in ownership.

In fact, Lou outlived them all. Theatre ownership was transferred to the brothers sometime after Al's death. They offered it to the city as a gift, but retained a vested interest, so the city declined the gift.

It is said that Lou had no interest in either the theatre or the huge stone mansion, and moved out shortly to the older family home, which had been moved to Fourth Street near the Methodist Church.

Disastrous investments, such as the ill-fated Morris Hotel at Mirror Lake and certain Illinois investments, both discussed in previous articles, reduced Lou's fortune greatly. She lived until 1941, residing for a time in the elegant "Wigwam" on Ash Street, also discussed in previous articles.

In a sense the State of Florida, executing John's estate, may have been the owner or at least the controller of the Al. Ringling Theatre for a time. Henry Ringling Junior managed and eventually owned it, selling it to Milwaukee owners in 1953.

A closing provision of the Will covered any remaining or overlooked properties, giving them to his brothers. In less than three years, however, both Alf. T and Henry were dead. Charley died in 1926. John lingered until December 2, 1936, losing control of the family enterprise in 1932.

Al's historic theatre remains a significant gift, despite the City's refusal of outright ownership. Thanks to Al, the city has not had to build a civic auditorium, for ninety five years and counting. Management is always open to possible public use, and it does more gratis operations than are generally known.

Al. was a man with a strong Will!