

# 1949 Ringling Route Book is Revealing

## *Tales of Earlier Days*

By Bob Dewel

Jennifer Blau is the genial owner of Oak Street Antiques and recently she called my attention to a new item, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Route Book for 1949. Only 4 by 6 inches, this 82 page hardbound volume is packed with circus statistics, the least of which are the lists and dates of cities visited in each year from 1919 through 1949. Even this long-time resident of Circus City, USA was impressed by the statistics.

The route listings alone occupy 37 pages, including the 50 Year Anniversary performance in Baraboo on August 3, 1933. We have written of that record-smashing event previously (Volume II, page 779). There were some 130 cities visited that year, running from April 8 to October 24. The only other mention of Baraboo was in a short piece by Henry North regarding a man who joined the circus in 1902.

There was, however, information in the route book which a Baraboo native of the day could readily recognize. The listing of Officers and Directors included President John Ringling North and his brother, Vice-President Henry Ringling North, both of whom were Baraboo-born and raised, as was Chairman of the Board Robert Ringling. Robert's Mother, Edith (Charlie) Ringling, a director, was a Baraboo teacher. The listings do not, however, reveal the deep family disagreements and ongoing struggle for ownership which lurked beneath the surface then.

Beyond the disagreements, the circus was remarkably successful over the years, despite the astonishing demands on its humans and animals, with one night stands day after day. The 1949 coast to coast tour route lists some 415 performances in 120 cities from May 8 to November 25. There were 25 performances in Madison Square Garden alone, from April 8 through May 8. Rail travel added up to 18,948 miles on 32 railroads.

I was astonished at the number of departments, and their size. Merle Evans still directed the band, with 26 musicians, including an organist. Other departments with their associated number of workers included Property 45, wardrobe 27, Canvass 68, seats 24, cookout 66, trucks 36, train management 39, ushers 33, and railroad porters 22, plus many more departments.

There also were three men in charge of Gargantua the gorilla and his mate. There were 3 veterinarians, 10 stablemen, 18 persons for the elephant department, and at least half a dozen other departments for various purposes. It lists 1338 persons altogether as regular employees. Some 30 nationalities were represented in the work force.

There are even more statistics for this well-run circus operation. For example, the longest train run was from Denver to Salt Lake city, some 613 miles, but the shortest was in Connecticut, only 18 miles. There were 1096 animals, many being work horses and non-performers. It rained only 18 days during the tour.

Of special interest to the book's editor was the presence of Cecil B De Mill, the famed motion picture producer. He was featured as a famous guest and exhibited great interest in every part of the Ringling operation. It was widely assumed that he would make a major motion picture about the circus, though no plans were revealed at the time. He often mingled with the crowds.

On his 68<sup>th</sup> birthday, while in Madison, he had himself strapped to a chair and hoisted to the inside top of the tent to get a better feel for what was happening. He actually traveled with the circus in its run through Wisconsin, Minnesota and North Dakota in 1949.

It had been 79 years since the five brothers shook hands and agreed to a five-way split in the profits no matter who did what work. They had quickly prospered and within 15 to 20 years had built three mansions in Baraboo. Alfred T's home was later donated to the original St. Mary-Ringling hospital and has since been demolished. Charlie's house was later sold to younger brother Henry, and is extant and for sale. Al's impressive stone mansion is under renovation and restoration, and will soon be a part of the quality attractions of Baraboo.

The current Al. Ringling Theatre restoration drive shows great promise of success, including restoration of the 1928 Barton organ. The organ's purchase and installation in 1928 was presumably approved by John Ringling, by then the owner of the theater. The renowned Circus World and Museum is now under the guidance of Scott O'Donnell, and the Al. Ringling home is now owned by Joe Colosso. Both are seasoned circus officials. Sounds like Baraboo is still the Circus Capitol of the World!

John Ringling North attended Baraboo High School

On the Football team>

The Minnewaukan predicted a future as a Musician. (partly true):

