

The CIRCUS Is Coming To Town

article & photos by GARY ELLISON

There are few places where you can revisit your childhood, grasping memories of sights and smells—cotton candy, sawdust, grease paint, peanuts, ferocious animals, sequined-clad aerialists, enormous pachyderms—you get the picture. Under the big top is just one of those places.

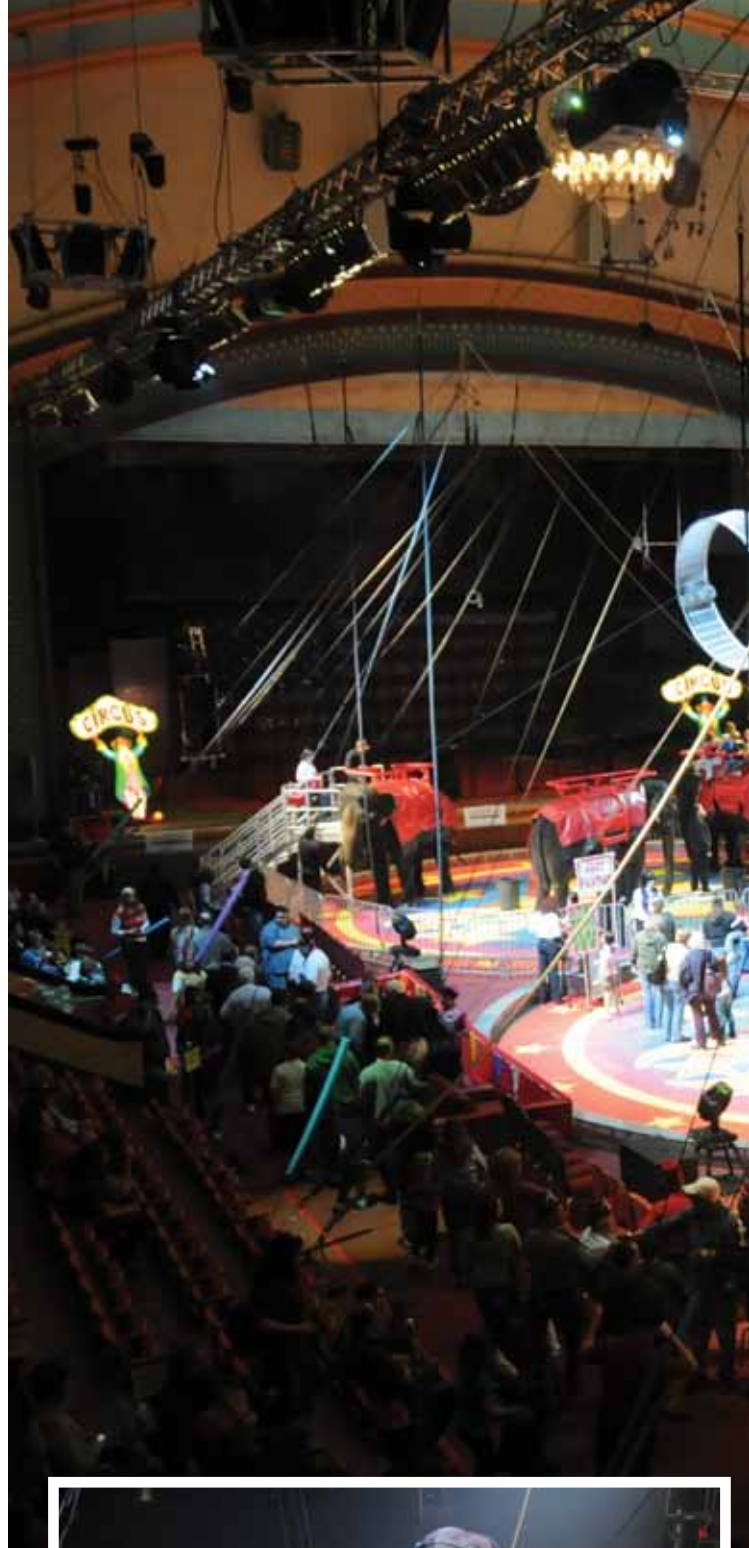
When I was a kid a neighborhood couple loaded a bunch of us into their station wagon at 4:30 a.m., and we set out on an adventure. Driving to the edge of town, we watched the Ringling Brothers-Barnum & Bailey Circus train unload before heading to the fairgrounds to watch the big top rise. The circus workers were so surprised to see a bunch of kids watching their work at that early hour that they invited us to join them for breakfast in the cook tent. After their tents were all set up, we headed home only to come back later to see “The Greatest Show On Earth.” A few years later I went to the same fairgrounds to see another tent circus, the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus starring Beatty, perhaps the most famous wild animal trainer ever.

Ringling Brothers no longer uses the big tent, playing only in arenas, but the magic of the circus is still there. A few shows still put up a tent, and if you get a chance get up early to see the entire procedure.

Springfield singer Louie Michael decided to run away with the circus for six months last year. He worked for the Willard, Missouri-based George Carden Circus. About 90 percent of Carden’s work is to produce Shrine circuses in the center of the United States. Louie served as a singing emcee (he likes to do Elvis covers) and part-time ringmaster. He didn’t have to do shovel work after the elephants, but he did have to pitch ticket sales for elephant and camel rides for \$20 before and after the shows and during intermission. He also had to pitch face-painting and the opportunity to have your photo taken with a large snake.

Most of the other performers have to set up their own equipment, do their act and then help tear down and pack up all the equipment for the next town. It is not un-

(TOP) Prior to the main show, circus-goers get up close and personal with the show’s star performers. **(RIGHT)** An elephant shows off to the crowd. **(MIDDLE)** A tiger obeys the commands of the animal trainer. **(RIGHT)** David Smith, Jr., The Human Cannonball, launches across the arena.





common for these folks to put in 120 hours a week.

“Everything they say about ‘life is a circus’ is true,” says Louie. “We opened the show the same way each performance, but we didn’t know the order of the rest of the show ‘til after it got started.” His first show was at Lake Havasu City, Arizona in January at an outdoor speedway. While it was cold for Louie, it was really cold for the scantily dressed girls who do aerial work above the rings. It was so cold, in fact, that only 12 customers showed up.

Louie did a lot of traveling in his short circus career. Among the cities the Carden circus played were Las Vegas, Nevada; Corpus Christie, Austin and Dallas, Texas; Milwaukee, Madison and Green Bay, Wisconsin; and Louie’s Missouri hometown of Springfield. He accomplished his goal of singing in big venues in major cities, but his favorite memory was in Springfield where he performed in the 1923 Shrine Mosque.

“As a kid I knew that Elvis played there. My friends and family could hear me in that historic venue. That was special.”

Most of the acts in the Carden circus have to provide much of their own equipment and props, in addition to their own transportation. Many are working in the United States on a Green Card and travel in their family groups. Other acts, like David Smith, Jr., the Human Cannonball, are limited by the size of the arena as there must be enough room to get the cannon truck inside the building.

According to Louie, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) was present almost everywhere the circus played. The animal rights group wants to ban animals, particularly elephants, from circuses. They showed up to protest outside the arena and tried to videotape the animals during the show and backstage. The U.S. Department of Agriculture monitors the health of elephants in most circuses, and there is a growing speculation among circus veterans that all animals will be eliminated from the circus in the next five years. Websites for major circuses promote their work in animal care and conservation.



(ABOVE) Kids take a ride on the elephants prior to the start of the show. (LEFT) Louie Michael of Springfield spent six months as the singing emcee for the Missouri-based George Carden Circus.



The circus has a rich heritage in the United States. P. T. Barnum took the one-ring European circus and made it the three-ring circus we know today.

Words have crept into our vocabulary. Jumbo, a huge African bush elephant that stood 11-foot-six-inches tall at the shoulders, now means extra large. Barnum bought Jumbo from a London zoo in 1882. Jumbo was killed in 1885 in St. Thomas, Ontario, when a locomotive in a rail yard struck the elephant.

Gargantua, a 550-pound lowland gorilla credited with saving the Ringling Brothers circus from bankruptcy in the 1940s, evolved into “gargantuan,” meaning enormous or colossal. Gargantua was. The gorilla, originally named Buddy, was purchased by John Ringling, and was billed as “the world’s most terrifying living creature.” Gargantua died in 1949 of double pneumonia. An autopsy at Johns Hopkins Hospital revealed that he also had a skin disease and four impacted rotten wisdom teeth.

There are still a number of circuses that traverse the United States. The Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus now performs only east of the Mississippi. The Carson and Barnes Circus, based in Hugo, Oklahoma, travels with the largest big top of any circus in America. This summer they will play all over the Midwest. George Carden’s Circus will again perform at Springfield’s Shrine Mosque March 8-18 and in West Plains on March 20. The granddaddy of them all, the Ringling Brothers-Barnum & Bailey Circus, has three complete traveling units. Shows will be in Cape Girardeau April 27-29, Kansas City September 12-16, and St. Louis October 11-14. Many circuses are still finalizing their 2012 tour schedule so watch for local advertising. 📌