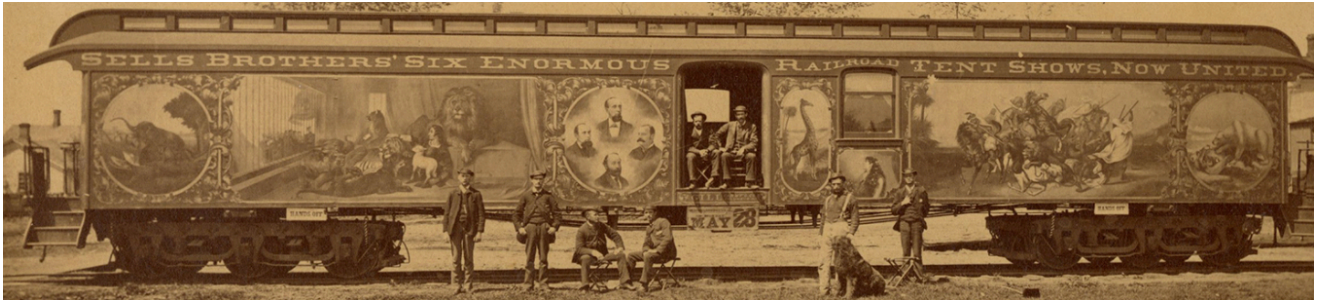


# The Advance Car



**A Newsletter (New Series) of the**

## **CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

ISSUED QUARTERLY

FALL 2020

NEW SERIES, WHOLE #1

### **“Ladeez and Gentlemen, Welcome” from CHS President Don Covington**

It is my pleasure to introduce you to the revived Circus Historical Society newsletter. With the launch of this, our new internet-based “Advance Car,” the Society will be able to provide you with additional historical information beyond what appears in *Bandwagon* and on our website. CHS Trustee and Past President Dick Flint has been appointed Newsletter Editor and is already hard at work ensuring that it will be filled with fascinating research ideas and leads, unique exploration of heretofore neglected circus topics, and updates on

Society activities. I think you will find it a welcome addition to your personal circus research tool box.

The Newsletter will appear in your email inbox four times per year on a schedule that places it between publication dates for *Bandwagon*. Thanks to the internet format, references can be linked to sources, additional resources can be heralded, and distribution will be instantaneous.

Enjoy this premiere issue and be safe, be well.

### **Pithy Pronouncements from the Past** *by Richard Flint*

Lucio Cristiani, one of the premier performers in the big Cristiani riding act, rose to be general manager of the family circus that had its origin in a partnership with Floyd King--the King Bros. show of 1948. In 1954-55, having severed their partnership with King, the Cristiani's operated the Bailey Bros.-Cristiani Circus, remembered as the first show to venture into the then Territory of Alaska in 1954. Beginning in 1956, the immigrant Italian family fielded the Cristiani Bros. Circus, a large truck show presenting a very traditional American circus complete with a steam calliope and separate menagerie tent. In 1960, an ill-fated cross-country return to Sarasota from a California tour ended with the show closing. Broke and with disputes amongst themselves, the brothers went their separate ways. Lucio formed a riding act and went with a Ringling unit that John Ringling North sent to South America. Oscar started his elephant act and Daviso focused on his work as a high school rider. Belmonte began building carnival rides. Meanwhile, brother Pete cobbled together some of their show trucks and hired other relatives to create Wallace Bros. Circus



Lucio Cristiani while with Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros., West Springfield, MA, July 4, 1965. -- Photograph by Richard Flint

in 1961, later touring as Cristiani-Wallace Bros. until 1965. A decade later Lucio Cristiani was interviewed on tape by me on several occasions. His soft steady voice, at times revealing a slight raspy tone but coupled with a wry smile, revealed lessons learned from a long life that wasn't always spent somersaulting from the back of a bareback horse. What stood out in those hours of time I spent at his Sarasota home—and remain etched in my mind today—are the following two sentences that neatly

summarize difficulties all showman have faced in attempting to keep a circus on the road:

*Even money-lenders don't  
take chances on circus.*

and

*If you're in the circus business and  
you handle money, some of it is  
bound to stick to you.*

## Circus Comrades: Research Is Better Together *by Kristin Lee*

One of the key benefits of being part of an organization like the Circus Historical Society is finding a community of researchers to collaborate with and who share an enthusiasm for all areas of circus history. At the end of January 2019, a group of researchers who met at the 2018 CHS Convention in Baraboo, WI, got together to make a trip to the Archives of The Ringling Museum. We escaped chilly northern climes for sunny Sarasota, FL, on a joint trip that allowed us to get some research done and save money by sharing accommodations and a rental vehicle. It also offered our group, made up of Betsy Golden Kellem (from CT), Kristin Lee (MA), Amelia Osterud (WI), Shannon Scott (MN), and Kat Vecchio (NY), the chance to meet up and talk about our individual research and how our varied interests and approaches overlapped.



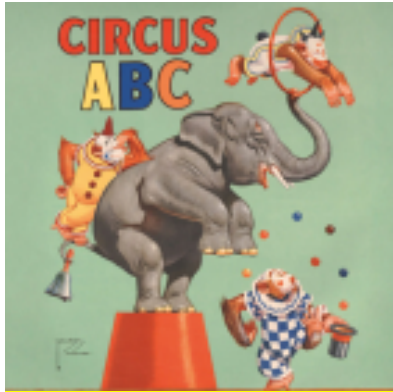
Betsy Kellem researches Mme. Clofullia and wishes for a drink and conversation with the long deceased bearded lady.

The Archives at the Ringling are in the Tibbals Learning Center, which is also the home of circus exhibits and The Howard Bros. Circus, a miniature circus created by Howard Tibbals. When our group arrived at the Archives on our first of three research days, we were greeted by the staff with warm handshakes and enthusiasm.

Everyone was accommodating and helpful but also, I think more importantly, as excited about our research as we were. Files, journals, and scrapbooks were passed around, read through, and immediately replaced with some new treasure. Requests were revised on the fly and I think we all got something special that we hadn't even expect to exist, let alone be put in front of us. We marveled at the staff who work in these archives and can find things in their collections that answers questions you didn't even know you had. Staff members are truly research partners.

One of the great joys of this trip was being able to share in everyone's delight as they came across information that they hadn't previously known and documents that filled in pieces of the puzzles from centuries past that give us a picture of the people who inhabited the early American circus. Everyone helped each other and pointed out materials that we thought might help the others. Shouts of delight and gasps of astonishment were common and everyone (including several of the people who worked at the archives) would gather around to discuss the item in question. When handwriting was unclear (P. T. Barnum had especially terrible penmanship) the letter was passed around to get more opinions. No one shushed us or gave us a dirty look, and our discussion allowed us to come away with a broader understanding of the materials than we would have had if we had each gone in individually. I think at the end of the trip we all agreed that if you can find a group of people to storm an archive with I highly recommend it.

Enormous thanks to all the people at the Ringling Archives for your generosity and patience: Jennifer Lemmer Posey, Tibbals Curator of Circus; Heidi Connor, Archivist; and Peggy Williams.



64 pages, 8.5 in x 8.5 in, \$14.95

## **A Holiday Gift Idea From The Ringling Museums**

Two Ringling Museum staff members--Associate Director of Academic Affairs Dr. David Berry and Tibbals Curator of Circus Jennifer Lemmer-Posey--have collaborated on an alphabet book for young children and they believe there is no better place to learn your ABCs than at the circus! Only there can you work your way through the alphabet with acrobats, bears, clowns, dogs, elephants, and circusy typefaces in whimsical rhyming couplets for each letter. Beautifully designed with details from vintage circus posters, this entertaining book is the perfect gift from a circus enthusiast to young friends and family. To learn more, go to

[https://issuu.com/accpublishinggroup/docs/circus\\_abc\\_blad/2](https://issuu.com/accpublishinggroup/docs/circus_abc_blad/2)

## **New Secretary-Treasurer Handles Jumbo Responsibility for CHS**

New Secretary-Treasurer Kristin Lee joined the CHS in April of 2018 and attended her first Convention in Baraboo that summer. She has always loved working with data and is a huge self-described map nerd, so once she started looking at the enormous amount of paperwork left by the circus she was hooked. Kristin is a Research Data Librarian at Tufts University in Medford, MA, with a background as a mineral exploration field geologist and geographic information system specialist.

Kristin's journey into circus started with Jumbo the Elephant, the beloved mascot of Tufts University, where she works in the Tisch Library. Part of her job is to teach researchers skills related to working with data and she is always looking for datasets to use for those sessions. Tired of the old standards, she started looking for data related to Jumbo and found the routes posted on the Circus Historical Society website. While having the transcribed data was great for her purposes, she began wondering where the data came from. While in Chicago for a

conference, she extended her journey, appropriately by train, from Chicago to Bloomington-Normal, IL, to the Special Collections in the Milner Library at Illinois State University. Maureen Brunsdale, Head of Special Collections and Rare Books at Milner, became her circus history mentor and encouraged her work.

Kristin's circus history research involves finding new ways to present details about the circus on digital maps. She has started to collect circus route books and enjoys reading memoirs and biographies about women who were part of the circus. She would love to see UniverSoul and is looking forward to catching Circus Smirkus as part of the 2021 CHS convention.

Kristin has a Master of Library and Information Science from Western University (Ontario), a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Geographic Information Systems from Penn State University World Campus, and a Bachelor of Science in Geology and a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies from the University of Saskatchewan.

## **BANDWAGON Arrives With New Year**

Dependent on the holiday storm of packages and letters that annually inundate the Postal Service, the last 2020 issues of *Bandwagon* ought to arrive at their destinations just as this pandemic-riddled year ends. The prolific Chris Berry recounts *The Circus That Roared – Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey 1920-1926*, the exciting years that the last of the Ringling brothers, Charles and John, together ran their mammoth circus. European circus historian Raffaele de Ritis tells the long history of the big Circus Krone. Both heavily illustrated articles join the shorter *Count Nicholas – A Life in Pictures*.

## **The Advance Car**



After a long hiatus, the CHS newsletter returns in a new series, with a new title, and a new issue numbering system. It will carry CHS news and notes about research projects and especially about source material—where to find it and how it can be best utilized and interpreted. Contact the new editor, Richard Flint, at [CHS.newsletter.editor@gmail.com](mailto:CHS.newsletter.editor@gmail.com)



## CHS Website *By Alan Campbell*

Judy Griffin created the "Classic" CHS website. She was our second woman President and served from 2010 to 2013. She tirelessly added to and worked on the site for years. Judith passed in November of 2019. Her work and efforts remain to this day. CHS is indebted to her vision and perseverance.

Straw House ticketing took over our website at the end of 2018 and brought it up to contemporary standards of safety, provided backup capability and daily scans to prevent interference by others. They did their best to respond to the diverse inputs they were receiving. It became clear that CHS needed a clear focus and consistency to achieve the website our Trustees desired.

In December of 2019, Don Covington, CHS President, asked me to chair a committee that would review the CHS website and provide recommendations for changes and improvements. I have an exceptional committee. The members are Deb Walk, Kat Vecchio, Kristin Lee, Chris Berry and Bruce Hawley. Over the past seven months, this team of dedicated CHS members have met very frequently. Together we have updated resources, proposed changes, and made additions. Each member of the website committee brings unique capabilities and I appreciate the contributions each of them have made. They are the heart of this team.

In light of all of our research and work, the Website Committee decided to take on the design development, management, and hosting of the CHS website. To that end, we outlined a transition path with Straw House Ticketing and they were quite helpful during this process.

Kat Vecchio is our new webmaster. She has previously worked on websites and is familiar with the required technical aspects. She and the committee will be leading our work in design and she will be managing our website. WordPress, which we are using, is in use by nearly one-third of the world's websites because of its flexibility and ease of use. As a part of expanding our website capabilities, the Board of Trustees voted on June 10, 2020, to obtain membership software. After review of a number of possibilities, Wild Apricot software best met our needs. This software integrates seamlessly into our website. Many organizations use this software because of its ease of use and saving of

time on routine administrative tasks such as membership renewals and invoice creation. Kristin Lee, our Treasurer, will be integrating and managing the features available within Wild Apricot software into our website. She has revised forms and inputted our membership database.

Wild Apricot will fully integrate with our accounting software, support annual recurring dues, and allow members to update their information. It will provide us with the ability to distribute our quarterly newsletter and other information to the entire membership. We have also changed from PayPal to Affinipay, which will result in quicker payments to CHS.

One of the goals of the committee was to not only maintain and update, but also to incorporate the rich resources of the CHS "Classic" web site. We are working to transfer as much material as possible from the "Classic" site to the current site. Straw House Ticketing has assisted greatly in that effort. It is slow and time consuming to accomplish. The "Classic" site will be retired because it is fragile and beyond the point where it can be safely updated.

We already have made significant progress and we do not expect any or minimal down time as we continue this transition. It will take some additional time before members see the full result of this work. We are committed to bringing an improvement in capability, usability, and design. Members now have access and will soon be able to have searchable access to the "*Bandwagon*."

We appreciate Leigh Ketchum and Michael Riley of Straw House Ticketing for their work in modernizing our site during this transition. They faced a difficult job in integrating and modernizing our classic website. They built a much more current site which has been fast and safe. They were instrumental in adding a massive amount of route information to the their former site and working with us on the digitization of the *Bandwagon*. As we move forward you will notice that the new site, when fully implemented, will have a members only area and that the Trustees will have their own area where CHS documents will be stored including minutes, policies and other documents we may find helpful.

We hope you enjoy the new look of the website and most importantly that it serves you, the membership, in accessing the many wonderful resources of CHS.



# Cues for Collectors, Hints for Historians

Conducted by Richard Flint

This column will be a regular feature of the new CHS newsletter, *Advance Car*. "Cues & Hints" is designed both to appeal to collectors and to serve as a guide about sources for historians. Written, visual, oral, and even objects useful for understanding the circus will be explored. While this initial article concentrates upon only one source, a May 27, 1957, article from the amusement trade paper *Billboard*, it demonstrates how scarce sources are for now-forgotten hallmarks of circus life; future essays will usually address a group of related sources or topics.

In inaugurating this series, we begin with a report by the observant Tom Parkinson about a now lost oral tradition, the chants used by workingmen while guying out the canvas tents. The article—so far the only one known—captures only the words of a dozen chants but not the colorful musical rhythm so important for inspiring the tent crew to pull hard in unison to tighten the tent. As the attached article documents, the chants largely disappeared by the 1950s and if readers know of any recordings of a chant, please contact the newsletter editor.

Early on Parkinson explained how the chanteys he documents were used in the process of *ragging out* the big top:

"After a big top is in the air, it's necessary to tighten the ropes with which it is staked down. Around the edge of the tent are many side poles; on a 150-foot round top with three 50-foot middle pieces, for example, there are 80 poles.

"At each [side] pole position there are two ropes. One, the *main guy*, extends outward to a stake. The other is called a *pull rope*, and the canvasmen tug at it, in time with a chantey, to tighten the knot. A man at the stake takes up the resulting slack in the main guy by pushing the half-hitch knot farther down on the tent stake. Once the main guy is *down-staked*, the pull rope also is tied off, and it becomes a *storm guy*, an added protection in bad weather.

"An early chantey went like this:  
'Oh you shake it and you break it;  
'You fall back and take the slack;

## The SIXTY-THIRD YEAR Billboard

### Big Tops Bloom But Chanteys Disappear

Mechanization Leaves Only Memories Of Canvasmen's Colorful Work Chants

By TOM PARKINSON

CHICAGO—Circus big tops are far from extinct, but what has disappeared are the distinctive chanteys of big top crews.

Similar work-chants of sailors and plantation workers have been written down and, in some cases, popularized. But circus canvasmen, like their fellow specialists in various show fields, have escaped notice for the most part. Now their lore is all but gone.

Time was that the singing and chants of Negro tent crews were as much a part of the action on a circus lot as were the rhythmic poundings of stake hammer crews and the long-string drivers.

Now, altho there are about as many big tops in the air as ever it's a different breed of man that works show canvas. The newcomers aren't so inclined to sing as were their predecessors. Last year a big top boss tried to revive the old chanteys, but he had no luck.

#### First Time Published

As far as is known, these chanteys have never been written down before. The only exceptions are a couple of versions of the simplest chantey, the kind used by the "advanced" and experienced crews. One such version goes like this:

"Heave it, heavy;  
"Shake it; break it;  
"Shove it down;  
"Next. . ."

One of the last versions of this to be used was recorded by Edward Hoagland in a novel he wrote after being with the Ringling-Barnum show a few seasons ago. He quoted it phonetically:

"Reaaaar b' aaag - jomp - jomp - jomp - jomp - wawgalong."

That translates into "Rear back,

jump, jump, jump, walk along," and it is as close as recent crews have come to the older chants. The earlier ones not only had more color and music to them, they also avoided the near-mechanical tone of this one.

#### Many Loose Ends

Here is how the chants were used. After a big top is in the air, it's necessary to tighten the ropes with which it is staked down. Around the edge of the tent are many side poles; on a 150-foot round top with three 50-foot middle pieces, for example, there are 80 poles.

At each pole position are two ropes. One, the main guy, extends outward to a stake. The other is called a pull rope, and the canvasmen tug at it, in time with a chantey, to tighten the top. A man at the stake takes up the resulting slack in the main guy by pushing the half-hitch knot farther down on the tent stake. Once the main guy is down-staked, the pull rope also is tied off, and it then becomes a storm guy, an added protection in bad weather.

An early chantey went like this:  
"Oh, you shake it and you break it;  
"You fall back and take the slack;  
"You pull with all your might,  
"To get the old rag tight;  
"The slack you must take,



'You pull with all your might.  
'To get the old rag tight;  
'The slack you must take,  
'So he can push it down-stake;  
'And now we'll move along.'

"The rope caller's polite last line was the crew's clue to move to the next ropes. Once they had worked clear around the 150 by 300-foot big top, and down-staked 80 main guys, they repeated the circle to guy out the other 80 extra guys. The purpose of these is to create a depression in the tent surface for rapid drainage of rainwater. Side poles hold the tent edge high; extra guys between them pull the edge downward.

"This means crews guyed out 160 ropes on a sample tent. To that were sometimes added 26 quarter-pole guy ropes. Finally, in some sections of the country or in some weather conditions, the boss canvasman ordered use of the so-called *funny ropes*. More properly, these are scissor ropes because they extend from one [side] wall pole to the next stake, crossing over each other to give an added brace against heavy wind. The whole process is called *ragging out*."

In the remaining portion of his near 1400-word article, Parkinson goes on to provide lines to a dozen chanteys. Like an experienced folklorist, he identifies each of his half-dozen showmen sources and gives us some brief background on their lives, two being veterans of 60 years of trouping. Readers can read the entire *Billboard* article online at:

[https://books.google.com/books?id=vh0EAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&dq=circus+chanteys&source=bl&ots=W6V9h8Zym&sig=EqKkNeD5XzHKQnW5VOnw4HGMckw&hl=en&sa=X&ei=5vUAVPiHEcvnsAT\\_y4LoCg&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=circus%20chanteys&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=vh0EAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&dq=circus+chanteys&source=bl&ots=W6V9h8Zym&sig=EqKkNeD5XzHKQnW5VOnw4HGMckw&hl=en&sa=X&ei=5vUAVPiHEcvnsAT_y4LoCg&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=circus%20chanteys&f=false)

Soon after its *Billboard* appearance, Parkinson's remarkable article was reprinted in the January 1958 issue of *Western Folklore*, the Western States Folklore Society academic quarterly. The journal regularly sought items of folklore appearing in the daily press, enabling such valuable ephemeral material to find its way into the general bibliography of American folklore. Indeed, in 1973 a shortened version titled "Circus Chanties" appeared in a collection published as *Folklore From The Working Folk Of America* edited by the distinguished folklorist Tristram Potter Coffin and Hennig Cohen.

If more chanteys survived, historians might have had greater understanding about the mores and thoughts of circusdom's many illiterate workingmen. Parkinson's article does reveal tidbits about the treatment of the big top

gang's womenfolk, attitudes about a cookhouse serving "Ham hocks and bumble bees" or the "Same damn old thing." But humor appeared in a pun with a circus name, "Break your back, Hagenbeck; down stake, next...;" other chants could commemorate an event in one performer's life or the constant of perpetual travel by naming the current day's town in a series of city names. Parkinson's perception rivaled those of more formally trained folklorists but his advantage was the exceptional depth of understanding he had for the ways of the circus.

From childhood, article author Tom Parkinson (1921-1993) was an ardent circus enthusiast as was his younger brother Bob. Tom began his career as a newspaper journalist but in the spring of 1950 he joined *Billboard* as an associate editor based in Chicago reporting on circuses, amusement parks, ice shows, and other live show business. While there, he was able to study the many bound volumes of back issues in the office and regularly dine at the Atwell Luncheon Club, the mid-day gathering place for showmen in Chicago where he was able pick the brains of many oldtimers. As Fred Pfening has expressed, Parkinson's "feature stories in *Billboard* should be required reading for all circus historians." In a future "Cues & Hints" column, the CHS newsletter, *Advance Car*, will publish a list of his major articles with online links.

When *Billboard* ceased covering outdoor show business in 1961, Parkinson went on to plan and manage Assembly Hall, a new 17,000 seat multi-purpose facility at the University of Illinois for 24 years. An industry leader, he was president of the International Association of Assembly Managers (IAAM) from 1971-1972.

Parkinson joined the Circus Historical Society in 1941, receiving membership number 31. His first published article on circus history was published in the old mimeographed *Bandwagon* in February 1943. He wrote the season's review five times in the 1960s, and an important series on William P. Hall in 1973 and 1974. In 1957 his concise, paragraph-long histories of 107 major circuses from 1793 on appeared as an appendix in John and Alice Durant's *Pictorial History of the American Circus*; it remains a helpful reference to anyone new to the history of the circus. With C.P. Fox, he co-authored three major circus books in 1969, 1978, and 1985. In the late 1950s he was one of the small group that revitalized *Bandwagon*, initiating the current series of volume numbering. He was CHS president from 1978 to 1981.