

# BACK YARD

Volume IV, Issue #78

October 31, 1999

## **“The Only Little Girl Who Ever Ran Away From Home To Join The Circus And Became A Big Star” By George Emery**

Yankee Magazine 6/71 (Illinois State Univ. Archives)

“Dear Mr. Myers,” the message read; “I consent for my daughter to work for you in your circus. Mrs. T. Comeau, Holyoke, Mass., July 2, 1923.” That’s all there was to it. One simple declarative sentence, but a sentence that was to be Miss Mickey Comeau’s passport, her open sesame to a life of spangled stardom. She had written the note, secretly, herself.

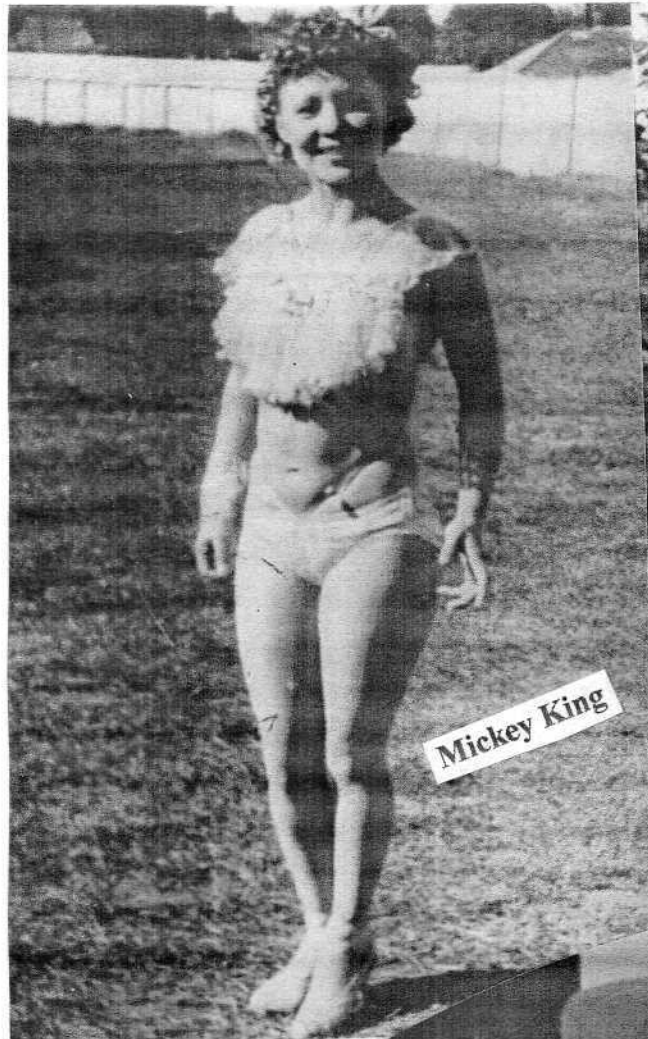
Mickey was born in Sutton, Quebec & christened Marie Gertrude, one of 9 children of Toussaint and Jane Comeau. The father was nicknamed “Mike,” and before age 3, Marie was known as “Little Mike” or “Mickey.”

“My father was a farmer-a ‘cultivator’ they called it in Canada,” Mickey now says, “but he jogged around. We came across in 1910 and lived in Swanton, Richford and Shelburne Springs in Vermont. Oh, and Newport Farms. Then, he worked in the Van Camp milk plant in St. Albans and the candy factory in Burlington. Along about 1917 he heard of good-paying jobs in mills at Holyoke, so we moved there. We were a poor family; when I was old enough I worked in the mills too. Skinners, Farr Alpaca, Livingston Worsted. Mornings I’d go to continuation school-typing, sewing, music-and in the afternoons to work. I didn’t like it. The work, I mean. It was all right, I guess, except it was not for me.

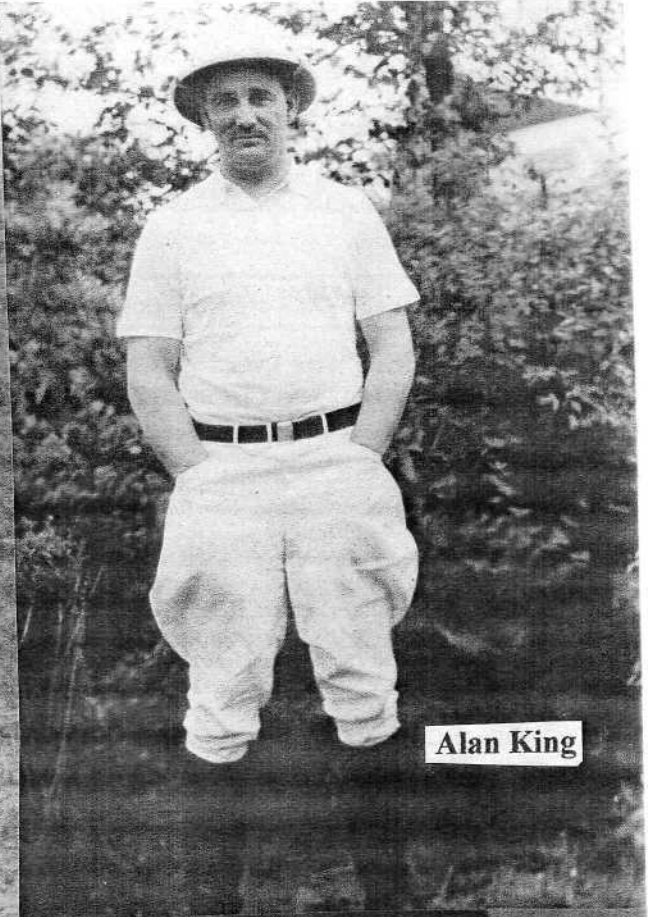
But I had fun. My girl friends were Polly Bednarski, Mary Shea & Lillian Couture. We’d go to dances at Mountain Park together swimming and rowing at Hampton Ponds. Good times. But the factories, I couldn’t stand them.” Then, on July 2, 1923, Sells-Floto came to Holyoke and Mickey, who had never seen a circus, found herself truant from work, on the show’s midway just before the matinee. Mouth agape, she watched & listened while the side show barker pointed to a handsome young man standing beside him on the bally platform and shouted, “I call your attention, friends, to Capt. Terrell Jacobs, world’s youngest and most fearless animal tamer.” Jacobs hardly looked the part. He wore a faded red bandsman’s jacket & unpressed gray trousers. But he did carry an impressive coiled black whip and a shiny 32-caliber revolver, one in either hand. “This daring young man,” the barker went on, “is about to enter the den, the steel-bound arena, with Nero, that ferocious, untamed African lion direct from faraway jungles. He will fight



his way in, he will fight his way out, and remember, friends, no matter what happens, the steel bars are there for your protection. Are you ready, Capt.?” Jacobs saluted, left the platform and entered the side show tent. Mickey was right behind him. (Continued on Page 6)



Mickey King



Alan King



Dave Hoover



Mickey

## BIG "BONGO" By Mike Cecere

One of my "Favorite Years" was 1983 when I had a series of wonderful assignments in South America with Latin America's top showbiz family, the Familia Fuentes Gasca. They are top showmen and animal lovers with much of the family skilled trainers and presenters of all types of animals. While working as a consultant/trainer with Circo Modelo De Mexico (one of several large tent shows family owned) I got to work with one of the more highly trained Asians ever.

His name was "Bongo", or "Big Bongo" as I called him. He was a bull Asian elephant, originally trained and purchased from circus legend, Daviso Cristiani. Daviso is one of the famed Cristiani family who need no introduction to circus fans. He had highly trained "Bongo" and when other projects conflicted, chose the Fuentes family as the ones that would best look after "Bongo."

It's an unfortunate thing among U.S. shows with the labor pool of people skilled with bull elephants shrank it was harder to find a home for bull elephants. Plus Circo Modelo De Mexico, headed up by Juventino Fuentes Gasca was a real pro-animal circus. Juventino famed as the "Tarzan of Mexico" personally presented a mixed cat act with 7 tigers, 2 lions and 5 leopards, along with a lion riding on both "Bongo" and a horse. Both great acts! And the Supt. of animals and elephant trainer was Carlos Hugo Guillamine or "Che" as all his friends called him.

We had 3 huge, friendly Asians, the former Hunt Bros./Bartok/Carden-Johnson/Circus Vargas trio of "Dina," "Sita," and "Muna." Added to their act were 2 juvenile Asian females, "Madu" and "Gina" recently imported from Europe and broken by Che. They formed a fast moving 5 act and Big "Bongo," aside from his stint giving the lion a ride, did an outstanding single routine. He was an impressive male with great ivory and the last trick in the act was the "flag trick," where he would pick up and throw flags until he found one from the country we we in and would run around the rings, mount a tub and stand on his hind legs (without anyone hooking him!) which always brought thunderous applause. Each elephant had two grooms to attend to them 24 hours and they had the best of food at all times. In fact, I recall them sending a semi 500 miles round trip to pick up hay for them. On another occasion, Che hired several trucks and dozens of laborers with machetes to cut hay on a tropical savanna near the equator. It was like something out of a Jungle movie to be wearing straw hats, watching all the people singing, cutting the elephant hay! "Bongo" was

an exceptional animal and a real pleasure to be around which shows good training, followed by good animal management, pays off. And with a master trainer like Daviso Cristiani, how could it have been otherwise.

As I'm sure Daviso feels the same as I do in that there are two kinds of people in the world, people who are Italian and people who wish they were! Salute to Daviso Cristiani and "Bongo!" God Bless America!

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## News From Our Circus Friends

Niles Calhoun, From the Deep South, "The Mississippi State Fair kicked off its 140th annual event on Oct. 6! And it presented its 21st consecutive State Fair Free Circus produced by Jorge & Lou Ann Barreda. This year's hour-long show featured a mix of favorite circus attractions, some of whom have appeared in previous State Fair Free Circus productions while others fall into the "first time here" category. Local Ringmaster Richard Johnson again introduced the show which included: the Miguel Caceres Troupe doing their Flying Trapeze with triple somersault feature and their Russian Swing presentation; the Dubskeys presenting Christina's Dressed Dog Revue and Prof. Janos in his Comedy Musicale; Davide Zoppe and friends romping through their one-of-a-kind Rhesus Monkey Act; and Justino (Zoppe) wowing the audience with his fast-paced and well presented juggling turn. This year's finale is Human Cannonball Louis Munoz, who garnered lots of opening day publicity by being fired over the fairgrounds fence to officially open the fair. The fair ran thru Oct. 17, with circus performances presented twice each night and 3 times on Sat. & Sun. Many fairgoers now think of these circus performances as "must see" events at the fair. Let's hope that they continue for years to come!

\*On Oct. 14, Louis Munoz sustained a broken heel as he performed his act. During the 21 years that Jorge Barreda has presented the circus at the fair, this is the first accident to have occurred. After having the foot cared for, it is understood that the Munoz family went home to Florida for him to recuperate. Louis had become an avid golfer and was checking out the courses around Jackson, so let's all hope that he will soon be up and around on the golf course as well as flying out of the cannon once again.

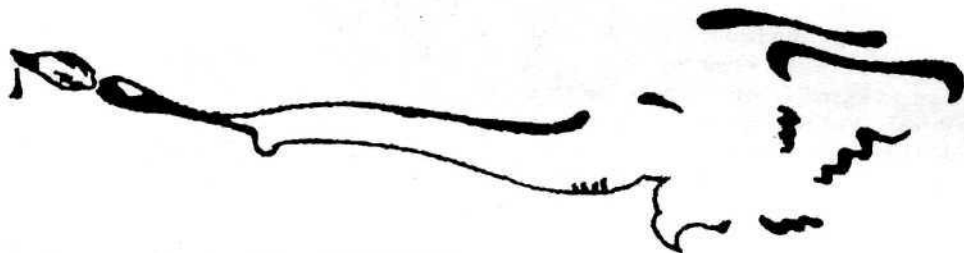
\*From Al & Maxine House: "More than 40 members and guests of the Felix Adler Tent met in Rutherford, NJ on Oct. 17, for the annual banquet. Dick Monday, Ringling clown school graduate and director and more recently, free-lance actor, was the guest speaker. While he detailed his life to the assembled fans, he displayed his clowning skills by joshing waitresses and addressing other restaurant guests. In addition to Dick's wife, Tiffany Reilly, guests of note included clowns Mike Keever and Greg & Karen DeSantos; juggler Lottie Brunn and Dominique Jando, asst. director of the Big Apple Circus. An auction of circus memorabilia followed Dick's talk.

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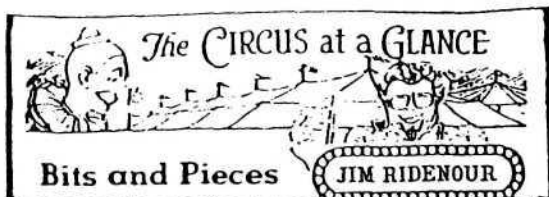
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At my age, I bore easily. On occasion I do run across an item that "rings my chimes." I have ran across 3 items lately. First off, I received the Duggan-Bros-Arnold Maley Tent 166 Newsletter. A couple of items turned me on. First, Tent 116 has the proud distinction of being the first CFA Tent to join the OABA. (I'm mad as hell that I didn't think of it first). I certainly hope that this idea catches on as the OABA & Heidi Herriott are doing an outstanding job. The same newsletter announces a pizza party to be held on the Clyde Beatty lot. Most Tents do the coffee & donuts bit. There's nothing wrong with that. I think it is great, however, if your Tent has limited funds and you have to make a choice, spend you money on the OABA. The OABA, with its knowledge, clout & money will make sure you fans have a traditional circus with animals for years to come. Can you imagine, coffee and donuts on Du Soliel.

It's Sunday, Sept. 26, and I just finished watching a very interesting circus elephant piece on "Dateline." I have mixed emotions about the whole thing. Ms. Chipperfield did the circus industry a million dollars worth of damage and was fined a measly 32 grand. And she got to keep her animals. What a miscarriage of justice. We can never repair the damage she did. Yet, we must. That's why our support of the OABA is vitally important. Mr. Kenneth Feld had the guts to appear in person in the center ring of the Big One and defend his operation and the industry as a whole. I thought he did an outstanding job. And my hat is off to him..Attn: Circus Owners..You can run, but you cannot hide..So get with the program and fight fire with facts..Give em the facts..Just the facts..It has been my observation that the "bad guys" are finally getting their due..This is as it should be. The fact remains, the good guys have to pay the price and suffer and waste valuable time and resources when they are doing it right. Well, Mr. Feld, as you are smart enough to realize, life is not fair..There is no justice, even at the court house. Remember, "Time wounds all heals." The heals are slowly but surely getting theirs..That should be some reward..So, hang in there. I feel like a Baptist preacher at a tent revival..The fact remains, we must fight the likes of Pat Derby and the other "neurotic kooks" with every fiber in our bodies. They are making mini careers of this vital issue. We got them outnumbered but we need organization. United we stand and divided we fall. So join the OABA today and get your Tent to join, as well. It will be money well spent.

The second excellent piece I recently read was entitled "OABA" By Bernie Bolstad. It was in the Sept. 13 Circus Report. Bernie, in a nutshell, explained what the OABA is about, what its goals are and why we should be members. Why don't you call Heidi Herriott today at 407-656-4340 for all the details. The third "goodie" was in the Sept. 20 issue of Circus Report, written by my good friend, Gordon Taylor. It is called "A Semi Circus." Boy, Gordon hit the nail on the head. His

assessment of Cirque du Soliel left nothing to be desired by me. Gordon's closing advise was..seven irrelevant words.."Save your money-go back to Baraboo." Of course, Gordon is an educated, retired educator and my self, I'm a graduate of the school of hard knocks, lacking in book learning.



## FAMOUS CIRCUS QUOTES

"A circus is a magnet drawing its people from far flung lands, and their languages are as varied as the tongues of Babel, to some it is a home..to others it is fame and excitement. To many it is a fortune." Cecil B. DeMille

For every circus millionaire there are a thousand others who dedicate their lives to the circus for a modest financial reward. Why, because they love the circus and I love them.



10 years ago, while visiting my friend, John Polacsek, in Detroit while on my way to the CFA Convention in Milwaukee, John said, "Jim..Why don't you do a video on the Miller family in Hugo, OK..Well, I never got the project off the ground..That has all changed now..For the past 10 days, I have been writing letters, making phone calls and viewing over 45 videos of the Kelly Miller & Carson & Barnes Circus. I am currently working night and day rounding up film & video for the "Video of the Century" honoring the Miller family who are no doubt, "The Showmen of the Century." It will be called "The Millers of Hugo" and will be a comprehensive study of their lives and careers in the circus business. I have acquired film footage of Kelly-Miller in 1939, 46,47,49,50-53, 1960 Carson & Barnes, 61,63,64,66,67,69,70,77 thru 79,82,85-89, 94,96-98. I desire any film or video from 50s,60s,70s,80s & 90s. Either 8mm, Super 8, 16mm or video (VHS or Beta)..I cannot use any 5th generation or fuzzy copies. I desire only crisp, clear 1st, 2nd or 3rd generation video. I want this to be first class. What I really desire, more than anything, is footage of Dorie Miller, Isla Miller, Barbara Byrd, Gary Byrd, Tracy Byrd Cavallino & Kristan Byrd Parra. I need on the lot scenes, cook house shots, back yard shots-you get the idea. I especially desire footage of birthday parties, anniversaries-I really want a video of Barbara Byrd speaking at the CFA Convention in San Francisco. Would like footage of Hugo, OK-downtown, the museum, the Showman's Rest, the Millers estate. I have a "fuzzy" copy of Mr. Miller putting the patch on a railroad man in Michigan in the 80s. It was called Weekend Magazine. It is a classic. I need a good clear copy. Please help me to make this the best tribute to the Miller family ever conceived by man. All film and video will be returned (insured) along with a complimentary copy of the finished video, "The Miller of Hugo." This will, no doubt, end up being a 4 tape (8 hour) retrospect due to the scope & magnitude of the subject matter. It is my intention to donate 10% of the gross sales to the Endangered Ark that Mr. Miller started. Please, help me..I can't do it without you fans.

Thanks, Jim.

## "Little Girl Becomes A Big Star".....

If she was fascinated outside the tent, she was completely spellbound when Jacobs, following an introduction by another speaker ("the inside talker"), fired his pistol, broke into Nero's cage, cracked his whip a few times, chased the unwilling lion back and forth for a minute or so and then ducked out. The talker addressed the crowd, "I now direct your attention to this next platform and Miss Artoria, the tattooed lady. She will entertain you." The spectators moved on. All except Mickey. She stood transfixed. As he left the safety cage adjoining Nero's lair, Jacobs casually noticed the lone spectator, but he now turned his back, opened a trunk & proceeded to repair a rip in his trousers. Mickey was sure that Nero had clawed him; actually Cap had torn his pants on a cage door latch. Over his shoulder he asked, "How's the big show house?"

"He thought I was a girl visiting from the big show," Mickey now understands & when she made no reply, he turned for a second look. "You're not with it," he guessed, then added, "But you ought to be. They need ballet girls." "He wrote the name, 'George Myers,' the ballet director, on a scrap of paper, gave it to me, told me how to find him and went back to his sewing," Mickey recalls. Myers proved ready to provide employment: Mickey was just the sprightly, attractive girl the show could use. But her youth gave him pause (she was 17 and looked younger) and he insisted on a letter of parental consent. He said if she could get permission and would bring the evidence, she might join in Greenfield, 10 miles away, the show's next town. What else need she bring, she asked. "Plenty of soap and towels," Myers replied.

Mickey hurried home. She wrote the note, "I consent for my daughter..." packed a grip with towels & soap and hid it in the cellar coal bin, confiding plans to no one. Next morning she slipped down to the cellar, retrieved the grip, left her house and started out on foot toward Greenfield. She never dreamed that through this escapade she was to become the first and only girl to run away from home to join the circus & "make it big" with circuses and in music halls and theaters in half a dozen countries on three continents. It was raining. Hard.

Eventually the Comeau family learned, somewhat with shock, of Mickey's whereabouts, but when they found her in apparently good hands and obviously content, there was a happy, even tearful, reunion. Her furtive letter-writing and clandestine leave-taking were both excused as more ingenious than deceitful. The family loved her still. "C'est bon," says Mickey now. Hitch-hiked rides brought Miss Comeau to the Greenfield show grounds ("the lot") by late afternoon. Had her arrival been earlier, she might have found friend Jacobs a less glamorous personality than he had seemed the day before. Aside from exercising Nero a dozen times a day for side show patrons, he had the correlative chore of keeping exhibition premises neat and tidy. Mornings, with the tent empty of customers, he would invade Nero's den, not with whip and gun but with a bushel of shavings and an outsized kitchen broom. To sweep out! In his housekeeping, he often had to sweep a

recumbent lion to one side and out of the way. On occasion, Nero balked; he was at an age where relaxation was preferable to enforced activity. The Cap would bring the broom into play, as something other than a cleaning tool. From Nero, and with a broom, Jacobs learned the fundamentals of wild animal training; he learned them well.

In time he would train a lion to ride horseback-so amenable, if not amicably, that his wife could "work" the act. He would be the first to teach a group of black leopards to perform. By 1938 he would be considered "the greatest subjugator of lions ever to appear in the Ringling Bros. steel arena." Circusy hyperbole, this last. But also, fact. It was in Bangor, Maine, however, on a steamy, muddy lot in early summer 1928 that Cap reached his finest hour. In full view of a horror-stricken audience he became the hero of circus history's most celebrated rescue of an animal trainer attacked by a savage beast. Mabel Stark was the victim; Terrell Jacobs saved her.

Jacobs & Miss Stark were traveling with the John Robinson circus, he with a cage full of lions and she with 8 tigers. It had rained for several days in Bangor prior to the show's arrival and the fairgrounds lot was a quagmire. During her act, Mabel slipped and fell, prone. Immediately her 2 most treacherous tigers pounced and set out literally to make a meal of her. Jacobs, standing by, burst into the arena, beat off the tigers and held them, cornered, until attendants could drag Miss Stark, bloody and barely breathing, from the cage. At the Bangor hospital, Dr. Harrison Robinson took charge of remedial surgery that lasted over four hours.

Miss Stark observed, later and reasonably, that Robinson was the "best doctor in Bangor." She had been unmercifully mauled. It is a tribute to Dr. Robinson's surgical skill that she recovered. It is a tribute to Terrell Jacobs' instinctive bravery that she was spared for surgery. "I let Cap get engaged to me at one time," Mickey confides. "He had been married, and the marriage broke up. He was down-in-the-mouth, at loose ends, and I knew how he felt. Besides, I liked him and, after all, he put me in show business."

But, for the following 6 months, Cap and Mickey seldom worked together or saw each other. The engagement was called off and Cap married someone else. The whole "romance" was an interlude 25 years removed from the rainy afternoon, July 3, 1923, when Mickey presented herself to George Myers and Sells-Floto, drenched and bedraggled but "ready to work."

"Mr. Myers put his arm around me," Mickey says, "and introduced me to 'Mother Copeland.'"

Mrs. Copeland, wardrobe mistress and shepherdess of the unmarried showgirls, found some dry clothing and did what else she could to help acquaint the neophyte with a new and different world-the circus. It was different; that night three elephants stampeded. Whether the elephants had been unduly stimulated by the cooling rain or startled by some stray, scampering mouse has never been determined. In any event, 3 of the herd broke from their keepers at the show's loading point in the Boston and Maine yards at the foot of Bank Street.

(Continued on Page 10)

## **\*\*News From Our Circus Friends\*\***

**Geraldine Horton**, sister of **George, Bill, Fred and Roy Valentine**, sent along an article from Ft. Walton Beach, FL: "**Cheryl Haddad's** job title with the **Clyde Beatty Circus** describes the ties she has with the 11 tigers owned & trained by her husband, **Josip Marcan**. Just call her the "tiger mom." "My job basically entails taking care of the kids." When she talks about her kids, though, she's not talking about just the two 8-month old tiger cubs. "I think of all the tigers as my kids. I work at keeping them clean, keeping them fed and happy. The cubs are like little spoiled rotten children."

One of the benefits for tigers performing on the road is that they stay "well-stimulated mentally, happy. We provide for all their needs. On the road, the tigers always have something to look at, the scenery is always changing. They stay pretty alert, to see what's going on. I think they enjoy having contact with the trainers. They do enjoy their performance routines." After the cubs turn a year old, they'll begin learning performance behavior; which are modeled on natural tiger actions, Cheryl said. "We don't use any props, other than the seats they sit on."

The tigers' day is pretty regimented: Up at 6:30 AM, when they get their cages cleaned, dry bedding and fresh water. By 11, the tigers are taken to the large performance cage for a little playtime. By show time at 4:30, the tigers are ready for their first performance. After the 7:30 show, they get the meal they they've been looking forward to all day and their cages are prepared for resting at night. Cheryl has been with the tigers for 9 years; Josip has been breeding & training the felines for 40 years. "I consider them my kids, they are my family," Cheryl said.

\***Geraldine** also sent a beautiful color photo from the paper of **Helen**, former charge of **Fred Logan**, getting ready for the show by being brushed off. The other 3 elephants are in the background.

**Jenny Wallenda** is busy getting acts rounded up for the Showfolks Circus Dec. 11. She came up with a great idea to have the Ring of Fame honorees find one act each for the circus! **Dick Garden** is donating ring curbs, sound system, lights, etc. **Allan Hill** is in charge of concessions. This will truly be an all-star circus! Jenny also said **Renee Geraldo** passed away. She heard **Charlie Baumann** and **George Hanneford** were in the hospital. Those of you going south for the winter, I hope you will write about the Showfolks Circus and let us know how many circus stars from the past you see!

### **\*In Memory of Eugene Nock By Bobby Gibbs\***

I just got news of the passing of a wonderful man, Eugene Nock. I didn't want to believe it so I tried to make it not so by not putting any truth to the story of his passing. Everyone of us hates to lose a loved one, even if expected & if there was a way to turn back time we would all trade our worldly possessions to have our loved one back. But life does not offer us that option. The only way our loved ones live is thru us, our memories and

how they touched our life. Sometimes when one goes on, it's hard to come up with something good to say but not so with Eugene. There is so much good to tell about that it's hard to accept the fact that such a good and true person has left us. Eugene was a great performer, a true friend in every way; a man of his word, a wonderful father, who left some very talented and good kids here with us plus a wife who is loved by the entire circus family. We who are left behind suffer because of how his loss will change our lives. What a hero; what a man. His memory will live with me till I too must go on but outside of my real father, I don't know of anyone I respected more. So, Eugene, till we meet again, thank you and rest in peace.

\***The Past President of CFA, Rich Deptula** has not taken it easy since he got out of the front office. Rich has been very busy visiting many shows both far and near. He recently spent a week traveling with **Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus** while the show was in Ohio this year. He visited with many old friends and met many new friends. Cheryl and Rich went to visit **Donald Horowitz**, CFA member in Long Island, NY where they went to see the site of the great **Hartford Circus Fire** back in 1944. They then went on to the **Big E**. On Monday, the 4th of October, they traveled to the **Foxwood Resort and Casino** where **Donald** had dinner and a room awaiting them for their 30th Anniversary. Rich won a few bucks at the quarter machines. A few days later, it was on to the **Barnum Museum** to see the side show exhibition. Rich has spent some time with **RBBB Blue Unit** and **Red Unit** this season, also.

### **(HAPPY ANNIVERSARY RICH AND CHERYL)**

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### **BOBBY TAKES BETTY TO MURRAY HILL**

**By Bobby Gibbs**

On Oct. 7th, I took "**Betty**," the big Asian, up to **Murray's** place in **Fordland, MO**. I have got a whole lot of respect for **Mr. Hill** and his goals. For years, **Murray** operated elephants, chimps and other animals acts, both out of **Wisconsin** and later, **Texas**. He always offered a place to stay; a safe haven, to acts with animals coming thru the area. Both **Jimmy Hall** and myself camped at **Murray's** in the past. He is well known as the man that stole his elephants back & stayed on the lam for a long time before the law finally caught up with him. He went thru years of hardship because of his personal love of his elephants. He spent almost every dime he had doing so, lost his beloved elephants & had to serve community service but he didn't regret one thing he did. His facility has room for 8 elephants, hundreds of trees, a large pond, just like a major zoo. He is offering a home for a young Asian male to perhaps start some babies. At one time, **Murray** had a very large breeding colony of chimps. We need more people in the animal world to put their time and money back into the animals that we all enjoy so much.

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**RINGLING RED:** Rosemont, IL-Allstate Arena-11/3-14; Chicago-United Ctr-11/16-28.

**RINGLING BLUE:** St. Louis-Kiel Ctr-11/3-7.

**CARSON & BARNES CIRCUS:** Yucca Valley, CA-11/1; Indio-11/2; Parker, AZ-11/3; Apache Jct-11/4; Green Valley-11/5; Sierra Vista-11/6; Willcox-11/7; Las Cruces, NM-11/8; Alamogordo-11/9; Lovington-11/10; Odessa, TX-11/11-13.

**BIG APPLE CIRCUS:** Lincoln Ctr-NYC-10/31-1/9.

**UniverSoul Circus:** LA-10/22-11/3; Houston-11/9-14.

These routes are for information to the fans and should not be given to anyone other than fans without permission of the shows.

### BACK YARD

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**News From Carson & Barnes:** Bill Biggerstaff visited the show to take more photos for the 1999 Route Book. To order your copy, send \$15 to: Carson & Barnes 1999 Route Book, PO Box J, Hugo, OK 74743. On Sept. 30, Sister Priscilla received word that her mother had died. She immediately left for Switzerland. The show played 18 states in 240 days and had one day off-Easter Sunday. The "Viva Espana 2000" edition which will tour the East Coast, opens March 18 in Paris, TX. Changes to look for next season include a beautiful new tent & new acts. Those of you on the East Coast will get to see Jennie, their baby elephant, who turned one on Sept. 6. "Barbara, Geary, Traci, Julio, Kristin & Gustavo have been overwhelmed with the cards, letters, e-mail & calls expressing condolences over the death of D.R. They want all of you to know how much they appreciate your prayers, your kind words & your support during this difficult time. D.R.'s funeral service will be held in Hugo at 10 AM Nov. 17. His interment will be at Showman's Rest at the Mt. Olivet Cemetery."

\*Bob Kitchen writes "The Father Sullivan Tent met on 10/17 in Marlboro, MA. Speakers included Gordon McKay who is booking Carson & Barnes into New England next year. Also Lisa Dufresne, an animal trainer who has performed on several shows. Tim Holst also attended, talking about Ringling shows. Some 61 Tent members and friends attended the meeting!

### Mozart II-The Adventure Continues

By Mike Cecere

Yes, to all the concerned animal loving readers of Back Yard, Editor Cherie Valentine's top cat, "Mozart," is improving daily. He is back on track healthwise and has retaken his place as chief of the Valentine pride of fierce domestic cats. Thanks to all the many fans of Mozart who sent cards and gifts-he appreciates it all. Keep 'em coming! Mozart, the Top Cat!

(Mozart really appreciated the get-well card sent by his friend, Lloyd Fengel, of Oak Park, Illinois. The card has a beautiful cat on the front. Lloyd writes, "Dear Mozart, Sorry to hear you were sick and had to go to the vet, but it is good to hear you are feeling better now. Our Senior Citizens Orchestra is playing, "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" by W. A. Mozart. Is this any of your relatives? In the Oct. 18 Circus Report, page 8, is an article on Cat Theatre. If you aren't well enough to read, perhaps, Cherie can read it to you." Lloyd's card really cheered up Mozart! - Cherie.)

### "Lioness's Death Ends Exhibit At Miller Park Zoo"

**Bloomington, IL-10/15:** The Zoo's only remaining lion had to be euthanized, essentially ending the lion exhibit at the zoo. The Zoo made the decision after finding a second cancerous tumor in the abdomen of Palitana, a 19-year old female Asian lion. "We suspected something was wrong," said John Tobias, Zoo supt. "She was eating well but losing weight. Officials recently had noticed what appeared to be another tumor on the lioness.

Dr. Matt Fraker, the zoo's veterinarian, removed a cancerous tumor from her about a year ago. At that time, Dr. Fraker expected Palitana to only live about 6 more months. Zoo officials decided to put down the animal if another tumor was detected during an exam 10/13. The Zoo keeper who had taken care of her for the past 8 years was allowed to be with her during the exam and saw the tumor. Palitana had been at the Miller Park Zoo for 15 years. Tobias said she will be the last lion at the Zoo-a decision made even before her male counterpart, Ishamael, was euthanized in 1994 after suffering from a blood condition known as degenerative anemia. "Lions are social animals and need to be in groups. They need to be able to breed," Tobias said. And the lion exhibit does not have adequate space for lions. The new Sumatran tiger the zoo recently received from Memphis will be moved to the former lion exhibit. The area now used by the tiger will be returned to one of the zoo's two sets of snow leopards. The zoo's 2 sun bears also occupy exhibit space near the big cats.

(Dr. Matt Fraker is the veterinarian of Mozart-it is no wonder Mozart got well!)

\*New officers of the Felix Adler Tent are Al House, President; Mark Hammer, Vice President and Jack Belles,

## *TO JACK GOBBLE*

**IT WAS BACK IN '73 OR '74—  
YOU GAVE ME SOME ADVICE: YOU SAID,  
“WHEN YOU’RE WORKING AN ELEPHANT IN  
HARNESS, PULLING TRUCKS OFF THE LOT,  
ALWAYS STAND OFF TO THE SIDE, BECAUSE  
IF THE HARNESS BREAKS, YOU WON’T BE  
IN THE WAY WHEN SHE LUNGES FORWARD!”**

**WELL, I REMEMBERED WHAT YOU TOLD ME,  
AND OVER THE YEARS, PULLED LOTS OF TRUCKS  
OFF, ALWAYS STANDING OFF TO THE SIDE.**

**ABOUT 2 WEEKS AGO, I WAS PULLING THE POLE  
TRUCK OFF, WHEN THE HARNESS SPLIT RIGHT  
IN HALF, AND “BOO” CAME BY ME LIKE  
A ROCK OUT OF A SLINGSHOT!**

**SO, NOW IT’S 22 YEARS LATER AND TIME TO SAY  
THANKS AGAIN FOR THE ADVICE.**

**MORAL OF THIS STORY IS:  
ALL YOU YOUNG GUYS,  
LISTEN TO THE OLDER GUYS.**

**KEN “TURTLE” BENSON**

## “Little Girl Becomes A Star” .....

Trunks and tails outstretched, the animals shuffled up Bank Row Hill at 15 miles an hour, turned east onto Main St., then through a passageway next to the Unitarian Church. They crashed slam-bang through a couple of wooden fences and finally halted in the open cellar of the nearby Washburn barn. The breathless keepers caught them there, adjusted shackles and returned the errant elephants to the cars. Mickey only learned of the ruckus the next day. “I didn’t know what stampede meant, anyway. I didn’t even know elephants could run!”

She learned, though, first hand, a few weeks later when again the elephants ran away—this time while marching in the show’s opening spectacle, “A Night in Persia,” in which Mickey also took part. She ran, too. “Yessiree bobtail, I ran. The other way.” If there is one circus refuge from stampede, confusion and bustle, it is the big top between shows—precious hours after the matinee and before doors open for the night show. Here performers habitually congregate to chat, read or just rest. Or to sharpen their skills by practice in the vacant rings.

Mickey joined the group one afternoon, climbed a web to an unoccupied trapeze and began to swing. She had hardly stirred up a breeze when a thick-set, heavy-shouldered man came into the tent, saw the swinging stranger and ordered her to come down. “Right quick.” The man was Eddie Ward, owner, trainer and principal catcher of the “16 Flying Wards.”

It was on his rigging that Mickey was an unwitting trespasser. Confronted on the ground by Eddie, she found him more amused than irritated by her aerial exploits and in conversation, it developed that she liked to swing, had good muscle and was unafraid of height. Ed thought, he said, the Flying Wards might take her into the troupe, “if you’d like it.” If she’d like it? Oh brother, would she! Her career was underway.

“Mr. Ward was the greatest catcher of flyers there ever was, now, then or anytime,” Mickey declares. “He was stern and, by cracky, you did what he said to do. But he was great. And he was a wonderful man. He loved his wife and children. Did everything for them. He was like a father to me.” She glows—still to recall Ward once having said to her, “Mickey, you’re a good girl.” Jimmie Thistle, a young clown tumbler from East Boston, commented about Eddie, in different vein, after he had spent the 1928 season on the Floto show in association with Ward. “Eddie Ward!” exclaimed the incredulous Thistle; “Ward, why, that guy plays like Jack Dempsey fights.” The 1924 Sells Floto season was memorable for the 2 major events in Mickey’s life. She became a catcher, all 98 pounds of her, with the Flying Wards. “Mr. Ward felt it would help strengthen my arms and stomach muscles.” And she fell in love with Allen King, a lion and polar bear trainer newly arrived on the show.

They were married in Patterson, NJ, between shows, in a civil ceremony. “I cried all through it,” Mickey says. The marriage endured 6 years. Allen had a compulsion, an addiction, for games with dice or cards, at which normally innocent pastimes he was chronically unlucky—so altogether unlucky that by a

season’s end the Kings would find themselves with no winter nest egg or, like as not, with debts. Mrs. King, thrifty then as now, considered this intolerable. And disappointing. Dreams of a “vine-covered cottage” vanished while only dreams. She pleaded and remonstrated. But to no end. Eventually, there was a separation; finally, divorce. Mickey King was on her own. This time as a one-arm swing girl. Prior to his death in 1929, Eddie Ward taught half a dozen of his girl flyers to “roll up” a web and do one-arm swings. Mickey excelled. Roll-ups involve a series of one-arm back plunges, the body held horizontally on a 2” cotton rope. As the performer reaches upward for the rope, first with her right then with her left hand, she literally rolls her body up the rope. Mickey once did 17 consecutive plunges while rolling up a rope and thinks this may be the most that anyone ever did. “Anyway, it was easier for me than going up hand over hand.” The one-arm swing is a more grueling exercise. The performer hangs by one hand from a swiveled loop, then throws her body over her own shoulder in continuous arcs. The body is like a single revolving vane on a Dutch windmill; the shoulder socket serves as what would be the blade’s point of attachment to the axle of the windmill. Extraordinary strength is requisite. Mickey did 276 continuous one-arm swings in Springfield, MA, with Bob Morton’s Shrine Circus on May 6, 1936—at a special morning show for orphans & underprivileged children—a record number which may never be exceeded.

Mickey felt good at the time and wanted to thrill the kids. “Hey, come on down,” the rigging man who has holding her web kept yelling, “My hands are getting tired.” Mickey was tired, herself, when she did come down. But happy. The kids went wild. It has been said that one-arm swing girls, other than Ward’s, were often jealous because “Mickey could do so much more,” but she never sensed it. Neither has she felt it incumbent to vie with others. She was the queen. “I once played a big outdoor circus at the Narragansett race track in Rhode Island and Lalage was there too, doing one-arm swings. That was no way for a show to be framed—with two of us swinging together. Made it look like we were a dime a dozen. Anyway, I did more than Lalage and knew it, so I told her we’d cue the music to her act and when the drums rolled or the music stopped, I’d change what I was doing so we’d finish together. She’s a lovely person, Lalage.” When, a while ago, Mickey learned she had been called a “proud performer” she hesitated, then said, “Well, I guess I was. I tried to do my best. Always. I’d concentrate. I lived for my act. And when I became a flyer for Mr. Ward, after I had been catching, I’d dream about how to do certain tricks. With my own act, I lived it, practiced it all the time. Even when I wasn’t working.” Her act was often billed as “unsurpassed in grace and skill.” Supremacy achieved through dedication. She took her act to England, Scotland and France in 1934; she toured Australia 5 years later. She played 2 seasons in Mexico, 2 in Canada. She crisscrossed the US, two dozen times; her “Broadway” dates included the Roxy, Radio City, Loew’s State. In 1942-43, she toured army camps with a Special Services show & along the way, was made an honorary

**"Little Girl Becomes Star" .....**

Sgt. in the army's recruiting service. She has a special citation from the U.S. Marine Corps, signed by Gen. Chas. Price, "in appreciation for entertainment provided U.S. Marines in training" at Camp Pendleton. The general might well have added, "and for showing them what they're fighting for." It was about this time that Mickey was pioneering the "nude look" for lady aerial gymnasts; to the casual observer her costumes consisted simply of a few carefully placed spangles. She was, and is, a pretty, blue-eyed redhead, 4 ft. 11 1/2" barefoot, with a figure obviously feminine. She had her one near-fatal accident at the 1939 Cincinnati Shrine Circus; a rigger failed to properly adjust the shackle of her one-arm swivel loop and she fell 40'. She was lucky to have lived. Her right shoulder was crushed and took five months to mend. When she opened, after the accident, at Loew's Orpheum in Boston, she had strength for her rope and ring routine but for only 8 one-arm swings. "We want you if you just do 5," the theater manager told her. "C'est bon," said Mickey!

She quit performing in 1968 when, in a sentimental farewell gesture, she did 63 swings at a show in Florida. But she has kept her rigging handy-for a few roll-ups now and then, just to "keep in shape." Her 60 pounds of scrapbooks contain sincere encomiums from a wide-spread public press and complimentary professional review from the theatrical weeklies. Her most cherished notice is the cabled dispatch from Billboard's London correspondent to his editor in New York following her first performance at the Palladium. She is it memorized: "Mickey King Closes Show And Holds Her Public Until The King."

The translation: At the conclusion of each Palladium show it was customary for the audience to rise and remain standing while the British national anthem was played. It was also customary for most people in the audience to leave their seats after the next-to-closing act, generally the feature of the bill-Chevalier, Durante; comparatively few patrons would be left in the auditorium for the final act and "God Save the King." Thus, when the London audience remained for Miss Mickey's aerial performance and the subsequent anthem, it was not only paying homage to the King but was also honoring the artistry of a foreign queen. A bespangled Yankee queen!

**\*\*Back Yard Subscription Rate Change\*\***

Frank Thompson started "Back Yard" in 1996. Since then, there has been no change in the subscription price. On the other hand, postage rates have increased, along with printing costs, paper and ink prices and other office supplies. As of January 1st, the new subscription rate will be \$30 for 24 issues per year. Advertising rates will stay the same. Remember, a gift subscription to Back Yard would make a great Christmas present!

\*The 130th Edition of Ringling's Blue Unit starts rehearsals 11/29 in Winter Quarters. They will open Jan. 6 in Tampa.

**WINTER ADDRESS**

**FOR**

**KEN**

**"TURTLE"**

**BENSON**

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FLORIDA 34265**

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**"For Daredevil Michelangelo Nock, The Sky Is Not The Limit"-Interviewed By John Vick & Mary-Jane Foote**

Written By Margaret Frances Shannon

"You know, a man like Tommy Bartlett was like..Disney or Cecil B. DeMille, where you have a vision where there are no limits to what is produced..You know, having a helicopter, a full-scale helicopter, 200' in front of the audience and you hear the winds blowing, the popcorn is blowing. I mean that's 'affect,' you know, that's 'in your face' entertainment," says Michelangelo.

In the course of their collective careers, the Nocks have indeed faced off with a wide range of people. "We will work for the President, the King and Queen of England and we'll also do someone's barmitzva. You can't have this attitude where once you reach this plateau you're not going back," he advises. Among the dignitaries for whom the Nocks have performed is Nelson Mandela. "We did the Super Thrill Show in Johannesburg, South Africa. Our highlight of the trip was doing a special performance for Nelson Madela, whom we always wanted to meet. It was an honor..that we were able to do a special show for him and celebrate his success. I really got along with the Zulu people..The whole country was just great. When you go to countries like that and they've never seen what you do, they're stunned," remembers Michelangelo.

"The global tour for South Africa was the biggest and most watched American Thrill Show ever viewed in that country. We were at the Expo and it was huge..We have this big, huge sound system..We brought over 50 huge 6' speakers..Between shows we were playing this music and dancing. All of a sudden there are 10,000 Zulus dancing! The president of the Expo comes and says, 'You don't know what you're doing! You're going to start a riot.' And Eugie (brother Eugene, Jr.) goes, 'What? I'm dancing. They're just dancing.' The Expo people were terrified..but Eugie is having a good time with them. For a half hour he was dancing with 10,000 Zulus."

The Nocks' international dance of opportunities also includes a 1993 tour in Thailand, which brought Michelangelo unforgettable memories. "When we went to Thailand, we took the 3-wheel motorcycle. We went to the River Kwai. It was great. We took a 12-hour trip into Burma and we saw wild elephants! Where do you see wild elephant?! I mean, it was like, we're from the circus. Wild elephants! It was unbelievable. The trains were the same train systems that the U.S. and France built in the early 40s and they're still using them. They are restored. They are all wooden cars. It's just an unbelievable experience."

While it is fun, it's certainly not all fun & games. "First of all, the logistics of traveling when we go on tour. At one time we had 9 70,000 pound containers criss-crossing the globe. They are semi-truck boxes and that's the limit on those things. With all our equipment, all our Hollywood special effects, things like that, the logistical journey itself is a part of the job as well as an art itself."

"I really never took a vacation. You know, you get a job & you go overseas and that's your vacation. You're working."

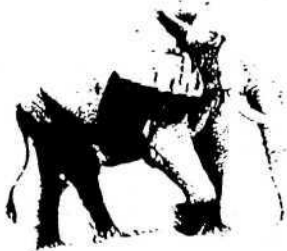
Whether this work is for the Academy Award winning movie, "Blue Sky," for which the Nocks did the aerial stunts and provided 4 helicopters or whether it's his 7-year old daughter Angelina's debut at Baraboo's Al Ringling Theater, thrill-seeker Michelangelo is indeed thrilled for the family's ever-expanding work. "Two of our new acts that we are building: one is a full size pick-up, a jet- powered pick up and we only do it at race tracks and outdoor stadiums because you can just blow the whole stadium away. It's just unbelievable. Then we have a full-size jeep that does wheelies..When people come see you year after year, you always want them to see something new and exciting," says Michelangelo. For this upcoming season at the Tommy Bartlett Thrill Show in the Wisconsin Dells, Michelangelo plans on presenting the double space wheel, "but both rings will be on fire. I'm probably going to bring the wheelie jeep and make an entrance with that. It's like a big foot jeep that does wheelies. It can go a whole football field doing a wheelie."

"But the backbone of our act is the sway poles. It's still an act after all these years the people just love..The way we climb up and exchange up there. Then we do our 90' free fall, with no bungies, no rappelling-nothing-just free fall stop at the end. It doesn't get more dangerous than that," says this daredevil and family man who still works his acts without safety devices. Explaining about his helicopter-trapeze act, he says, "Sometimes it's a 30 to 40 mile-per hour wind and you still have to perform. You're just like a flag underneath a jet plane. You just got to keep your cool, do your show..and you pray that it's all going to be fine. One time we were doing the aerial raceway. We have 4 motorcycles with 1000' cables and they're 100' in the air. One of our aerialists got sick..My mom wasn't working for a couple of years but boom, put on a costume and there she is, spinning by her neck."

Risking their necks for 7 generations now, the Nocks remain one of the favorite families in the wide world of entertainment. Aside from their own God-given talents, part of their charm is indeed their appreciation for the teamwork that defines circus-an appreciation that is clear when speaking with Michelangelo Nock. "I remember in my lifetime I have felt honored because even when I was still young, I really appreciated the people I got to meet and work with-the likes of Emmett Kelly, Karl Wallenda, Roy Disney and even people in the vaudeville live thrill show business like Tommy Bartlett. The list goes on & on." Included in that list for Michelangelo are the circus fans.

"One of the biggest things to happen in our family was being honored with a Tent in our name. For years we've always had circus fans. I didn't know they were circus fans; I thought they were my friends, but they're circus fans as well. They were friends first..We feel so honored that there are people who love the circus. And that's the greatest thing. It's just like family." And just like that 4-year old boy who carefully watched the shadows of his mentors, we are watching you, Michelangelo and loving every minute of it. (Reprinted with permission of *White Tops*, magazine of the Circus Fans Assn. of America.)

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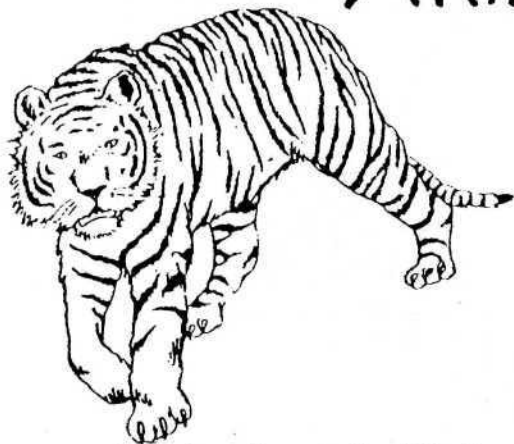


American



# Animal Trainer

Magazine



In January the long awaited  
first issue of the:  
*AMERICAN ANIMAL TRAINER*  
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## News From Our Circus Friends

Frank Thompson writes "couldn't help noting the item in the 9/30 issue of Back Yard about Michael Haberland having some Mabel Stark items. We have one of Mabel's arena "training" seats here. My father-in-law, Felix Morales, had this welded steel frame that he used as a sort of sawhorse. I mentioned it one day while in his workshop and he told me the story. It seems that this was a low, free standing seat that Mabel used on the John Robinson show-in 1927, if I remember correctly, though I could check the date-and the wood portion of the seat had been broken up badly. It was discarded and left on the lot. Felix picked it up and carried it as a way of supporting his rigging while it was on the ground and, after he retired, as a sawhorse. When he died in 1975, I got it and still have it. I made one attempt to remove the paint from it, but it was covered in layer upon layer; white, green, blue, red and more, so it is still partly painted! I still use it as a sawhorse occasionally, but have always intended to completely remove the paint, repaint it with white and then put a thick, natural finished, wood top on it as it was originally and use it as a coffee table, since it is just about the right height."

## \*News From Our Circus Friends\*

From Gene Mascioli: "Any circus admirer wanting to attend the combined Leonard Aylesworth Ring (CMB) & the Robert Dover-Peggy Williams Tent 112 (CFA) Banquet on Nov. 13 at 5 PM at Geo's Family Restaurant, 6290 Allentown Blvd, Harrisburg, PA can send \$16 per person for your banquet ticket (includes full course buffet meal, entertainment & a great evening with our guest speaker, Peggy Williams) to: James Rittle, 2127 Kline St, Lebanon, PA 17042 (Payable to Leonard Aylesworth Ring). Hope you can come and join us!!!

Pete Kinosh sent along a newspaper clipping from Waterbury, CT: 10/9: "Sponsors of a circus scheduled to come to Library Park are canceling the shows because of legal difficulties tied with having the circus come to town. The sponsors are planning to reschedule Vidbels Old Tyme Circus to perform in the spring. Those with tickets can keep them & they will be honored when the show is rescheduled." Pete also sent a photo from the NY Post of Siegfried and Roy with Magic, their beautiful white tiger cub, at the world premiere of their 3-D movie, "Siegfried & Roy: The Magic Box," at the IMAX Theatre on the Upper West Side.

\*Jim Swafford sent this clipping: "49 white tigers being raised by Siegfried & Roy are making their TV debut in a bid to raise public consciousness of the plight of the endangered animals. They are joining with Exxon and the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation to help preserve the animals. A 30-second commercial will feature the pair & their animals. Many of the white tigers are used in their show at the Mirage in Las Vegas."

\*Harry Gordon reports, "I saw the Ringling Blue Unit in Boston on 10/23. The 3:30 show was sold out and the house was rocking! During the pre-show activities on the floor, there were more people than I had ever seen before. Really a popular feature. Spotted on the lot—Tim Holst!"

14

## \*\*RUMBLINGS FROM THE CRUMMY\*\*

By Brian Nunn

Cotton candy, a cool breeze, the canvas drying off after more than enough mud lots. The smell of the hay burners, dogs bark, some run free. My laundry's been done, there's no hurry and it's four hours till doors (showtime). The elephants know it's a good day 'cause there's no mud and a bunch of working harnesses are laying around. A butcher brings a big bag of popcorn by for the bulls because it was a poor house the night before; the rain, you know. A visiting showman stops by to cut up jackpots.

A circus fan comes by with a nice photo album everyone wants to look at. I've got to change my motor oil but it'll wait till after the first show. Big John reminds me what a good time he had laughin' at me gettin' tipped over by the Brat. I grab a wheelbarrow and clean up the line, come back and listen to more jackpots.

Like how Dry County got his name or when I left the Doctor's daughter crying in Quebec City. Or my friend tellin' them, "Hey, you hired me to work 'em, not to track 'em. I'll get 'em when they stop." Or me and TWA Chuck makin' up stock figuring it's gonna be a strong house.

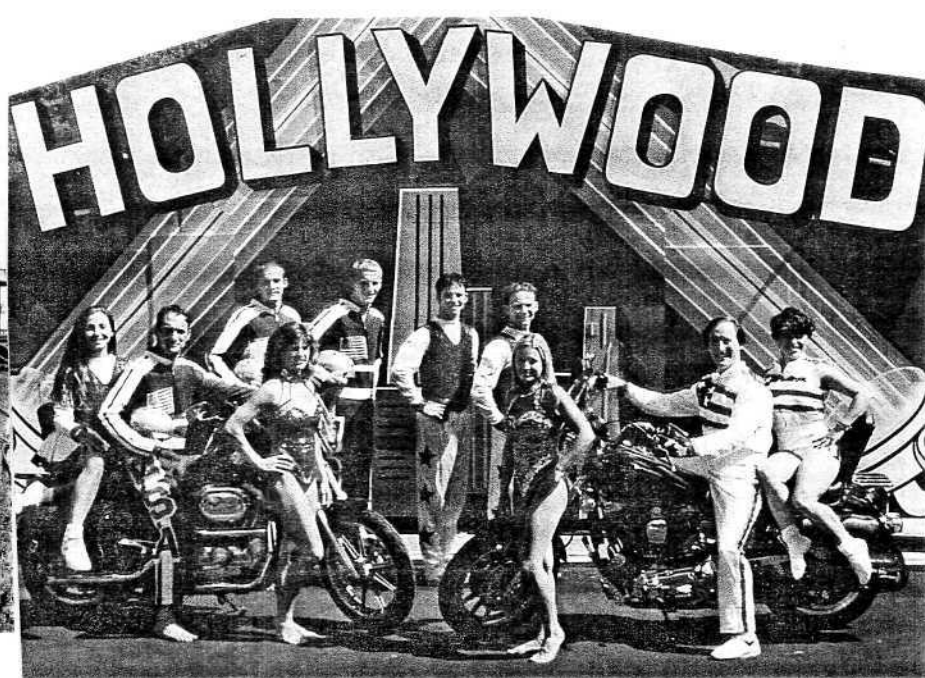
Let's see, there's so much to remember and talk about. It's more fun in the barn with a bunch of show bums. It's easier to talk there.

Bud De Vere sent along a message from Jane Nida. "It is so nice to report such a good day today-Dow's 81st birthday. When I arrived with a large decorated sheet cake to share in the dining room, I found Dow sitting proudly in his wheelchair and being wheeled in by the Chaplain. Dow had already attended the Chapel service! One of the patients presented him with a Happy Birthday balloon which we tied to his wheelchair. The dining room help cut the large cake & distributed it before lunch was served and the men were so pleased that we were thanked over and over again! Then the staff served Dow's tray first-coming in singing Happy Birthday. We stayed in the dining room opening all the many cards. It was indeed a real joy to see Dow looking so "normal" again. Thank you all for your continuing prayers and love and concern."



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Dubskys



THE NERVELESS NOCKS HOLLYWOOD STUNT TEAM



Mickey



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Peru, Indiana Parade

