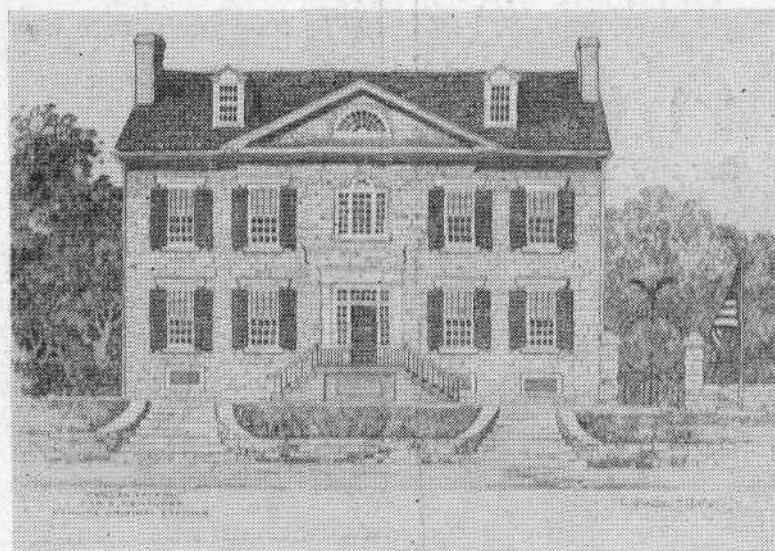


HOBBY-SWAPPER

The Collector's Monthly



Duncan Tavern in Paris, Kentucky

Best Wishes for the Yuletide Season to All

December 1946

10c

James Robinson & Frank Pastor's Champion Circus

By C. Spencer Chambers

Early in November 1869, James Robinson, the greatest of all bare-back riders, was attending a variety performance at the Opera House in the Bowery which was jointly owned by Antonio Pastor, commonly known to his thousands of admirers as "Tony" and Sam Sharply, the man who had made famous the "Iron Clads" Minstrels.

"Tony" that evening informed James Robinson that his brother, Frank Pastor, the champion pad rider, had not renewed his contract with the French Circus for the season of 1870. He suggested that it would be to the mutual advantage of the two great equestrians if they would enter into a partnership to put a new circus on the road bearing the name of James Robinson and Frank Pastor's Champion Circus, as each was the acknowledged leader in his respective line.

The suggestion was acted upon at once and by January the plans and details were worked out in Philadelphia where Pastor was personally caring for his ring stock which was stabled near the Old Arch Street Theatre.

This is the circus which seems to have been sadly neglected by circus historians and badly abused by those who recorded so little about it—thus this detailed information.

M. B. Leavitt in his "Fifty Years of Theatrical Management" states "James Robinson learned to ride with the John Robinson Show." It is regrettable that this error has remained unchallenged down to the present time, as great credit should be given to the two people who are entitled to the credit of teaching and developing the greatest rider of all time. At the age of nine, young James, who was apprenticed to John Gossin, a popular clown and his wife, an equestrian, who took a parental interest in the well being and future of their talented ward. To be exact that was in 1844, and fifteen years before he appeared under the John Robinson management with the Robinson and Lake Circus for the seasons of 1861 to 1863 inclusive. Shortly after these three



Frank Pastor

seasons he was closed by his own request in order to fill a short European contract where he was acknowledged the foremost bare-back rider by his admiring contemporaries.

Frank Pastor, his partner, was one of the three Pastor brothers from New York's East Side, each of whom became famous in the circus and theatrical world. These boys served their apprenticeship under the tutelage of John Nathans, an owner and manager who stood at the pinnacle of Circusdom. When Antonio, Billy and Frank had completed their training under Uncle John they toured Europe, playing in England, France, Germany, Spain and Portugal which was an extraordinary post graduate course from a standpoint of fame and business. Their debut on this tour was made before Her Majesty the Queen in London from whom they received a most enthusiastic approbation.

This information is presented
Next Page, Please

merely to show the background of the partners and that the name Champion Circus was earned and deserved.

The first contract of the new undertaking was signed by the grotesque trick clown, Billy Burke, who still lives in the person and exceptional talent of his daughter, Miss Billie Burke, one of Hollywood's most beloved actresses. A courier of the show states "Billy dare not be as funny as he can for fear of the consequences on the audience."

The next to sign was Jack Lawton, the old singing clown of whom it was said never was with a show two successive seasons on account of his temperament.

Sharp and Whitney, a team of gymnasts and trapeze performers, were on the show and if they lived up to their billing they must have been in a class by themselves. "Their exercises would terrify the stoutest heart to witness, did not the consummate ease with which they perform them disarm the exhibition of terror." So states a courier which had the magic touch of an able press agent's pen.

There is no denying that the Champion Circus was top-heavy with equestrian acts. William Munroe, the Four Horse rider opened the show taking the place of the present day "Spec" and showed remarkable skill by "dashing around the circle on four matched and spirited grays—now tandem, now in pairs and now abreast—reining them in or giving them their utmost speed at pleasure." Placing this act in the opening spot was good showmanship as evidenced by the build up of the entire program which closed with Phil Sheridan, the equestrian dog leaping banners, barriers and through balloons while the horse was going at its utmost speed. Truly a miracle on horseback.

There was only one lady performer on the show. She was M'lle Jeanette Armstrong, an equestrian who possessed all the attractions of form features and youth in addition to an intrepidity that was astounding and a grace that was marvelous. This young lady was the highest salaried artist on the show and received top billing to the exclusion of the champions which seems inexplicable to the present day proprietors.

Another name made its appearance on the program for the first time in any circus. Clarence Robinson, the son of James, made his debut at the same age as that of his father when he was apprenticed to John Gossin. But young Robinson was at this time doing a phenomenal bare-back act on a pony much to the satisfaction of his father who had given a great quantity of time and attention in the development of his son's talent.

The proprietors prided themselves that they had brought an idea from Europe which was quite a sensation. The Champion Circus was the first American show to use a balloon ascension as an outdoor attraction. Prof. Paul LeGrand 'who has traveled farther through the air than any other living man' made an ascension before each day's performance. Among the many beautiful pictorial posters made by Messrs. Russell Morgan and Company of 20 College street, Cincinnati, Ohio, none are more interesting than the "City of Paris" balloon item at which the present time only a few are extant. The following year, Stone and Murray's Circus adopted the idea and soon balloons became a must for successful circuses during the next three decades.

.....turn to page 9

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J. ROBINSON & F. PASTOR

from page 5

Ed Quinn's celebrated Orchestra and Brass Band supplied the music. It consisted of six pieces which was about the standard size of that period.

From first to the last performance of the season there was professional jealousy existing among the equestrians of the organization which was so deeply rooted that the partnership was dissolved by mutual consent.

What was left of the wreck went out the next season under the

name of James Robinson's Champion Circus and folded before the season closed.

The great equestrian continued as a star of the first magnitude under other managers until the exacting gentleman, Father Time, closed the incomparable equestrian's career most ingloriously while performing with a Ten Cent Circus. Years have not dulled the brilliancy of the feats of the man to whom every equestrian wishes to be compared and may we always unhesitatingly place him among the immortals in the Circus Hall of Fame where he justly belongs.

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