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BEYOND THE BIG TOP:
THE LEGACY OF JOHN RINGLING AND THE AMERICAN CIRCUS

A Thesis Presented

By

CASEY L. NEMEC

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2020

History Program

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THE LEGACY OF JOHN RINGLING AND THE AMERICAN CIRCUS

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ABSTRACT

BEYOND THE BIG TOP: THE LEGACY OF JOHN RINGLING AND THE AMERICAN CIRCUS

MAY 2020

Casey L. Nemec, B.A., Florida Gulf Coast University
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Directed by Professor Vincent J. Cannato

Beyond the Big Top: The Legacy of John Ringling and the American Circus is a focused interpretation of the impact of the American circus post-Civil War through present day, most particularly that of circus impresario, corporate magnate, and philanthropist John Ringling, in what was once a quiet Florida fishing village named Sarasota. It is my observation that John Ringling, through moving the winter quarters of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey to Sarasota, investing in a sizable amount of real estate, and spearheading a campaign to bring a world-class art museum and school to the area, played a key role in shaping Florida tourism, diversity, expanding cultural awareness, and boosting the local economy. I have addressed the effects Ringling had on the region, as well as discuss how and why Ringling invested so heavily in Sarasota. The rise of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus will also be discussed, and how Ringling planned to make contributions that would live on long after he did. Although the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus shuttered its wagon doors

for good in 2017, Ringling ensured that he utilized his proceeds from the show, as well as other ventures, to finance endeavors that have allowed his memory and intentions to live well on into the 21st century.

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This thesis was an exceptional undertaking, and it would have been inconceivable without the assistance of a core group of individuals. Susan O'Shea, Archival Collections Specialist at the Circus Museum at the Ringling was instrumental in providing me with ample amounts of material and granting me access to documents I never could have imagined I would have the opportunity to view in person. Steve Gossard, Curator of Circus Collections at the Illinois State University spent copious amounts of time providing me with new avenues for my research, and connecting me with other circus historians that were extremely helpful in my research. Tito Gaona, the time you gave me and the window you opened into the world of a circus performer was both intriguing and immeasurable in value.

Professor Vincent J. Cannato, you have endured years of working with me exhaustedly on developing my skills as a historical writer, and still agreed to be the chair of my thesis committee. I am eternally grateful for your persistence and patience. Professor Elizabeth McCahill, you picked me up somewhere along the way, and provided me with your stellar guidance. Thank you for acquiring a responsibility that you did not have to. Professor Timothy Hacsí and Professor Roberta Wollons, thank you for your contributions and insight as my third and fourth committee members, respectively.

To my children, Brixon and Hudson, thank you for tolerating long nights, awful dinners, and an impatient mother while I worked to accomplish a long-standing personal goal. I hope that my persistence has shown you that you are never too old to have big dreams. To Nick, you have never told me no when it came to something that you knew I was determined to achieve, and your love and support through this process will always be so truly appreciated.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Let us turn the searchlight of truth upon the history of amusements, and we will find no brighter page than the one upon which the name of Ringling is emblazoned.”¹

Alfred Ringling, 1900.

Nearly every starry-eyed young child has dreamed of running away to join the circus; the warmth of the spotlight, the roar of the crowd, the thrill of the feat. The American circus was a profoundly popular and awe-inspiring form of entertainment in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and thousands of boys and girls, men and women were intrigued by the art form. Early and traditional forms of the circus comprised of menageries of wild animals, salted peanuts and cotton candy, and maybe even a sideshow act or two. At its peak, the circus had the power to command sell-out performances at venues like Madison Square Garden and Soldier Field, the ability to force professional sports teams in major cities to reschedule their games because league managers feared a loss of attendance, and shut down entire communities so that all residents could spend a day at the show.² However, the twentieth century ushered in significant change to the entertainment industry, with the advent and evolution of movies,

¹ Alfred T. Ringling, *Life Story of the Ringling Brothers* (Chicago, IL: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1900), viii.

² Jerry Apps, *Ringlingville, USA: The Stupendous Story of Seven Siblings and their Stunning Circus Success* (Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2005).

television, video games, social media, and immersive leisure activities, such as theme and water parks. The circus has, sometimes begrudgingly, been forced to adapt. The circus is no longer a simple pleasure on a sunny Sunday afternoon, filled with affordable family fun. The circus has evolved into primarily a celebration of the aerial arts; an opulent and costly spectacle worthy of headlining a dazzling Las Vegas stage. What the traditional American circus, and the subsequent impact of one of the industry's key figures, John Ringling, did for the entertainment and tourism industry is remarkable.

Beyond the Big Top: The Legacy of John Ringling and the American Circus is a focused interpretation of the impact of the American circus post-Civil War through present day, most particularly that of circus impresario, corporate magnate, and philanthropist John Ringling, in what was once a quiet Florida fishing village named Sarasota. This thesis argues that John Ringling, through moving the winter quarters of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey to Sarasota, investing in a sizable amount of real estate, and spearheading a campaign to bring a world-class art museum and school to the area, played a key role in shaping Florida tourism, expanding cultural awareness, and boosting the local economy. *Beyond the Big Top* examines the effects Ringling had on the region, as well as how and why Ringling invested so heavily in Sarasota. The rise of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus will also be discussed, and how Ringling planned to make contributions that would live on long after he did. Although the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus shuttered its wagon doors for good in 2017, Ringling ensured that he utilized his proceeds from the show, as well as other ventures, to finance endeavors that have allowed his memory and intentions to live on well into the 21st century.

This thesis is not an exhaustive look into the international history of the circus, nor is it a complete biography of John Ringling. It is also not a comprehensive evaluation of Florida travel and tourism. This work was born out of a love of the performing arts, and a desire to create a broader awareness in regards to the importance of the circus from a variety of aspects, specifically the contributions of John Ringling, in the Sarasota region of Florida. The intention is to stimulate conversation, and allow the reader to be introduced to a Florida tourist attraction that far preceded Walt Disney World.

Various forms of sourced material have contributed to the completion of this thesis, and in the production of a valid and tangible argument. This piece conceptualizes the idea that the circus was not just a form of entertainment, but an exploration of local and global culture, and was a primary example of the social fabric of America post-Victorian era. This thesis also calls to attention that those behind the scenes of the circus made an impact far beyond the center ring. Six sources in particular helped me tremendously in understanding how the circus represented a new form of American living after the Civil War. These works also assisted in not only understanding the dynamism of the industry and key players, but in comprehending just how broad and enduring the scope of influence was.

Professor Charles F. McGovern, in his chapter “Consumer Culture and Mass Culture,” that appeared in *A Companion to American Cultural History* investigates just how mass consumption not only influenced American society, but completely *structured* American society. McGovern’s chapter focuses on culture within the circus, helping to place it in the broader field of cultural and intellectual history. McGovern argues that post-Civil War, spending money and accumulating wealth signified American citizenship. McGovern believes

that the massive marketing and advertising campaigns of circus men spurred the mass consumption movement. Modern life no longer centered around religion; social gatherings expanded beyond the realm of the town square. Transportation changed the average American's accessibility to material goods, and presented the opportunity for citizens to visit and be visited. As these systems grew and improved, mobility throughout the country expanded, and people such as circus performers, brought big city spectacles to little towns. Rural townspeople responded to their notorious marketing campaigns, and circus became a big business. McGovern's chapter was particularly useful in that it placed such an emphasis on how a rather simple tool, a poster, came to help define the culture of the circus. It was this circus industry reliance on enormous and powerful advertising that later marked Ringling's financial impact on Sarasota.³

Janet Davis, in her book *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top*, explores the overarching themes of the circus; entertainment, capitalism, and novelty, but she also brings attention to the unintended outcomes of the industry, such as the formation of a tight-knit community that has endured for well over a century. Through careful analysis of route books, photographs, programs, manuscripts, newspaper articles and more, Davis acknowledges just how complex of an entity the circus was, from an economic, psychological, sociological, and geographical perspective. There are few resources that truly study the circus from an academic standpoint, and not just its existence as an extravagant form of entertainment. Davis positions the circus as both a complex cultural and historical process in

³Charles F. McGovern "Consumer Culture and Mass Culture," in *A Companion to American Cultural History*, ed. Karen Halltunen (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

America, and one that had the power to single-handedly alter the day-to-day existence in our post-Victorian nation.⁴

In *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams*, author, professor, and historian Gary Mormino analyzes Florida geographically, socially, demographically, and economically. Mormino offers a unique and candid take on the growth and progression of Florida, filled with wit and brutal honesty. While the book predominantly focuses on the mid-twentieth century and beyond, several of the factors that made the sunshine state what it is today were set in motion in the early 1900's. Although throngs of tourists now pour into the state on a daily basis, Florida was not born to be a vacation destination. In the not-so-distant past, Florida was a primitive swampland, uncomfortably humid, and teeming with mosquitoes and animals wildly exotic to much of the continental United States. Over the last century, however, hundreds of thousands of people have invested everything they have to buy a slice of Florida paradise, and the subsequent development changed the state physically, economically, and demographically. Mormino cleverly sums it up: "Florida imported dreamers and exported oranges."⁵ Whether it was a personal relocation or a business investment, Florida drew visionaries, one of whom was John Ringling. While not much page space is devoted to Ringling and the mark he made on tourism and culture in the state, much to my dismay, Mormino's work provided a greater understanding as to the desires of Florida settlers, the mindset of tourists, and the lofty goals of developers and investors. Florida is a place like no other, and Mormino's book does a stellar job of examining the people, the visions, and the cultures that have shaped the state.

⁴Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), 2002.

⁵Gary R. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005), 3.

The article “Sarasota: Hardship and Tourism in the 1930s” which appeared in a 1997 issue of *The Florida Historical Quarterly* takes a close look at the impact that the Great Depression had on the region. Author Ruthmary Bauer chronologically assesses the rise of Sarasota, its rapid decline, and the ultimate revival of the city that made it an international destination. Bauer discusses several developers who had a hand in taking Sarasota from a sleepy fishing village to a first-class resort town, and how their investments helped to keep the city afloat during America’s darkest hours. Bauer evaluates the area from an economic standpoint, but in doing so, recognizes the impact that John Ringling had on enabling Sarasotans to continue to survive. Bauer highlights the multiple ways in which Ringling, among other residents, was innovative and proactive in luring tourists to the area, as well as continuing to maintain employment for locals. Analyzing materials from Ringling’s employment contracts to municipal marketing materials, Bauer demonstrates the resourcefulness that helped Sarasota to survive and prosper.⁶

Ringling, The Florida Years: 1911-1936 by historian and educator David C. Weeks, provides a detailed biography of John Ringling during his time spent in Florida, which were concurrently the final years of his life. Weeks not only scrutinizes the public and private personas of the showman, but also the political, economic, social, and cultural climate during this period. John Ringling was a complex figure, and differentiated himself from his industry peers in that he envisioned a life of consequence outside of the ring. John Ringling longed to

⁶ Ruthmary Bauer, “Sarasota: Hardship and Tourism in the 1930s,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 76, No. 2 (1997), 135-151.

make an impact on future generations that extended beyond that of the circus, and did so by taking an interest in real estate and railroads, along with pursuing philanthropic ambitions. Sarasota, Florida was the location in which Ringling made the majority of his investments, and Weeks provides a comprehensive exploration of the various projects Ringling spearheaded in the region, and how they continue to impact the city to the present.⁷

In his retrospective *The Life Story of the Ringling Brothers*, Alfred (also referred to as Alf. T.) Ringling provides the reader with a unique take on the circus and the life that accompanied the show. As this is a primary source, it is differentiated from the above sources, but was beneficial in that it was written in the midst of the Ringling brothers climb to success, by a member of the family. Boastful and at times presumptuous (particularly because it was published only 16 years into the Ringling brothers' career), Alfred's writing reflects his rearing in the performing arts; dramatic, exceptionally descriptive, and overtly theatrical. In his introduction, Alfred boldly compares what his siblings had accomplished thus far with some of the world's most infamous leaders, "It is Caesarian, Napoleonic, Bismarckian in effort, and in accomplishment more than can be said of Alexander. The latter conquered the world, but the Ringling brothers pleased it."⁸ Referring to his siblings, Ringling declares "history records no greater trials that marked the beginning of the career of these great circus men, nor does history record a greater triumph that has rewarded them for their labor."⁹ The reader can almost hear the proclamation being shouted from the center of the circus ring. While Ringling may have exaggerated the importance of the brothers' accomplishments in comparison to some of

⁷ David C. Weeks, *Ringling: The Florida Years, 1922-1936* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1993).

⁸ Ringling, *Life Story*, vii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

the broader events in world history, it does indeed draw awareness to their achievements, and urges the reader to see the impact of the Ringling brothers beyond the circus tent. Strikingly audacious upon the initial read, when truly considering the number of people that the Ringling brothers have impacted in some form, it may not be off mark. Ringling fills the pages with charming stories of childhood barter, negotiation, hard work, and relentless determination. The boys learned essential life skills, many of which were acquired before reaching double digits, that would shadow each of them throughout their life in the circus and beyond. The Ringling brothers had an incomparable business acumen, but refused to compromise their values for the sake of profit. From humble beginnings derived great success, and much wealth. While they were not the fathers of the American circus, the boys from Baraboo were surely some of the most impactful.

In addition to the above sources, local and national newspaper articles and biographical accounts were examined, and personal interviews with historians, and museum archivists and curators were conducted. I spoke with famed circus performers Tito Gaona and Nik Wallenda at length and learned a great deal about their respective experiences as members of the circus. I was able to hear stories from the past, and be given perspective on how the circus has changed over time, as they both descend from multi-generational circus families. In addition, the archives housed at the Circus Museum at the Ringling in Sarasota were opened for my exploration, and a variety of primary source material was reviewed, including journals, invoices, route books, correspondence, and personal effects.

Chapter two, *Under the Big Top*, examines the dawn of the circus in America, and introduces the reader to the first family of circus, the Ringling brothers. The arrival of the

circus in the late 18th century introduced Americans to a new form of organized entertainment, exotic performers, wild animals, and feats of courage that blurred the lines between man and superhuman. This chapter will look at the culture that formed within the circus, and how the circus affected mass culture. Chapter two will also explore the unique community that was established among circus performers, and explore the various ways in which John Ringling helped to make Sarasota, Florida an international destination for arts and culture.

Chapter three, *Circus and Capitalism* takes a closer look at the evolution of the circus as a corporation, and how it set itself apart in the age of industry. The circus proved to be a big business, and the logistics surrounding the execution of performances was paramount to its success. This chapter will look at how the circus transitioned from a local music and stunt demonstration to an immense touring production with the progression of transportation. Men such as John Ringling, P.T. Barnum, and Adam Forepaugh, among others, were innovators and opportunists, capitalists in ways their oil and railroad chief peers likely could not fathom. This chapter will also look beyond the circus at some of the other corporate undertakings of John and Charles Ringling, particularly their business ventures in Florida. John, in particular, was determined to use his wealth and status to put Sarasota on the map.

The final chapter, *The Ringling Residual*, will take a close look at how the arrival of the circus, the dedication of the Ringling brothers, and the fertile soil for tourism in Florida worked in concert to assist in not only helping to launch the state to the top of vacation wish lists around the globe, but to also bring world-class culture, education, and diversity to the region. This chapter will focus primarily on the Sarasota area where John Ringling and the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus made their most significant impact, but will

also acknowledge the attractions that came after, and how Ringling may have influenced their establishment.

Beyond the Big Top: The Legacy of John Ringling and the American Circus explains the sizable effect the circus had on American society, from the booming metropolis of New York City to rural McGregor, Iowa to a relatively unknown fishing town called Sarasota, Florida. What started out as the lofty aspirations of seven brothers from the Midwest to perform on the big stage revolutionized the American entertainment industry, and opened the door for a small town on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico to become an international destination for art, culture, entertainment, and education. The Ringling brothers and their circus also provided a place for a diverse group of people to call home, and to be not only accepted, but embraced by local residents. The impact of both Ringling and his circus have had a substantial and important impact on shaping Florida's economy, cultural awareness, and tourism. By moving the winter quarters of the circus to Sarasota, investing in real estate, creating infrastructure, and offering opportunities to immerse and educate the public in the arts, John Ringling played a key role in making Florida the tourism and cultural mecca that it is today.

CHAPTER 2

UNDER THE BIG TOP: CIRCUS AND CULTURE

“America was an agrarian society. And it was a hard life you had. You woke up early. And you worked through the day. And then, all of a sudden, if you were so lucky, for one magical day, you were transported from your workaday world into the spangles, into the spectacle that crisscrossed the country, the circus.”¹⁰

Deborah Walk, 2017

The first known circus in the United States debuted in 1793 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, only seventeen years after America became an independent nation. These novice circus shows, however, were far less of a production than the glitz and glamour-filled marvel that they are today. Early circuses did not start out with cross-country train car parades that children would stay up all night for just to usher into their hometown, high-flying trapeze artists, or concession stands hawking cotton candy and popcorn. Instead, circuses were relatively small, and stationary, most frequently being held in a brick-and-mortar facility, town halls being a venue of choice. In 1825, with the creation of the first circus tent, J. Purdy Brown took the show on the road. Circus men Samuel Nichols, Edmund and Jeremiah Mabie, P.T.

¹⁰ Deborah Walk, *American Experience*, season 30, episode 10, “The Circus, Part One,” written and directed by Sharon Grimberg, aired October 9, 2018, PBS.

Barnum, William C. Coup, and Dan Castello followed suit, and soon, the circus became premier form of entertainment in America. By the end of the 19th century, the circus was booming, and altered the way arts and culture were presented throughout the United States.¹¹ John Ringling and his industry peers strove to bring cultural awareness to every corner of the nation. Because of his diligence in particular, by the latter part of his career, John Ringling fostered the development of a circus winter quarters, a world-class art museum, and a top-tier art school, all of which paved the way for several other institutions in the region to be established, and for Sarasota to become an international destination for arts and culture.¹²

Though the American circus was born in Philadelphia, it grew up in the Midwest. Rural towns in states like Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa welcomed the circus as a respite from long, quiet winter nights and hot summer days spent on the farm. Author Henry Miller stated “the circus is a tiny, closed-off area of forgetfulness.”¹³ It gave thousands of people an hour or two to revel in the glory of the performing arts, and escape the monotony of their day-to-day existence. The circus offered average American men and women, boys and girls, the opportunity to see world-class performances in their own backyards. Seventh-generation circus performer Nik Wallenda describes a major draw of the circus as being a fascination “with talents that they [circus performers] may have that other people may not comprehend.”¹⁴

While it was unquestionably entertaining, and at times, downright silly, the circus was more than just well-groomed poodles parading around on their hindquarters and portly clowns

¹¹ Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, xv-xvii.

¹² Ibid., xv-xvi.

¹³ Linda Simon, *The Greatest Shows on Earth : A History of the Circus*, (2014). ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umboston/detail.action?docID=2096585>.

¹⁴ Nik Wallenda, interview by author, Punta Gorda, December 17, 2018.

sporting squeaky, bulbous rubber noses. The circus was an authentic representation of the performing arts, from music and acrobatics to death-defying feats of imagination. Performers of tremendous skill levels from around the world joined the ranks of the American circus, and introduced American men, women, and children to diverse groups of people and ethnic traditions.¹⁵

The circus gained popularity at the end of the Victorian era, the norms of which had pervaded society much of the prior century. The 19th century was defined by delineated gender roles, and modest feminine behavior.¹⁶ There was little social interaction outside of the home or church, and leisure time was a concept that had yet to be truly embraced by Americans. As Charles F. McGovern points out in “Consumer Culture and Mass Culture,” amusements gained traction in America in the late 19th century. McGovern states “Amusement for its own sake challenged the probity and “useful” recreation of Victorianism; gratification overtook virtuous self-denial, while youth and novelty overshadowed long-standing veneration of age and tradition.”¹⁷ The circus defied everything that Victorianism stood for; as a patron, there was no productivity associated with attending the circus. The circus allowed for, and encouraged, finding joy and satisfaction in pure entertainment. Whether American society was prepared or not, the circus was coming to town, and it would come to define entertainment in the early 20th century.

The circus had been thrilling American audiences for nearly a century when the Ringling boys pitched their very own big top. John Ringling, along with his seven siblings,

¹⁵ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 22-23.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹⁷ McGovern “Consumer Culture,” 190.

were first-generation Americans raised in the midwest. August Rüngeling (later changed to Ringling) emigrated to North America in 1847, first Canada and then the United States, from Northern Europe. Shortly after his relocation, August met, and subsequently wed Marie Salomé Juliar, whose family had emigrated from France in 1845.¹⁸ Over the next 22 years, Salomé would give birth to eight children; seven boys and one girl. After moving from one midwestern city to another in an attempt to grow their family harness-making operation, the Ringling family eventually settled in Baraboo, Wisconsin in 1882. It was here in Baraboo that the Ringling Brothers Circus was officially conceived.¹⁹

While later years saw the brothers enjoying the fruits of their labor in New York City penthouses, and gliding down city streets in luxury automobiles, the Ringling children were raised in extreme poverty. McGregor resident Miss Gretchen Daugenberger recollected when the local practical nurse and midwife came to visit her mother, exclaiming “Mrs Daugenberger! The Ringlings up the Hollow have just had another baby. There isn’t a second sheet for the mother’s bed, nor a stitch of clothing for the new babe. It is a pitiful state of affairs.”²⁰ Although impoverished, August and Salomé raised each of their children to be tenacious, ethical, and loyal. What the Ringling patriarch and matriarch could not provide financially, they compensated with the promotion of good character. As author David Weeks notes, “both grave in manner and anxious for their children’s good, lived out their thoroughly puritan precepts of unfailing honesty, self-discipline, and fidelity.”²¹

¹⁸ Weeks, *Ringling*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-9.

²⁰ Marian C. Rischmueller, “The Ringlings of McGregor,” *The Palimpsest* 25, no. 6 (1944), 184.

²¹ Weeks, *Ringling*, 6.

Although historical accounts vary, it was at some point during the late 1860s and early 1870s that the Ringling boys attended their very first circus. August Ringling repaired a harness for a visiting circus equestrian, and in lieu of payment, August accepted a pass to the circus for his family.²² Soon after, the brothers began putting together their own small-scale, local shows over the next several years while residing in McGregor and later, Baraboo, Wisconsin. These early performances featured the boys parading through town with local animals in tow, bright costumes, music, and even acrobatics.²³ While these acts may have appeared to be simple expressions of childhood play, the Ringling brothers had lofty ambitions. After spending the next several years working alternately in their father's harness shop and appearing in small traveling circuses, the Ringlings made the bold decision to go out on their own. The Ringling brothers officially launched their professional career in 1882 with a comedy show and town hall concert, then gradually acquired performers with various talents to join their troupe. John Ringling had initially taken on a performer role, appearing as a Dutch clown, but quickly found that he was better suited for logistics and accounting.²⁴ Intelligent, well-versed, and driven, even at a young age, it was apparent that John Ringling would settle for nothing less than the success of himself and his brothers.

There was no question that John Ringling loved the circus. He and his six brothers (all seven had involvement in the circus at varying stages), opened their very first complete traveling circus in conjunction with famed circus veteran Yankee Robinson, titled "Yankee Robinson and the Ringling Bros. Great Double Shows, Circus and Caravan" in 1884, and John

²² Simon, *The Greatest Shows*, 12.

²³ Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, 5-6.

²⁴ Weeks, *Ringling*, 8-11.

stayed involved in the art form until his death in 1936. He was known to be a decisive man, confident in his ability to achieve a desired outcome. His expectations were high, and he savored the control that his profession required.²⁵ Ringling avoided intimate social relationships both within the circus, and outside the tent, and kept a close circle of friends, many of whom were also family members. While Ringling may have seemed cold and aloof, he and his brothers were recognized as superb employers, highly respected by those who worked for them.²⁶ John Ringling and his brothers helped to create a community like no other.

While there were years with financial challenges, and even fatal accidents, the Ringling brothers pressed on, and they did so with tremendous character.²⁷ Jerry Apps notes “unlike many circuses, traveling medicine shows, and other rural attractions, the Ringling Brothers’ show was an honest show-no shortchanging, pickpockets, or game-of-chance cheats.”²⁸ Their parents had instilled in them the importance of working hard, and working with integrity, values each of the brothers honored truly. The Ringlings were a family, and every performer, employee, and even patron was a member of this one-of-a-kind community.

Author Hasia R. Diner describes culture as “a range of abstract and interior matters including the beliefs and values, attitudes and aspirations, fears and emotions distinctive to any particular people at specific moments in time and place.”²⁹ Diner’s assessment of culture is appropriate in defining exactly what the Ringling brothers and their circus created; a core set of beliefs and values in regards to sound business practices, the attitudes and aspirations of

²⁵ Weeks, *Ringling*, 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-18.

²⁷ Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, 25-63.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁹ Hasia R. Diner, “Immigration and Ethnic Culture,” in *A Companion to American Cultural History*, ed. Karen Halltunen (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 154.

each and every participant to excel in his or her profession, and the fears and emotions that were specific to those who had experienced this volatile and fast-paced way of life. Circus performers and employees came from the far reaches of the world; they were unique in talent, and often unique in appearance. Many of them would not be able to make a living performing in their native countries, but in the circus, they could thrive. In 1908, Ringling Brothers Circus performers and employees came from over 22 different nations.³⁰ Author Janet Davis notes the paradox within the circus, with performers often having to portray racial and ethnic stereotypes, or exploit their physical deformities, but also allowing for circus folk to “find a refuge of sorts in this nomadic community of oddballs.”³¹ There was a shared culture among performers, and the circus was their safe haven.

Although Davis points out that the circus was not entirely immune to racial and gender divisions within the industry, circus relationships tended to demonstrate a camaraderie between individuals that would generally be seen as taboo, especially during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Sideshow performer Carrie Holt, known as a “fat lady” along with her “racially and physically diverse coworkers” formed a club that had rules to be followed and dues that were collected.³² Jerry Apps notes that employees of the circus spent nearly seven months a year together, working, eating, sleeping, and socializing.³³ It was inevitable that bonds would form, but what many circus folk discovered was a desire, and perhaps somewhat of a necessity, to maintain those relationships even into the off-season.

³⁰ Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, 87.

³¹ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 46.

³² Ibid, 72.

³³ Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, 81.

In the mid-1930s, circus and carnival performers and employees began to spend their winters in Gibsonton, Florida, a small town on the banks of the Alafia River, about 45 miles north of Sarasota. Initially the performers were drawn to the area because of the warm climate, good fishing, and solitude. What they also found was a place that they could embrace their profession and feel safe in doing so. Retired performers owned small businesses, and those still in the industry were able to store their equipment (and even practice their acts) on their own property. In the early 1960s, the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus relocated their winter quarters a little over twenty miles south to Venice, Florida from Sarasota, and at that time, many circus performers moved to Gibsonton permanently.³⁴ Although audiences enjoyed attending the circus, there was definitive social obstruction that separated the circus folk from their audiences.³⁵ Gibtown, as it was affectionately referred to by locals, was a sanctuary, and because of the circus, its residents found a place where they could be proud of what was not just a job, but a true way of life.

Beyond the key role that the circus played in the establishment of a culture among circus performers and employees, it also had an immense impact on mass culture. According to Charles F. McGovern, mass culture is widely referred to “as art, amusements, or expressions produced along industrial principles for large markets that are usually distinct from communities that cohere within discrete social or geographic borders.”³⁶ McGovern discusses the debate amongst historians between whether or not mass culture set expectations that were

³⁴ Larry Rohter, “Gibsonton Journal; Carny Performers Build a Haven by Tampa Bay,” *New York Times*, January 26, 1992. Accessed February 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/26/us/gibsonton-journal-carny-performers-build-a-haven-by-tampa-bay.html>.

³⁵ Weeks, *Ringling*, 11.

³⁶ McGovern, “Consumer Culture,” 184.

impractical and encouraged immorality, or if mass culture allowed for society to have an outlet for entertainment and aspiration.³⁷ Various facets of the circus could be interpreted from either perspective, for example, in considering sideshow acts. Some scholars have argued that men and women of countless ethnicities, shapes, and sizes, some with extreme physical deformities, were exploited for the cheap amusement of circus patrons, as in the case of Willie and George Muse, albino African-American boys who were forced from circus-to-circus with no pay while their mother fought for their return.³⁸ It could also be argued as giving Americans an opportunity to be introduced to people from other areas of the world, or people that simply may not look like anyone they had ever seen before, while the sideshow employees bonded with other like individuals. Author M. Alison Kibler notes the potential disconnect, stating that “freaks” could gain wealth and notoriety from their profession, but were also subject to long work hours and the meddling of their superiors in personal affairs.³⁹ This is no more evident than in the case of Charles Stratton, known widely as “General Tom Thumb.” Stratton, a dwarf, traveled the globe as an internationally recognized performer working for P.T. Barnum, which proved to be highly profitable.⁴⁰ No matter how the circus or its many acts were perceived, there is no doubt that the art form contributed tremendously to the ideology of mass culture as it evolved the late 1800s and early 1900s.

³⁷ McGovern, “Consumer Culture,” 184-186.

³⁸ Jeff Baker, “Two Black Brothers Enslaved by the Circus; In ‘Truevine’ Beth Macy tells the harrowing story of the black albino brothers held as virtual prisoners on the sideshow circuit of 100 years ago,” *Wall Street Journal (online)*, October 14, 2016.

³⁹ M. Alison Kibler, “Performance and Display,” in *A Companion to American Cultural History*, ed. Karen Halltunen (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 314.

⁴⁰ Matthew Wittman, “Around the World with General Tom Thumb,” Accessed May 18, 2020, <http://www.matthewwittmann.com/mapping/general-tom-thumb/>.

Even decades after John Ringling's passing, the circus has proved to be an integral part of mass culture. In 1951, Cecil B. DeMille filmed much of "The Greatest Show on Earth" in the streets of Sarasota. The film went on to win the Academy Award for best picture that year, demonstrating that both Ringling and the art form that is the circus has the ability to transcend generations, defy socioeconomic status, and be acknowledged as a legitimate entity.

McGovern argues that "mass culture and consumption both have been integral in the modern United States by fostering and embodying national identity."⁴¹ In terms of the circus and mass culture, there is validity in McGovern's assessment. The circus provided an innovative form of family entertainment and encouraged people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds to dream beyond what was considered to be within the realm of possibility during this period. A typical circus experience could include observing a variety of performances, a visit to the museum tent, viewing exotic animals in cages, and witnessing unusual sideshow acts.⁴² The circus allowed for hardworking men and women to escape their realities just for a few hours and enjoy time with their children and fellow members of their communities. When the circus began to travel across the nation, it allowed audiences in New York City to have something in common with audiences in Peoria, Illinois. The circus created an industry of its own that not only bonded a community of performers, as well as the nation, together, but was highly profitable from a financial standpoint.

⁴¹ McGovern, "Consumer Culture," 185.

⁴² Michael Murphy, *American Experience*, season 30, episode 10, "The Circus, Part One," written and directed by Sharon Grimberg, aired October 9, 2018, PBS.

CHAPTER 3

CIRCUS AND CAPITALISM

“Every dollar that has accrued to the Ringling Brothers has been invested in gilt edge securities. Outside of the Wall Street clique, the Ringling Brothers are perhaps the largest holders of approved bonds in the United States.”⁴³

Show World, January 15, 1910

When considering the impact that the circus has had on America in the last 150 years, the idea of the art form having a noteworthy influence on corporate America may not be given much acknowledgment. Grand forms of entertainment, such as the circus, are so often associated with carefree family fun and lighthearted shows of imagination, that it is quite easy to disregard that they are legitimate corporations with the ability to generate sizeable revenue.⁴⁴ Davis, in reference to the circus, notes “its structural and ideological embodiment of a (traveling) company town gave its distant patrons an intimate look at the beliefs, values, and material practices of the new corporate order.”⁴⁵ Showbusiness is indeed a business, and a big business at that. Beginning in the late 1800s, the circus began to gain recognition in corporate America by yielding generous profits, and revolutionizing marketing and advertising.

⁴³ “Circus ‘Kings’ Cut a Large, Juicy Melon,” *Show World* V, No. 4, January 15, 1910, p. 18, Accessed April 5, 2020. <https://classic.circushistory.org/showworld/showworld1910.htm>.

⁴⁴ Weeks, *Ringling*, 11.

⁴⁵ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 39.

Author Susan Nance of *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus* recognizes the importance of the circus as a corporate entity, noting “following the Civil War, highly capitalized modern circuses merged the antebellum menageries and horse circuses into unified productions. They employed huge workforces of people and animals, modern technologies, and management schemes to serve consumers by wagon, trail, riverboat, and railway.”⁴⁶ In a short period of time, the circus became a contender in American industry. “Although much smaller in scale than giant trusts like Standard Oil and US Steel,” Davis points out, the circus was still capable of garnering ample profit.⁴⁷ In an excerpt from *Show World*, a weekly trade newspaper, the unnamed author opens his article with the headline “Ringling Brothers Clean Up a Cool Million During the Season of 1909.”⁴⁸ In the 1923 *New York Times* article “Ringling Buys Out Five Circus Rivals,” the unnamed author notes that John, Charles, Alfred (Alf T.), Otto, and Al Ringling embarked on their quest to become circus showmen with a mere \$5 between them.⁴⁹ In 1893, even with the distraction of the World’s Fair, and the United States being in the midst of a severe economic depression, patrons thronged to the circus. In Milwaukee alone, 14,000 people crowded an afternoon show with a standing-room only crowd.⁵⁰ In only a quarter of a century, the Ringlings proved that big dreams can translate into even bigger business.

⁴⁶ Susan Nance, *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 1.

⁴⁷ Davis, *The Circus Age*, 40.

⁴⁸ “Circus Kings,” 18.

⁴⁹ “Ringling Buys out Five Circus Rivals: Man Who Started as a Clown Now Controls the Entire Big Top Industry. Gets Garden Successor. Sells-Floto Which Leased Building for Next Spring Among Those Purchased.” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Sep 10, 1929.

⁵⁰ Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, 61-63.

Economic success was due to a variety of factors, and big dreams were simply the catalyst. As discussed in the previous chapter, American society was rapidly changing. The Victorian era gave way to a generation that craved entertainment and social gatherings. There was an expressed desire for Americans to learn about other cultures, and be exposed to what the world had to offer beyond their own front porches. There was no more singular factor in allowing this to become a reality than in the advent of modern transportation, and in the case of the circus, the most significant form was the railroad.

The modern railroad allowed for coast-to-coast travel, and granted showmen the ability to transport massive amounts of equipment, people, and animals great distances in a relatively short amount of time. Prior to this mode of mass transportation, the Ringling brothers relied on wagons, which did not allow them to move nearly as much cargo as they needed to support their operation. Wagon travel was also difficult in that it forced them to navigate poorly marked roads, and in many cases, “roads” were little more than loose rock and dirt that frequently turned into mud with the slightest drip of precipitation.⁵¹ Modern railways transformed the business of the circus. By the turn of the century, the Ringling train grew to 92 cars carrying one thousand people, their big top was large enough to seat 14,000 patrons, and their lot was the twice the size of Soldier Field in Chicago.⁵² In addition to railways allowing circuses to reach small towns throughout the nation, the brothers had also performed in big cities like Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, and San Francisco, resulting in much fanfare and swelling profits.

⁵¹ Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, 21.

⁵² Duncan Wall, *The Ordinary Acrobat: A Journey into the Wondrous World of the Circus, Past and Present*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 201.

Streamlined modes of transportation also allowed for different entities within the operation to arrive at times that would most benefit each performance. One of the most recognizable facets of the circus, even to this day, was its advertising. In no industry at that time were there marketing campaigns that compared to that of the circus, and the signature tool in these campaigns were the circus posters. Several months before a show was scheduled to arrive, a group of individuals from the circus would visit a particular town to set the stage. Colorful railroad cars pulled into town, prepared to plaster every storefront, barn, and barren wall with the eye-catching artwork. Sometimes hundreds of the same poster appeared on one façade, and other times, several different posters were pasted on the exterior of an entire building, fusing together to create one giant billboard. While the cost was significant, so was the impact, creating an impending sense of excitement and anticipation for the townsfolk. The marketing and advertising departments of the circus were a particularly essential cog in the wheel contributing to the economic success of the industry.⁵³

Similar to other industries at the time, there was a specific structure and operating system within the circus, and this began when the brothers first established. Each brother assumed a position that he was the most qualified for, but also one that he would enjoy. In his book, brother Alf. T. pointedly claimed that there was no discussion or debate as to whom would perform what task. Each brother simply gravitated to his preferred function, and by sheer chance, there was no overlap amongst them. Alf. T. also made it abundantly clear that when it came to business, no one brother was more important than the other, stating “equality between the Ringling brothers from the very beginning of their career has insured them

⁵³Davis, *The Circus Age*, 42-44.

success.”⁵⁴ Although Ringling’s biography may seem biased and self-serving, Apps, a primary historian in Ringling brothers history, concurs. He notes that the brothers took pride in their show, and there was not a task that was beneath their status. They made meticulous wardrobe decisions for their performers, knew the cost of supplies for their traveling productions throughout the country, and never missed a show. The brothers designed their own advertisements, built seating, hand-lettered and stitched canvas covers for their wagons, and even cut trees from a local swamp to fashion tent poles. As it would remain for the duration of their careers, there was not a facet of the circus operation that the brothers were not involved in.⁵⁵

Perhaps the Ringling brothers’ most formidable proficiency was not the musical instruments they could play, or the high wires they could walk with great skill, but their knack for organization. In his article “Circus Preserved,” *Chicago Tribune* writer Don Davenport notes that circuses gained such notoriety for their unmatched ability to set up, tear down, pack and unpack day in and day out, that the militaries of numerous countries took note, and actually implemented circus techniques in their tactical operations.⁵⁶ Famed high wire walker and member of prominent circus family “The Flying Wallendas” Nik Wallenda points out that the circus has, over time been likened to chaos. He notes that Washington D.C. is frequently referred to as a “circus,” connotating disorganization and irrelevance. Wallenda stated that, on the contrary, the circus was “extremely organized.”⁵⁷ Nowhere were the Ringling’s

⁵⁴ Ringling, *Life Story*, 125.

⁵⁵ Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, 18-22.

⁵⁶ Don Davenport, “Circus Preserved,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 5, 1996, accessed July 21, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1996-05-05-9605050069-story.html>.

⁵⁷ Wallenda, interview.

organizational abilities more evident than in their operation of both the temporary canvas villages set up along the route and the winter quarters.⁵⁸

Ringlingville was the name bestowed upon the community that was set up at each and every stop along the performance route (not to be confused with the Ringlingville that also referenced the winter quarters in Baraboo). Akin to a small city, Ringlingville provided mail services, barbers, detectives, physicians, veterinarians, and a storekeeper that set up shop all on the Ringling payroll. These were not only essential components for a successful show, but were necessary to create a sense of comfort and stability for the crew and performers.⁵⁹

While the show was on the road from April to November, the winter months were just as critical for the Ringling brothers. The animals still needed to be housed and fed, tents and wagons required repairs and maintenance, and performers needed to train and practice exciting new acts. Over the course of approximately 23 years, the brothers owned homes, carpentry shops, a hotel, performer housing, offices, barns, storage facilities, and more, in Baraboo, Wisconsin. Hundreds of people were employed, and much of the revenue generated in Baraboo came from the pockets of the Ringling brothers. Throughout the years, buildings were purchased, buildings were constructed, and buildings were repurposed to support the ever-growing circus.

As the Ringling brothers shows continued to gain notoriety and surge in popularity, their rivals began to dwindle. In 1905, the brothers purchased half of the historic Forepaugh-Sells show, and acquired the remainder, which was then owned by circus magnate James

⁵⁸ Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, 85-86.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 85-86.

Bailey, in 1906. With the passing of Bailey, Ringling's greatest competitor (P.T. Barnum had preceded Bailey in death several years prior), yet another opportunity presented itself. In 1907, the Ringling brothers became owners of the Barnum and Bailey Circus.⁶⁰ The brothers continued to run the three circuses as separate entities until 1911, when the Forepaugh-Sells show was closed.⁶¹ By 1919, the remaining two shows joined forces to create the mega-circus, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey, the Greatest Show on Earth.⁶² Corporate mergers were not a new concept in America, but for the circus world, this merger was monumental.

Shortly after the merger with Barnum and Bailey, the Ringling brothers came to the stark realization that the current winter quarters in Baraboo could not support both shows. After 34 years of residing in Wisconsin, the brothers made the difficult decision to relocate their winter quarters to Bridgeport, Connecticut, the winter home of the Barnum & Bailey Circus.⁶³ The combined shows spent just under a decade in Bridgeport before the Ringlings crafted a new plot for wintering, and this one involved sun, sand, and plenty of opportunity. In 1927, the Ringling brothers packed up and headed south.

⁶⁰ Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, 126-127.

⁶¹ Ibid., 172.

⁶² Deborah W. Walk, Jennifer Lemmer Posey, Frederick Dahlinger, Jr., *Circus Museum: The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art*, (New York: Scala Arts Publishers, Inc., 2014), 5.

⁶³ Davenport, "Circus Preserved".

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RINGLING RESIDUAL

“Sarasota owes its modern identity to the vision and deeds of John Ringling.”⁶⁴

Gary Mormino, 2005

Today’s Florida is synonymous with tropical beachfront resorts, crowded theme parks filled with mouse-eared, wand-wielding children, and interstate thoroughfares where the term “congestion” is a colossal understatement. In 2018 alone, nearly 125 million people visited the sunshine state, and in the previous year, the travel and tourism industry supported, both directly and indirectly, around 1.5 million jobs.⁶⁵ When considering those who call Florida home, the 2019 population estimate shows over 21,400,000 residents.⁶⁶ Just over a century ago, however, La Florida (a name bestowed upon the region by Spain in the mid 1520s), appeared vastly different.⁶⁷

Around the time that the Ringling brothers staged their first parade through the streets of McGregor, Iowa, Florida declared only approximately 250,000 residents, ranking it the least

⁶⁴ Mormino, *Land of Sunshine*, 329.

⁶⁵ “Research FAQ,” Visit Florida, accessed January 23, 2020, <https://www.visitflorida.org/resources/research/research-faq/>.

⁶⁶ “Florida: 2019 Population Estimates,” United States Census Bureau, accessed January 22, 2020, https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?q=florida+population&page=1&stateGeo=none&searchtype=web&cssp=SERP&_charset=UTF-8.

⁶⁷ Michael Gannon, “First European Contacts,” in *The History of Florida*, ed. Michael Gannon (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 18-40.

populous state east of the Mississippi River. As modes of transportation became more easily accessible, however, so did the southernmost state. Beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century, and continuing over the next four decades, Florida saw a population boom twice that of the United States as a whole.⁶⁸ Between 1920 and 1925, Florida saw its inhabitants grow from 968,740, which was less than Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, respectively, to over 1.4 million by 1925.⁶⁹ Enticed by the warm climate, immense parcels of undeveloped land, and the prospect of a new start, northerners flocked to the region.

Although author David Nelson claims “more than any other moment in Florida’s history, the debut of the state’s exhibit at Chicago’s Century of Progress world’s fair in 1933 marked the beginning of modern Florida tourism,”⁷⁰ several noteworthy attractions were in business far before the appearance at the fair. In the late 1870s, Silver Springs, with its crystal-clear waters and glass-bottom boats, was the first tourist attraction in the state, and is still in operation to this day.⁷¹ Dixieland Park, the St. Augustine Alligator Farm, the Fountain of Youth, and the Orlando Museum of Art also opened their doors in the early 20th century. Cities such as St. Augustine, Miami, and Tampa began to draw visitors due to the increased accessibility that the growing rail lines provided. By the turn of the century, towns were becoming incorporated at a rapid pace as the demand for a domestic paradise by wealthy tourists increased. On the west coast of Florida, just south of Tampa, lies a jewel by the sea. Although the name ‘Sarasota’ first appeared on a map in 1839, it was not established as a town

⁶⁸ Thomas Graham, “The First Developers,” in *The History of Florida*, ed. Michael Gannon (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), 276-295.

⁶⁹ Mormino, *Land of Sunshine*, 45.

⁷⁰ David Nelson, “When Modern Tourism Was Born: Florida at the World Fairs and on the World Stage in the 1930s,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2010), 435.

⁷¹ “Park History,” Silver Springs State Park, accessed January 23, 2020, <https://silversprings.com/park-history/>.

until 1902, and eventually incorporated as a city in 1913.⁷² In the early 20th century, Sarasota, with the advocacy of a distinct group of individuals, was well on its way to becoming a household name.

Although Sarasota was rich in vegetation and sources of food, including fish, game, and an abundance of fruit, settlement to the area was significantly delayed by the Seminole wars. In the mid-to-late 1850s, Sarasota slowly began to attract its first permanent settlers. These men and women began to develop an agricultural community, ranging from fruit groves to cattle ranching to sugar refining. As economic opportunities flourished, so followed the population. By the late 1870s, Sarasota erected its own post office and its first school, boasting a grand total of 12 pupils at its inception.⁷³ It did not take long, however, for the good word to spread, and for Sarasota to begin attracting wealthy ladies and gentlemen looking for a place to create their very own tropical utopia.

In 1886, John Hamilton Gillespie arrived from Scotland at the urging of his father, an investor in the Florida Mortgage and Investment Company. The FMIC was one of many companies throughout Florida history that sold hardworking, hopeful families on the promise that they could proudly own a slice of paradise, only to deliver inhospitable and uninhabitable swampland. Unlike many of his counterparts, the senior Gillespie was compelled to make sure that those who invested in Sarasota were given what they were pledged.⁷⁴ Dubbed “the father of Sarasota,” J.H. Gillespie made an impact in short order, becoming the city’s first mayor in

⁷² “Sarasota History,” History & Preservation Coalition of Sarasota County, accessed January 9, 2020, <http://historicpreservationsarasota.org/sarasotahistory>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Harold Bubil, “Sarasota’s 1st Developer: John Hamilton Gillespie,” *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, October 22 2011, accessed November 21, 2019, <https://www.heraldtribune.com/news/20111022/sarasotas-1st-developer-john-hamilton-gillespie>.

1902, and maintained this position for six terms. Until his death in 1923, Gillespie continued to engage in a variety of notable projects, including the construction of a wharf, starting a sizeable experimental farm, and even held the title of Justice of Peace for four years. J.H. Gillespie also earned the distinct honor of having introduced Florida to the sport of golf, going on to design and build seven courses throughout the state, and one in Havana, Cuba.⁷⁵

The year 1910 brought well-known Chicago socialite and widow, Mrs. Berthe Palmer. Having served as the chair of the Board of Lady Managers for the Chicago World's Fair, Mrs. Palmer was progressive and business savvy. Mrs. Palmer purchased a winter estate in Sarasota, but refused to spend her hours idly whiling away the sunset of her life. In the mere eight years she spent in Sarasota before passing away from breast cancer, Berthe Palmer was involved in agricultural ventures, real estate development, and horticulture, much of which is still on display at Historic Spanish Point, now operated as a museum and gardens.⁷⁶

Arriving in Sarasota only weeks after Mrs. Berthe Palmer was Owen Burns, who also moved from Chicago, and took no time to make his mark on the area. While Burns' name is not often recollected when discussing the early history of the city, he indeed had a significant impact. By 1911, a little over one year after relocating from the Midwest, he purchased \$35,000 worth of real estate from J.H. Gillespie, immediately taking ownership of 75% of Sarasota. It was Burns' ultimate objective to transform small-town Sarasota into a booming resort destination. Born into wealth, Burns' vision was easier to turn into reality than were the dreams of his self-made peers. Much of Burns' work was infrastructure, primarily dredging and filling,

⁷⁵ "John Hamilton Gillespie, Markers: Sarasota History," Sarasota History Alive, accessed January 17, 2020, <http://www.sarasotahistoryalive.com/history/markers/john-hamilton-gillespie/>.

⁷⁶ "Mrs. Potter Palmer: The Legendary Lady," Historic Spanish Point, accessed January 21, 2020, <https://www.historicspanishpoint.org/about-us/history/palmer/>.

but he also founded a bank, formed a trade organization that later became the chamber of commerce, constructed a hotel, and owned and operated a fruit sales company. Owen Burns and John Ringling were also long time business associates on several projects, although their relationship turned sour, and the two parted ways less than amicably.⁷⁷

A prominent Sarasota businessman that John Ringling *did* have a harmonious relationship with was Ralph Caples. Mr. Caples, who first visited Sarasota in 1899, had immediately seen the potential in this quaint, seaside town. In 1909, after several trips, Caples and his wife, Ellen, decided to make Sarasota their permanent home. Buying and selling property was Caples' specialty, but he also had a vested interest in both the railroad and advertising industries. Caples made several significant contributions to the city, from philanthropy to supporting the establishment of the New College of Florida, but convincing John and Charles Ringling to buy homes in Sarasota was by far his most remarkable.⁷⁸

In 1909, John and Mable Ringling paid a visit to their friends, Ralph and Ellen Caples, at their home in Shell Beach, located on the pristine Sarasota Bay. Sensing that John and Mable were interested in the area, Caples purchased a property adjacent to his estate in hopes that the couple would, in turn, purchase it from him. Caples' intuition proved to be correct, and in 1912, John and Mable Ringling purchased their first home in Sarasota. Just one year later, Charles Ringling bought an adjoining property, and began creating his legacy in the city by the bay.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Harold Bubil, "Owen Burns: He Built This City," *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, November 7, 2010, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://www.heraldtribune.com/article/LK/20101107/News/605228588/SH>.

⁷⁸ "Caples Convinced Ringlings to Come to Sarasota," *Sarasota Magazine*, November 17, 2017, Accessed December 11, 2020, <https://www.sarasotamagazine.com/news-and-profiles/2014/11/caples-ringlings-sarasota>.

⁷⁹ "Caples Convinced Ringlings," 2017.

In 1910, just one year after the Ringlings first visited the area, a town census indicated that Sarasota had a total of only 840 residents.⁸⁰ It was a town with unlimited potential, and a handful of believers with exceptionally deep pockets. Just as John Ringling believed that someday he could turn himself from a street performer into the world's greatest entertainer, he wholeheartedly believed that Sarasota could become an international mecca of arts and culture.

When 1912 arrived, not only were the residents of Sarasota craving growth and development, but John Ringling was longing for evolution as well. Mr. Ringling, while he would always have a passion for the circus and stay involved in the show until his death, he was also not content to live a life without variety, without indulgence, without proving that he could do more than just put on a grand show. Over the course of his 70 years, Ringling was involved in industries as vast as railroad, oil, real estate, and hotel, amongst others. The showbiz magnate held over 35 corporate roles by the time he passed in 1936.⁸¹ While he maintained primary residency on the legendary Park Avenue in New York City where he hobnobbed with the city's most elite, his desire to leave a legacy lie in Sarasota.

When Ringling purchased his first home in Sarasota, the city was growing at a rapid pace. It was now served by both passenger rail and steamship, maintained miles of sidewalks and roads, and possessed telephone service. People could stay in one of several hotels, purchase real estate from a variety of brokers, and could play a round of golf.⁸² They could enjoy the beach, and spend the warm, sunny Florida days hunting or fishing. What visitors to Sarasota, and residents alike, did not have access to in the early 20th century, however, was arts and

⁸⁰ "Sarasota's Circus Legacy Lives On!," The Ringling, Accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.ringling.org/sarasotas-circus-legacy-lives>.

⁸¹ Weeks, *Ringling*, xiii.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 36-37.

culture. Berthe Palmer, Owen Burns, John Hamilton Gillespie, and Ralph Caples laid the foundation for Sarasota to become a city, but it was John Ringling who made it a destination. Though John and Mable became homeowners in Sarasota in 1911, they did not immediately become active members of the community. Their first several winter seasons were spent making improvements to their home, with John planning and executing renovations and expansions, and Mable tending to her beloved rose garden. In fact, for the entire first decade of his southernmost homeownership, Ringling spent the majority of his time paying mind to his various other business ventures throughout the country, while limiting his affairs in Sarasota to real estate transactions.⁸³

Ringling's first major purchase in Sarasota, aside from his own residence, was a broad swath of land on Shell Beach, a joint investment with his good friend and neighbor, Ralph Caples. Several years later, in 1917, he purchased the Sarasota Yacht and Automobile Club, which had been foreclosed upon, and many years later, converted into apartments. This was one of numerous development projects that Ringling took on with Owen Burns.⁸⁴ Ringling continued to collect land, and by the mid-1920s, John, in conjunction with his brother, Charles, claimed ownership to 66,000 acres of land in the Eastern portion of Sarasota County alone.⁸⁵ Ringling also lay claim to several barrier islands, which today, boast some of Florida's most expensive real estate.

In 1925, John Ringling, along with Ralph Caples and Charles Ringling, made a grand announcement that a new Ritz-Carlton Hotel and Resort would be constructed on the Sarasota

⁸³ Weeks, *Ringling*, 51.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 73-79.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

waterfront. After much fanfare, a permit was secured and work commenced in 1926.⁸⁶ Ill-fated from conception, as the project was faced with financing and tax issues, Ringling abandoned the project in 1927, leaving an unfinished shell of a resort to decay on Longboat Key. It was demolished nearly four decades after its groundbreaking.⁸⁷

It was not until the conclusion of World War I that John Ringling decided to make Sarasota his primary focus.⁸⁸ While he had spent the preceding several years acquiring various properties in the area, it was not until the 1920s that John and Mable decided to take a more active and visible role in the community. At this point, Ringling also began to appear more socially throughout the area, previously limiting his engagements to affairs at his own or Charles and Edith's residence. Mable was elected president of the local garden club, and the two began to attend various functions.⁸⁹ John Ringling also began to develop much of the property that he had accumulated over the years. The 1920s marked the decade of the Ringlings in Sarasota, and what he did for the area over the span of ten years would make the city of Sarasota what it is today. The transformation began with the construction of one of Florida's most stunning private residences.

John Ringling was notorious for thriving on the glitz and glamour that accompanied a life in the circus. He loved the bright lights, the bold colors, the flair and the fanfare. Ringling also, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, had an affinity for the more subtle, the more refined. In particular, John and Mable appreciated the architecture and ornamentation that characterized the finest of Italian palazzos. Designed by celebrated architect Dwight James Baum, with

⁸⁶ Weeks, *Ringling*, 97-104.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 146

⁸⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 76.

plentiful input from both John and Mable, their new residence, Ca' d'Zan (translated with distinctive egocentricity into "House of John"), was completed in 1926.⁹⁰ Unique in its design and constructed specifically to endure the battering rain, blistering heat, and the violent hurricanes that characterized the Florida climate, Ca' d'Zan remains a striking visual reminder of the mark made on Sarasota by John and Mable Ringling.

Elegant and spacious, Ca' d'Zan was 36,000 square feet filled with furniture crafted by the most skilled artisans, intricately-woven tapestries, and even a custom-built organ designed for entertaining. Boasting 41 rooms and 15 bathrooms, the palatial estate was well-suited to host guests from around the world.⁹¹ What Ca' d'Zan lacked, however, was the space required to house John and Mable's most prized possession, their rapidly growing international collection of fine art.

John Ringling's interest in art began in the early 1900s. Upon meeting Mable, he discovered that she, too, shared his passion. Primarily self-taught, the two attended estate sales and art auctions in the early stages of their collections. As they progressed in age and experience, and expanded their travels, their taste became more refined. They began to peruse art catalogues, and work with international dealers to ensure that they were purchasing authentic and valuable pieces.⁹² Art collecting was more than just a hobby to Mable and John; it was a job that they took extremely seriously, and it would come to be a significant part of their legacy. After a quarter-century of acquisition, Ringling retained a substantial collection.

⁹⁰ Weeks, *Ringling*, 113-129.

⁹¹ "History of the Ringling, The Building of Ca' d'Zan," The Ringling, Accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.ringling.org/history-ringling>.

⁹² K. Lee De Groft, "In and Out of the Auction House: Collector to Connoisseur," in *John Ringling, Dreamer-Builder-Collector*, ed. Mark Ormond, Aaron De Groft, Gene Ray, (Sarasota, FL: The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art Foundation, Inc., 1996), 56-59.

A collection broad enough to fuel another one of his longing desires; the construction of an art museum.

In 1925, Ringling announced that he intended to construct an art museum as a gift to the people of Florida. Although the city of Orlando, northeast of Sarasota, established an art museum in 1924, Weeks notes that there was “no major museum for public enjoyment in the southeastern states.”⁹³ While Ringling was urged to consider opening his museum in a larger metropolitan area, such as New York City, Ringling refused.⁹⁴ He had developed an affinity for Sarasota, and chose a museum as just one of the many ways that he could help distinguish the area.

Construction on the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art commenced in 1927. In addition to hiring contractors and craftsmen from the area, helping to boost the local economy, John and Mable had not only been acquiring art to fill the galleries of their museum, but to construct the museum as well. The facility featured fountains and columns imported from Italy, decorative materials purchased from auctions in New York and abroad, and even full rooms that were deconstructed in their original location and reassembled at the Ringling.⁹⁵ While the prospect of an art museum was grand news for the area, Ringling made another monumental decision that would forever alter the course of Sarasota.

In 1927, at the annual lavish Sara de Sota Pageant, John Ringling made the proclamation that at the end of the current performance season, he would be moving the

⁹³ David Weeks, “The Dream Realized: The Building of the Museum,” in *John Ringling, Dreamer-Builder-Collector*, ed. Mark Ormond, Aaron De Groft, Gene Ray, (Sarasota, FL: The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art Foundation, Inc., 1996), 10-11.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16-20.

Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey to Sarasota. Hailed as the “most startling and important announcement in the history of Sarasota” by the *Sarasota Herald*, the city was ignited by the sheer thought.⁹⁶ It was not just Sarasotans that were excited by the move, however. According to author and Ringling descendant Pat Buck Ringling, Miami Beach entrepreneur N.B.T. Roney purchased a full-page ad in a local Miami newspaper singing the praises of John Ringling and welcoming he and the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus to Florida.⁹⁷

The winter quarters were an entertaining, yet necessary component of any circus. The performance season typically extended from April through early-to-mid-November, but the end of one season simply heralded the start of another. While some performers spent their winters performing in circuses throughout Europe, many stayed to continue their training and prepare their acts for the next season. The winter was also a time for equipment maintenance, the construction of new tents and set pieces, and logistical and financial planning. The operation of the winter quarters was also important in stimulating the economy of the city it was located in.

The Ringling brothers established their first winter quarters in Baraboo, Wisconsin. For 34 years, the Ringlings spent nearly five months out of the year in Baraboo, employing local craftsmen, patronizing local businesses, and utilizing community services. Author Jerry Apps, using figures from the 1916 winter season estimates that between wages paid, materials purchased, feed for the animals, and utilities, the amount contributed to the local economy was

⁹⁶ “Ringling Circus To Move Here,” *Sarasota Herald*, March 23, 1927.

⁹⁷ Pat Ringling Buck, “The Winter Headquarters,” *Sarasota Magazine* 17, No. 2 (1995), 48. https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.lib.umb.edu/apps/doc/A16642030/ITOF?u=mlin_b_umass&sid=ITOF&xid=6c52a893.

over \$18,000. In 2020 dollars, this would equal just short of \$500,000. When the Ringling brothers merged with Barnum and Bailey, they declared their intent to relocate to the larger winter quarters occupied by Barnum and Bailey in Bridgeport, Connecticut. In 1918, the show headed east after the completion of the performance season, and many in Baraboo were devastated. No longer would they hear the lions roar, or see the performers strolling up and down the street. It was a loss of financial and cultural significance to the little Wisconsin town.⁹⁸

Bridgeport was winter home to the circus for more than a half-century before the Ringlings rode into town. Home of the infamous P.T. Barnum and the Barnum and Bailey Circus, it remained their winter quarters even after his passing in 1891. What is now the most populous city in Connecticut was a prime location for the Barnum and Bailey winter quarters, as it was not far from New York City, arguably the most important stop on their route, as well as being on the banks of Black Rock Harbor.⁹⁹ Although the Ringling Brothers relocated their entire enterprise to Bridgeport in 1918, their stay would be short-lived. By 1927, John Ringling was the only Ringling brother still alive. Winters were difficult in New England, and John Ringling was aging. He had already established a life in Sarasota, and was hoping that moving the winter quarters down south would not only assist him in selling much of the real estate he had invested in over the years, but to also contribute to his objective of turning Sarasota into a cultural phenomenon on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. While the economic impact of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus' departure from Bridgeport is not apparent

⁹⁸ Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, 205-206.

⁹⁹ "About Bridgeport," Bridgeport, Connecticut, Accessed January 11, 2020, <https://www.bridgeportct.gov/content/341454/341458/default.aspx>.

from the perusal of newspaper articles, or through archival searches via Bridgeport's library and historical society, it is evident that P.T. Barnum is very much a celebrated part of the town's heritage. Bridgeport is home to The Barnum Museum, has preserved Barnum's birthplace, maintains both an elementary school and college building named in Barnum's honor, exhibits a statue of the showman, and hosts an annual Barnum Festival. Bridgeport has embraced its identity as a circus city, just as Sarasota would come to do.

John and Mable, along with Charles and Edith Ringling, had developed a fondness for Sarasota over the previous 15 years. John and Charles invested in thousands of acres of land, including several islands, in hopes of creating a resort. In this period of time, however, John saw the area as much more than simply an opportunity to produce income. He had built the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art with the belief that Sarasota would become a genuine destination for the arts and culture. He bestowed gifts, both tangible and intangible, upon the city with the wish that present and future generations could experience art in various forms, be culturally sentient, and would be inspired to not only be creative, but to render social change through creativity. Not only did Ringling's contributions assist the city socially and culturally, but economically as well.

The relocation of the winter quarters was a move that pried Sarasota from the merciless claws of bankruptcy, and allowed the city to prosper into the thriving oasis that it is today. Author and descendant Pat Ringling Buck notes the substantial economic contributions of her great uncle in a 1995 *Sarasota Magazine* article entitled "The Winter Headquarters." Buck states "In Sarasota, the economic benefits of the move were immediately apparent, as several hundred men were put to work remodeling old buildings on the grounds and erecting new

ones,” and goes on to point out that two railroads, the Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Air Lines, constructed tracks that led to the site. Buck notes that over \$500,000 was being invested into the establishment of the winter quarters, and that a tremendous amount of jobs were created in doing so.¹⁰⁰ Author Ruthmary Bauer adds “The circus was an economic godsend for the city, sustaining local merchants and drawing visitors to the area to see practice performances.”¹⁰¹

The impact on the area was also evident in the various circus souvenir programs that are housed in the archives of the Circus Museum at the Ringling. In the program contains advertisements from local businesses, along with the various purchases that the circus made from their establishments. The Sarasota Hardware and Paint company listed the amount of materials purchased from the store for just one winter season, totaling over five tons of white lead, 2,832 gallons of paint and varnish, 157 packs of gold leaf, and 26 barrels of oil and adhesive.¹⁰² The programs also featured beautiful, full-page advertisements encouraging show patrons to pay a visit to sunny Sarasota. Apparently their efforts to draw tourists were successful, as Deborah Walk states “Sarasota, Florida, maybe 50,000 people in the whole county, all of a sudden would see annually 100,000 people coming down to see the cocoon from which the great show emerges.”¹⁰³ After the close of the first winter quarters season, which was a mere three months in duration, Sarasota had seen a 57% increase in tourism over the previous year, and now led the state.¹⁰⁴ In 1928, the *Sarasota Herald* noted “thousands of

¹⁰⁰ Ringling Buck, “The Winter Headquarters,” 48.

¹⁰¹ Bauer, “Sarasota”, 136

¹⁰² Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, “Winter Quarters Pictorial,” Official Souvenir Guide.

¹⁰³ Walk, *American Experience*.

¹⁰⁴ Ringling Buck, “The Winter Headquarters,” 50.

dollars have been placed in the coffers of the Community Chest this season from the gate receipts of the circus quarters, and once again Sarasota finds itself deeply indebted to the forethought and generosity of Mr. Ringling.”¹⁰⁵ From investing to supporting local businesses to philanthropy, there was no doubt that John Ringling and his circus were dedicated to Sarasota.

Always ambitious, a major component of the design of Ringling’s museum was the incorporation of an art school on the premises. John and Mable recognized the importance of a formal arts education, and were certain that there was no better place to learn than in a facility that could immerse the student in world-class subject material. The Ringlings had faith in Sarasota, and felt that the offering of an arts institute in conjunction with their museum would attract more dreamers, more creatives, and more individuals who fervently believed in the importance of promoting culture. Early conceptualizations of the school, which was primarily centered around the provision of higher education, even included a program for children. However, grand visions of a school within the museum collapsed with both an economic downturn and Mable’s untimely death in 1929. As with other ventures, John Ringling was reluctant to dismiss the idea of the school entirely.

After two years of reconfiguration, Ringling, in association with Dr. Ludd Spivey, president of Southern College in Lakeland, Florida, announced the intent to construct the School of Fine and Applied Arts of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art. The facility was no longer to be housed on the museum grounds, but instead in an abandoned hotel nearby. The school opened in the fall of 1931, and as a testament to Ringling’s status within the city

¹⁰⁵ “Circus Gates Closed Sunday,” *Sarasota Herald*, March 20, 1928.

of Sarasota, local businesses were closed for the day so that proprietors could attend the opening celebration.¹⁰⁶ After a respectable first year, Ringling once again expressed the importance of his ventures having an impact on the city of Sarasota. In a speech, Ringling referenced the student body, “Sarasota, as a community, and Florida, as a state, have begun to feel the refining influence of these high-minded people. If, during the years that are to come, the school continues to progress as it has during its first year, then this art center will have performed an extensive service in art education.”¹⁰⁷ While Ringling often lacked humility, in this circumstance, his professions prove to be strikingly accurate to this day.

Well-known artists were on faculty, and *Art Digest* magazine sung the school’s praises, but the facility was not without issue. Over the next several years, John Ringling’s health deteriorated rapidly, and he became unable to continue on in association with the school. Overwhelmed, Spivey acquiesced his position as director, and faculty member Verman Kimbrough assumed the role. The school was restructured, and was hereby known as the Ringling School of Art and Design (later changed to Ringling College of Art and Design).¹⁰⁸

While the school gained traction, Ringling’s personal life continued to wane. Combined with the Great Depression, and a sudden decline in John’s health, money flowed less liberally, and the museum, amongst other investments, were in jeopardy. Fortunately, Ringling was keenly aware of both his financial state as well as his poor health, and had the farsightedness to make adequate arrangements for Ca’ d’Zan, the museum property, and his vast collection of art. When John Ringling passed away in 1936, he had willed both the museum and Ca’ d’Zan

¹⁰⁶ Weeks, *Ringling*, 208-210.

¹⁰⁷ John Ringling, Address at Ringling School Opening, 1931, interview transcript, The Ringling Archives, Sarasota, FL.

¹⁰⁸ Weeks, *Ringling*, 212.

to the state of Florida, avoiding the potential for the estate to be dismantled and sold off to creditors. Although it took a decade of court wrangling, the final wish of John and Mable was granted, and the Ringling estate became a permanent gift to the people of Florida.¹⁰⁹ Author Pete Schmidt professes “much of Sarasota’s heritage and history, progress and prosperity, stem from this extraordinary man.”¹¹⁰

What Ca’ d’Zan and the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art have done for the State of Florida, and the city of Sarasota in particular, is nothing short of remarkable. Now known as ‘The Ringling,’ the estate encompasses 66 acres on the Sarasota waterfront, and houses Ca’ d’Zan, the art museum, the circus museum, the Historic Asolo Theatre, the art library, and Bayfront Gardens. The Ringling has become not only a destination to entertain and bewilder, but one to inspire and educate as well. The Ringling is an establishment in Sarasota, and a place of glory and wonder that would make John and Mable proud. Although the estate has fallen into periods of tumult and disrepair, it has now been under the vigilant care of the Florida State University for the past two decades.¹¹¹

In addition to Ca’ d’Zan and the art museum, The Ringling supports the performing arts, housing the Historic Asolo Theatre, home of the Sarasota Ballet. The Asolo, which dates back to 1798, and was relocated from Asolo, Italy in the early 1950s, also hosts theatrical performances, lectures, films, and musical engagements, amongst others. The theatre is a

¹⁰⁹ Weeks, *Ringling*, 24-25.

¹¹⁰ Pete Schmidt, “John Ringling, His Impact on Sarasota,” *Sarasota Life* 1, No. 4, December 1970.

¹¹¹ “History of the Ringling,” The Ringling, accessed January 21, 2020, <https://www.ringling.org/history-ringling>.

shining example of Italian architecture, and even just viewing the facility, a spectacle in itself, provides visitors with a cultural experience.¹¹²

Placing emphasis on the importance of arts education with access for all, The Ringling is also home to the Johnson-Blalock Education Center, a facility created specifically to educate, conserve, and conduct research. Within the walls of the Education Center lie the art library, which opened in 1946. The public is allowed, and encouraged, to come browse the stacks, which currently hold approximately 70,000 items.¹¹³ In addition to providing a facility for arts education, The Ringling offers continuing education opportunities for teachers, and has even offered a Master of Arts in Museum and Cultural Studies degree in conjunction with Florida State University.¹¹⁴

During the 2018-2019 season, over 415,000 guests were provided with an unmatched education in the visual and performing arts, horticulture, design, and history. Thousands of schoolchildren and low-income families have been admitted to The Ringling at reduced or no admission fee to experience what John and Mable Ringling worked so diligently to establish, and what the state of Florida has committed to facilitate. On Mondays, admission to the art museum is free to the public, as accessibility for all was important to John and Mable. The Ringling has also partnered with numerous local non-profit agencies to support literacy and arts education.¹¹⁵ While in competition with world-class beaches, prime shopping and dining,

¹¹² “History of the Ringling, Historic Asolo Theatre,” The Ringling, accessed January 21, 2020, <https://www.ringling.org/historic-asolo-theatre>.

¹¹³ “The Ringling Education Center,” The Ringling, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.ringling.org/art-library-0>.

¹¹⁴ “Master of Arts in Museum and Cultural Studies,” The Ringling, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.ringling.org/master-arts-museum-and-cultural-studies>.

¹¹⁵ “Annual Review,” The Ringling, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.ringling.org/sites/default/files/18-19.pdf>.

botanical gardens, aquariums, athletic events, theatres, and golf courses, The Ringling is consistently named a top attraction in Sarasota and surrounding areas.

The Ringling College of Art and Design continues to thrive, and offers eleven degree programs to over 1,600 top-tier students. The college claims an alumni rich with Academy and Emmy award recipients, and diverse with artists that have made themselves known throughout the world.¹¹⁶ The mission of the Ringling College of Art and Design is to “provide programs leading to degrees that prepare students to be discerning visual thinkers, and ethical practitioners in their chosen area of art and design.”¹¹⁷ Ringling himself, giving address at the school, stated “As this institution begins its second year, let us hope that still more success is ahead of us. Let us hope that each student will absorb something that will make him a happier individual, a better citizen, and a more artful person.”¹¹⁸ The Ringling College of Art and Design is now one of the premier fine arts schools in the world, thanks to Ringling’s incessant drive, generous financial contributions, and commitment to working in harmony with others towards a unified cause.

Past circus performers concur that John Ringling and the circus shaped the region, and shared their fondness for the industry that sustained their families. Legendary trapeze artist Tito Gaona of the world-famous circus family “The Flying Gaonas” provided insight that only someone who had grown up under the big top could. In an interview with the author, Venice, Florida resident Gaona passionately expressed just what it meant to him to live a life of gravity-

¹¹⁶ “About Us,” Ringling College of Art and Design, accessed February 14, 2020, <https://www.ringling.edu/About>.

¹¹⁷ “Mission,” Ringling College of Art and Design, accessed February 14, 2020, <https://www.ringling.edu/About>.

¹¹⁸ Ringling, Address.

defying performance, world travel, and international recognition and celebration. He also emphasized the community that the circus fostered both on the road and at home, and took pride in describing the impact that John Ringling and the circus had on the region. His genuine adoration for the circus, and belief that the art form truly changed the world was strikingly evident in his enthusiasm when asked his opinion on the industry that still sustains him to this day. Gaona emphatically professed “Sarasota *began* because of Ringling.” Gaona elaborates “when Ringling brought the winter quarters, built the bridge, built the art museum, St. Armand’s Circle; when they filmed ‘The Greatest Show on Earth,’ he put Sarasota on the map. He made it the greatest city on Earth, and the circus was the greatest attraction on Earth.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Tito Gaona, interview by author, Venice, January 16, 2020.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Wandering through the immense and pristine rose garden that Mable Ringling so lovingly tended to nearly a century ago, set against the impressive backdrop of her beloved Ca' d'Zan provides the opportunity for reflection on the tremendous contributions of both the circus in America as well as those of her husband, John Ringling. On the grounds of the Ringling alone, Ca' d'Zan stands tall next to the Circus Museum, the Ringling Museum of Art and Design, the Asolo, and archives and education centers dedicated to ensuring that generations to come have access to learn about not only the circus, but be exposed to international arts and culture. Down the road lie the Ringling School of Art and Design, the John Ringling causeway, and St. Armands Key, just three more of Ringling's enormous contributions to the Sarasota, Florida area.

It required a great deal of research to find the acknowledgment that John Ringling and his circus rightly earned in their quest, and ultimate achievement, of making Sarasota a cultural and tourism destination. It took a great deal of perusing archives, reading newspaper articles from the era, talking with past performers and present curators, along with analyzing select journal articles and books to truly comprehend the vast and undeniable legacy that he left. Industry experts as a whole will likely always recognize the man and his mouse, Walt Disney,

as being the most important contributor to travel and tourism in the state of Florida. However, it is critical to distinguish those who came before Disney and took risks to make Florida a place tourists would want to visit from every corner of the world. Although Ringling's contribution to the national entertainment industry was revolutionary, he made his biggest mark in Sarasota.

When considering leisure and entertainment in America, it is highly likely that the first forms to come to mind are in the manner of an electronic device: movies, music, television, or video game console. If asked to consider an interactive form, one might name a Broadway show, a music festival, or a visit to a theme park. Although in the 21st century it may not be as widely recognized, the circus was once a highly regarded form of organized entertainment. For over a century, the circus provided an outlet for hardworking Americans, and introduced them to the beauty and intensity of the performing arts. Audiences were awed and flabbergasted by feats of human accomplishment that they could have never imagined in their wildest fantasies. The circus transformed American life from one of being work-centric to one that embraced leisure time as a necessity. After the rigidity and formality of the Victorian era, the introduction of the circus was a welcome indulgence. It is not unreasonable to assert that the circus contributed greatly to ushering in a new way of American life. A new way that fostered hopes and dreams, encouraged families to bond over shared experiences, and allowed new methods of social engagement.

What the circus did for not only for arts and entertainment, but for culture and diversity as well, is truly remarkable. The circus gave average Americans an unprecedented opportunity to see and interact with people and animals from what were once only thought of as far away and exotic lands. The circus gained popularity in America at a time when cross country travel

was not feasible for the general population. For many American citizens, there was little in the way of cultural experience outside of the confines of their rural towns. The circus introduced Americans to peoples and places that they would have never otherwise known existed.

The circus also did much to create a sense of equality among Americans, in that the form of entertainment drew audiences of all ages, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds and united them under one colossal striped tent. Laughs were shared, and memories were made for every man, woman, and child that patronized the big show. Everyone smiled, everyone gasped, and everyone held their communal breath. When people were under the circus tent, it did not matter what their occupation, status, or economic background was. For one afternoon, everyone shared the same goal; to enjoy a simple pleasure.

The circus did not provide a sense of unity for just the audience, however. The circus also created a community among its employees and performers that provided them a sense of pride, equality, and self-importance that they may not have otherwise experienced outside of the ring. In the circus, people who were typically considered outcasts from mainstream society were celebrated for their unique talents and attributes. The circus provided a sense of stability, both emotionally and economically, for a group of people that may have otherwise had difficulty finding their niche in society. Circus performers and employees found love and friendship in their special community, and the bond they created under the big top has transcended space and time.

Economically, the circus was a booming business. The circus made men, such as the Ringling brothers, tremendously wealthy, and allowed for these men to make significant contributions in a variety of other avenues. John Ringling took his profits and re-invested in

railroads and real estate, but he also invested in the future of Sarasota, Florida. It is generally agreed upon that Ringling and the decision to move the winter quarters of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus to the area almost certainly prevented the city from entering into bankruptcy, creating thousands of jobs and making the area an international tourist destination. Local businesses thrived on the arrival of the winter quarters, and the funds generated from both the quarters and Ringling's numerous side projects made Sarasota what it is today.

It can be said with certainty that the circus not only substantially contributed to the concept of leisure time during the post-Victorian years in the United States, but created a new sense of community and culture. Americans were introduced to innovative art forms, diverse groups of individuals, and encouraged children and adults alike to dream beyond the realm of possibility. John Ringling was one of these dreamers, and his drive and dedication made his aspirations a reality in Sarasota, Florida and throughout the nation.

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