

Not Quite the End of an Era

By Bill Schmick

A circus by any other name is still a circus

By now you may have heard that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus is set to close next month. That's the third circus in as many years to close its doors. You might say the announcement marks the end of an era stretching back for almost 150 years. I disagree.

The circus will never die. It has been around since the Romans were sticking each other with swords. It is a venue that is constantly changing that I believe will simply continue to evolve. Society has moved on from the need to see blood and guts on the sandy floor of the arena. For the last century and a half, we have been entertained instead by death-defying feats, acrobatics, wild animals and loud music. In today's digital age, where kids (and adults) would rather sit at home and watch television or play video games, the smell of peanuts and popcorn, intermingled with elephant feces and three rings of lion tamers, human cannonballs and clowns just doesn't cut it.

Over the years, dwindling audiences, rising expenses, competition from other sources, the lack of marketing savvy by owners, and the increasing efforts by animal rights activists have contributed to the dwindling supply of old-time circuses that at one time crisscrossed the country.

The rising cost of attending the circus may have also been an issue. Middle-class families, whose numbers are also shrinking, had long been the bread and butter of the industry. In some cities, tickets for a Ringling show could be as high as \$125. The cheapest seats, at \$25, were still almost twice the price of a movie ticket. Plus, everyone expects to buy food and at least one souvenir during a circus event. For a family of five, the costs have become insurmountable.

Despite rising ticket prices, circus costs were also increasing by leaps and bounds. Transportation costs alone have doubled over the last five years. The star system tradition was also adding to the red ink. Year after year, those whose acts brought in the most tickets demanded to be paid accordingly. Billboard names such as Emmett Kelly, the sad-faced clown, the Flying Wallendas and Gunther Gebel-Williams, the fearless lion tamer, took more and more of the profits.

Worst of all was the cost of the animals themselves. At Ringling Bros., one elephant alone costs \$65,000 per year just to maintain. They had 40 of the big guys on the employee list. Add in the cost of other wild animals, plus the mounting lawsuits from animal activists, and you get the picture.

Some say the final straw for the "greatest show on earth" in this increasingly difficult business environment was their decision last year to drop elephants from the line-up. Attendance dropped even further as a result. Those who were asked said that without the elephants a circus was just not the same. That may be true, but last year Cole, as well as the Big Apple Circus, both elephant-heavy big tops, also announced that they will be closing their tent flaps this year.

As the sun sets over the traditional animal-centric circus tent, a new group of modern-day acrobats, jugglers and dancers have taken the viewing public by storm. Led by Cirque du Soleil (the Cirque), a new industry has sprung up. Through marketing, research and innovation, these newcomers have captured the imagination and pocketbooks of an audience that numbers 150 million people in over three hundred cities worldwide.

The Cirque realized through market research that what was important to circus goers were three things: the tent, the clowns and the acrobatic acts—not animals. So they got rid of the most expensive element (the animals), kept the clowns (but swapped their slapstick humor for something more sophisticated), and glamorized the tent. As for the acrobats, they dropped the star system, added artistic flairs they borrowed from Broadway, and included special effects from other traveling acts.

Since then, plenty of imitators have followed in their footsteps. As a result, the present day circus has evolved into something that is not quite an ordinary circus, but neither is it a classic theater production. What it is, though, is successful. In less than 20 years, the Cirque has achieved a level of sales that took Ringling Bros.

Thanks for the Memories

By Charlie McBriarty

Countless automobile trips to and from northern reaches such as Milwaukee, Chicago, Youngstown and Berea, Ohio, began to wear, despite the joy associated with visiting adult children, their families and, of course, our grandchildren. During one of those journeys home four or five years ago, Eileen and I had a conversation about how much longer we would be willing to endure these trips. We eventually decided it would be best to relocate while we were still able to do so. Four years ago we took the first step and listed our house. Last month we received an offer on the house we could not refuse. So as you are reading this article, we will be taking a trip north that will not involve a return junket.

Our original resettlement from Ohio to North Carolina occurred in July 2002 when Eileen, her mother Helen and I arrived at our recently constructed home in Beacon's Reach. A couple of years later, after we had settled, I filled out a Pine Knoll Shores volunteer application and sent it on its merry way. After hearing nothing, I assumed my application had been moved from the back burner to the recycle bin.

An unexpected telephone call sometime in 2006 led to a meeting at town hall with a Mr. Bill White. Having forgotten my earlier effort to become a town volunteer, I wondered what he wanted with me. Later I found that Bill White had been selected two years earlier by newly elected Pine Knoll Shores Mayor Joan Lamson to resurrect *The Shoreline*. It was not until sometime well into this meeting that I realized my forgotten volunteer application had not been trashed. I was being interviewed as a potential volunteer for the newspaper.

Reality caused me to confess that I had no previous experience as a writer and had never even crafted a letter to the editor. What exactly occurred during the remainder of this meeting has completely left my memory bank. On my way home I realized what had just transpired. Bill White had sold me on becoming a volunteer for *The Shoreline*. It was then I decided that if he was as good a teacher and a newspaper editor as he was a salesman, I was in for something special. He was and it was.

Between 2006 when my first article appeared in *The Shoreline* until this very day, much of my time has been devoted to this newspaper. During the past 11 years I have served as a reporter, and when Bill and Barb White sold their house and moved to Waxhaw (NC), I again experienced his salesmanship. He convinced me to become the interim managing editor of *The Shoreline*. For the next three years I spent even more time in that role until I realized that enough was enough, and on May 31, 2011, my editorial days ended.

Nonetheless I have continued to draft articles about a variety of topics. Throughout these years I have worked with a number of dedicated and exceptional colleagues. I have learned a great deal about writing, editing and putting together a newspaper and gained respect for journalists. It has been a worthwhile 11 years, and in the process I have had more fun than I would have imagined.

'Tis possible that this bug I caught 11 years ago will reemerge after we have become accustomed to life up north, and you might find an article in *The Shoreline* describing a winter snow storm or the beauty of trees as they move from green to the golden colors of fall.

We wish Charlie and Eileen the very best in their new adventure. It has been the privilege of The Shoreline staff to work with Charlie—and nothing could please us more than finding an email from him with an article for an upcoming issue. His good humor and willingness to always step up to a challenge will be missed.—The Editors

a century to achieve. The point is that the circus will be around much longer than you or I, but like everything in life, it will just be different.

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