

'THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH'

Holden Homeowner Biographer Of Circus Boss Ringling

BY DOUG RUTTER

What kind of man could have masterminded an entertainment spectacle so colossal that it's billed as the "Greatest Show On Earth?"

There's probably nobody with a better answer than David Weeks, a Holden Beach homeowner who has authored a biography of the late John Ringling and his role in creating the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

"He was a big spender," explained Weeks, further describing Ringling as a large, colorful man who lived lavishly, loved smoking big cigars and driving Rolls Royces.

Weeks, who spends four months each year at Holden Beach, culminated 10 years of research and writing in October with the release of *Ringling: The Florida Years, 1911-1936*.

The 350-page book is the most extensive look ever at Ringling (1866-1936), but it focuses primarily on the last 25 years of his life, after he moved to Sarasota, Fla.

Weeks, a retiree who lives in the Gulf Coast city most of the year, wrote the biography for the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, where he occasionally works as a lecturer and tour guide.

Weeks said the only other books ever written about Ringling were filled with undocumented stories and anecdotes. "As I say in my forward, everybody in Sarasota had a story about John Ringling and few if any were true."

Weeks said he weeded the fact from fiction by talking with Ringling's relatives, studying estate papers, state archives, personal papers and reading a lot of newspapers—28 years worth to be exact.

"I found that the research was fascinating," Weeks said. "The writing was the hard part. You find, in doing something like this, everything has to be verifiable. Nobody wants your opinions."

Weeks, a bright 74-year-old who once worked for the CIA, retired to Sarasota 12 years ago after working most of his adult life in the Washington, D.C., area.

A Holden Beach homeowner since 1991 and island visitor since the 1970s, Weeks said he had previously written technical books, but never anything remotely akin to a biography.

When he started his research, the only thing he knew about Ringling was that his family ran a circus. Turns out Ringling also was a major Florida land developer who owned five short-line railroads and several Oklahoma oil wells.

The Ringling brothers started their "Greatest Show On Earth" from humble beginnings in 1884 in their home state of Iowa. They began with a small tent, 11 wagons and 22 horses.

John, one of eight Ringling children, never performed in the circus. For a short while though, he did have his own "Dutch clown" act which was part of the "hall shows" the Ringlings put on each winter when the circus shut down.

Fortunately for John, who never relished the clown act, the Ringling Circus quickly grew and really took off



when the family purchased the Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1906.

While his brothers tended to the circus, Weeks said John preferred the business end and rarely associated with circus people. "He was the one who was always out in front getting all the publicity while his brothers were back minding the store."

Although he was a great showman, Weeks said Ringling was "reticent and almost shy" and despised speaking in public.

"He had no close friends at all. He had thousands of people that he called by name but none were close friends," Weeks added.

Ringling and his wife Mable moved to Sarasota in 1911 and made millions during the Florida land boom of the 1920s. He moved circus headquarters to Sarasota in 1927, where it remains today.

But the circus isn't Southwest Florida's only reminder of Ringling. He left most of his estate to the state of Florida, including the 30-room Venetian palace known as Ca d'Zan (House of John) and the art museum.

The home overlooking Sarasota Bay cost \$2 million. Today, Weeks said it would cost between \$25 and \$50 million to build, if the imported materials could be obtained from Italy and Spain.

"It certainly is a good picture of how the rich lived in the 1920s," Weeks said of the mansion and art museum, which annually attracts 300,000 visitors.



STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG RUTTER

HOLDEN BEACH HOMEOWNER DAVID WEEKS has authored a biography about the late John Ringling, creator of "The Greatest Show On Earth."

Another indication of Ringling's "Roaring 20s" lifestyle is that he owed the Internal Revenue Service \$13 million in taxes when he died in 1936. The government ultimately settled for \$850,000.

Weeks had a hard time comparing Ringling to any modern-day millionaires, but likened him to network mogul Ted Turner. "We can't put into the class of Donald Trump because he didn't fly on that scale," he

said. So how has the biography been accepted? "It's selling very well at the museum bookstore if that's any indication," Weeks said.

Published by University Press of Florida, the book sells for \$49.95 in hardback and \$25 in paperback. It is not available in local bookstores, but may be ordered at L Bookworm in Holden Beach.

Some Names That Made Local News During '93...

Here's a list of names that made the news in Brunswick County in 1993 through honors, tragedy, election, accident or other circumstance. They are in no particular order:

■ **The Vitale family** of Sunset Beach, winning \$10,000 on "America's Funniest Home Videos" for a tape of their son with his head caught in an inhabited "Kitty Kondo."

■ Sheriff's Deputy **Ronald Hewett**, named state and national Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) Officer of the Year for his efforts to keep local young people off drugs and alcohol.

■ Brunswick Community College President **Michael Reeves** and Supply Elementary School Principal **Carolyn Williams**, both earning doctoral degrees in 1993.

■ **Odell Williamson** of Ocean Isle Beach, appointed by Gov. Jim Hunt to the N.C. Board of Transportation and leading the effort to route proposed Interstate 75 through Brunswick County.

■ **Larniece Laneer McKoy**, 21, of Winnabow, chosen Miss Brunswick County, and Maleta Ann Murray of Bolivia, Little Miss Brunswick County.

■ **Roney Cheers**, elected president of the Brunswick County Democratic Party.

■ **Shirley Babson**, elected president of the Brunswick County Republican Party.

■ **Glen Humbert** of United Carolina Bank, chosen

the South Brunswick Islands Chamber of Commerce Citizen of the Year.

■ **Al Laughinghouse**, also of UCB, becoming the chamber's 1993 president.

■ Other chamber honorees included **Annette Odom**, winner of the president's award for service; **Sally Nord**, volunteer of the year; and **Katherine Gossett**, member of the year.

■ **Amanda Scoggins**, a 13-year-old Supply resident, who walked again after a school bus accident in March on U.S. 17 in which her legs and pelvis were crushed. **Willie Clarence Pridgen**, 44, of Ivanhoe, was driver of the log truck which rear-ended the bus; he was charged with failure to reduce speed to avoid collision.

■ **Jimmy Ludlum**, 49, mourned by the Waccamaw community when he died of a heart attack during a men's church softball league game. Ludlum was a well-respected firefighter and coach of the Zion Church team.

■ **Crystal "Chris" Caudill** of Varnamtown, losing her four-year fight with cancer April 30. Caudill's unsuccessful bone marrow transplant received funding assistance from thousands of Brunswick Countians who opposed her insurance company's refusal to cover the experimental treatment.

■ **Caroline Sheffield**, Shallotte Middle School eighth-grader who traveled to Washington in June to

represent Brunswick County in the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee.

■ **Richard and Barbara Kelly**, recording local history with their well-received book *Boat Builders and Bug Hunters: The Carolina Watermen*.

■ **Franda Dobson Pedlow**, long-time Holden Beach homeowner and visitor, published *Sand and Sea Fever*, a history of Holden Beach since Hurricane Hazel as related by area natives.

■ **Patricia Morton Gergel**, author of *Into The Hurricane*, a novel whose setting is Holden Beach.

■ **Mina Mintz**, who celebrated her 104th birthday with friends, family and media Oct. 28 at Shallotte's Autumn Care nursing home.



Septic, Sewer Systems Remain Topics For Board Discussions

BY DOUG RUTTER

It was no surprise that septic systems and sewer systems continued to be the two major issues at Holden Beach in 1993.

The real debate started in February, when the community's wastewater management committee released a study showing that two-thirds of the homes in rental brochures advertise more sleeping capacity than their septic systems are designed to accommodate.

Commissioners agreed to send letters to the most "flagrant violators." There were 71 homeowners who advertised that their homes could sleep at least six more people than allowed by state law, which limits occupancy to two people per bedroom.

Town commissioners stopped short of adopting several wastewater committee recommendations aimed

at curbing the abuse of septic systems. Among the proposals was one to prohibit the "false advertising."

Talk turned to sewer systems later in the year, when commissioners approved that will require new homeowners and business owners to help pay for sewer and stormwater systems if they are needed in the future.

Minimum fees are \$1,000 for new homes and \$2,000 for new businesses. The town also is charging for additions and new driveways.

The fees are expected to raise about \$50,000 per year if current building trends continue. Fees will be refunded if the town has not com-

mitted to a sewer or stormwater system within 10 years.

In November, all five incumbents who sought re-election were returned to office for another two-year term, including Mayor Wally Ausley. Dwight Carroll was elected to his first term as commissioner, joining incumbents Gay Atkins, David Sandifer, Jim Fournier and Sid Swarts.

Carroll had retired as building inspector earlier in the year. Jim McSwain served as inspector for six months before resigning and being replaced by Bill Goodman.

Carroll retirement wasn't the only personnel move in 1993. In July, Gary Parker resigned as town manager under pressure from commissioners, opening the door for Gus Ulrich's return for a second stint as manager.



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