



the

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Illinois' Rich Circus History

Most people think of Illinois as the home of Abraham Lincoln, but to circus folks, it was home to numerous shows and performers. Our state produced top-notch aerialists, circus managers, trapeze artists, and others who delighted thousands under the big top.

The heyday for circuses in our state was between the 1890s and 1930s, when “scores of performers wintered here,” says Steve Gossard, Curator of Circus Collections at Illinois State University’s Milner Library. He has researched circuses’ Illinois history since the 1980s, interviewed about 30 performers, and written a book and articles about them. “The circus performers were such splendid people, I felt I needed to tell their story and preserve it because it was a fast-dying community,” he adds.

Why Illinois?

Equestrian James T. Johnson is credited with making Illinois a serious circus state in 1867 when he brought his circus from Kansas to Macomb and Galesburg. As a result, circus workers from all over the country gravitated here, Gossard says. Johnson’s circus was a small wagon show, but it drew “some of the greatest performers in America” to Illinois.

Johnson planned to travel along the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad and build specially-equipped barns in Quincy, Macomb, Galesburg, and Burlington, Iowa so his performers could practice and perform during their downtime in the winter. He settled in Galesburg.

Illinois’ plentiful railroads and entertainment-

hungry little towns were perfect lures for the big top, according to Gossard. “I think it had to do with going where the money was, because those little wagon

shows could go to these rural communities where the farmers were selling their crops,” he says. And it didn’t hurt that our state was close to the two big circus management centers of Baraboo, Wisconsin and Peru, Indiana.

Our Top Circus Towns

While Galesburg was the “granddaddy” Illinois circus town, Bloomington wasn’t far behind. “Between the 1870s and 1930s, Bloomington was the hotbed for aerial art,” says Maureen Brunsdale, Special Collections and Rare Books Librarian, at Illinois State University’s Milner Library.

Eddie Ward was largely responsible for that. He and his sister, Jennie, “were a couple of kids from the poor side of the tracks, you might say, and they trained themselves to do a double trapeze act which used no net,” Gossard says. “It was a very daring kind of act.” They started performing when they were about ten and later joined Ringling Brothers, although they performed for other circuses as well.

Around 1915, Eddie built a 40 by 40 foot barn in Bloomington that was rigged with trapezes and platforms for winter practice. There, he trained many aerial artists and created a troupe called “The Flying Wards,” which featured a revolving cast of performers. After a horrific circus train wreck near Ivanhoe, Indiana killed his sister and about 70 other perform-



Illinois trapeze artists Art and Antoinette Concello. Art became a very successful general manager for Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey Circus, and Antoinette became its aerial director. Photo used with permission from Illinois State University’s Special Collections, Milner Library.

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The Flying Wards aerialist team from Bloomington, around 1915. Left to right are: Alec Todd, Jennie Ward Todd (Eddie's sister), Bessie Catannah, Eddie Ward, Billie Summers, and Mayme Ward (Eddie's wife). Photo used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

ers, Eddie swore off the circus and worked in vaudeville. But that only lasted two years. He returned to the big top and operated several flying acts with performers he trained and selected.

After he died in 1929, his wife and trapeze partner, Mayme, took over the business. Later, one of Eddie's pupils -- Art Concello, bought the Wards' barn, trained more aerialists, and became one of the greatest trapeze flyers and circus managers in history, according to Gossard.

Petersburg, Illinois was another circus hotspot. It produced several center ring performers, including Harry Lamkin, who literally ran away from home in 1868 to join the circus in Galesburg. He became a "foot juggler, horseback rider and all around performer," Gossard says. "He'd lay on his back and juggle barrels, tables, any number of things." Lamkin came home six years later to construct a circus practice barn. There he trained horseback riders, including his half-brother Edward Shipp, who became the equestrian director for Ringling Brothers Circus.

Lamkin later partnered with another Galesburg circus alum, Frank Gardner, who was a "bounding jockey" and "leaper." A bounding jockey repeatedly jumped from the horse's back to the ring. A leaper sprang from a springboard and turned somersaults over horses, elephants, and other objects. Many considered Gardner the best bounding jockey in the business. "All performers wanted to be called the greatest," Gossard says. "They actually published

challenges, saying: 'I'll challenge anybody to compete with me,' and if nobody answered their challenge, they said they were the greatest!"

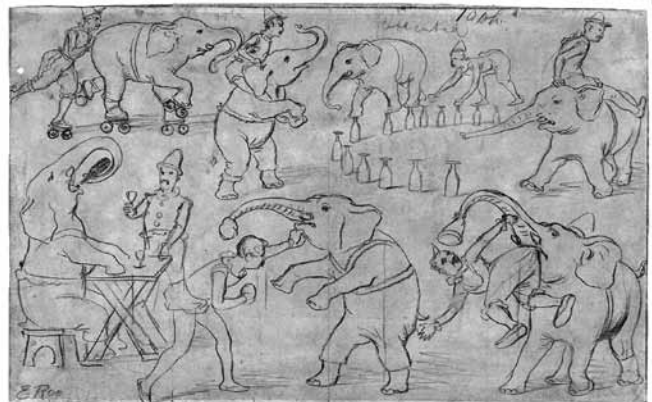
Lamkin and Gardner's circus toured Central and South America; in fact, Gardner became known as "the Barnum of South America," according to Gossard.

The Circus Life

Circus work meant life on the go. The whole show moved nearly every day. "The workers had it so well organized, they would set up in each town so it felt as if they were in the same place," Gossard says. "Their dressing room would be the same as it always was, but a couple hundred miles away from the day before."

While the later circuses moved by train, the earlier ones relied on wagons and horses, much like the pioneers. During his lifelong work in the circus, Tony Parker performed with both types, including some stationed in Illinois. He began as a horse rider at the age of ten in 1834, though he soon became a clown. In his memoirs, "On the Road with a Wagon Show for 53 Years" (available online at the Circus Historical Society - www.circushistory.org), he described the joys and hardships of circus life. Rainy seasons made traveling particularly slow and difficult for the earlier circuses. Sometimes more than a dozen horses were needed to pull wagons out of mud pits.

Once, his circus played Peoria and entered it via a bridge, but the town wouldn't let the show's elephant cross. So, the elephant swam across the river



This sketch from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog, was made between 1800 and 1920. It was created by Emil Rothengatter, who worked for Currier & Ives before creating circus posters.

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and enjoyed the dip so much he ignored the workers pleading with him to get out.

Illinois Circuses Today

Now there is only one circus that calls Illinois home — the Gamma Phi circus in Bloomington, which is comprised of Illinois State University students. The Gamma Phi Circus is the oldest collegiate circus in America, according to its web site (<http://gammaphicircus.illinoisstate.edu/>). The smaller circuses of yesterday are long gone and the larger ones have mostly moved south.



While this Bloomington, Illinois barn might have looked like a large version of any central Illinois barn, it was quite different. This structure was specially built and rigged by trapeze artist Eddie Ward to train and practice other aerialists for the circus. Photo used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

Kinnett Named to Legislative Internship Hall of Fame

Bruce Kinnett, vice president of Cook-Witter, Inc., will be inducted into the Samuel K. Gove Illinois Legislative Internship Hall of Fame on November 7 at the Executive Mansion. *Illinois Issues* magazine sponsors the award, which honors former legislative interns whose careers exemplify distinguished public service.

Kinnett received his bachelor's degree in history and government from Illinois College. His interest in government stretches back to when he was growing up on a farm in Alexander, Illinois.

"I remember watching the Kennedy/Nixon debates on television," he says. "Every night we would watch the Huntley-Brinkley Report (anchored by Chet Huntley and David Brinkley on NBC) and catch up on the news."

Kinnett soon learned there was "a direct correlation between the decisions of our elected leaders and our daily life on the farm. Whether it was price supports for grain, government set aside programs, funding for conservation practices, or limits on which pesticides or herbicides could be used, I learned that government policies played a significant role in farming and agriculture."

He hoped to find a career that would combine his interests in history, government, and agriculture. While at Illinois College, he applied for a legislative internship and was assigned to Representative Tom

McMaster, a Galesburg area farmer who served on the House Agriculture Committee. "From that experience I had my first exposure to the State Capitol and learned about the role of staff in the legislative process," Kinnett says.

But it was the Graduate Legislative Internship Program overseen by Sangamon State University (now the University of Illinois at Springfield), that "profoundly affected" and directed his career toward governmental relations. Kinnett interned with the Senate Republican staff.

After the internship, he was asked to stay on board and was assigned to the Senate Agriculture, Conservation, and Energy Committee. "There, I was able to combine my two great interests of agriculture and government, and I provided input that helped direct legislative policy for the state," Kinnett says.

He began working at Cook-Witter, Inc. in 1988.

On November 7, the following former interns will also be inducted into the Hall of Fame: David Kennedy, executive director of the American Council of Engineering Companies of Illinois; Michael Maibach, president and CEO of the European-American Business Council; Catherine Shannon, deputy director of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency; and Frank Straus, deputy director for revenue and public safety for the House Republican staff.



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In Memoriam

Former U.S. Senator **Charles H. Percy**, a Republican, died on September 17 in Washington, D.C. He served as a senator from 1967 to 1985. Percy was 91 years old.

Former Illinois representative **James Donald Holloway** of Chester, Illinois died on August 20. He served as a Democrat in the Illinois House of Representatives from 1958 to 1975.

On July 11, former state representative **Betty Lou Reed** died in Aurora, Colorado. She represented the Lake County area in the House as a Republican from 1974 to 1982.



Transitions

Governor Pat Quinn appointed **Arlene Juracek** as director of the Illinois Power Agency on October 5. Juracek was vice president of energy acquisition for Commonwealth Edison and has had a 34-year career in energy and transmission services acquisition, power station engineering, and strategic economic and policy analysis.

On the same day, the governor named **Michael Jones** as superintendent of the Illinois Lottery. Jones was superintendent of the Illinois Lottery from 1981 to 1985 under former governor **James Thompson**. Afterward, he founded a marketing promotion firm that helped various forms of gaming.

On September 30, Governor Quinn tapped **Dr. Craig Conover** to be the acting director of the Illinois Department of Public Health. Dr. Conover is currently the department's chief epidemiologist and medical director of the Office of Health Protection. He replaces **Dr. Damon Arnold**, who is leaving to create a Master's of Public Health degree program at Chicago State University.

The governor named **Jean Ortega-Piron** as acting director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) on September 30. She replaces **Erwin McEwen**, who resigned last month. Previously, Ortega-Piron was the department's Deputy Director of Guardian and Advocacy, acting as guardian for all children committed to DCFS by Illinois' juvenile courts.

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency Director **Jan Grimes** is resigning in November. She is joining the association management and public relations firm Frontline Public Strategies, which has offices in Springfield and Chicago. Grimes has headed IHPA for three years.

