

Modeler's Aid

In the past, questions to problems have been asked by members through the *Blowing Off Steam* column. Now we have a separate department called *Modeler's Aid*. It works as follows: If you have a modeling problem you haven't been able to solve locally, then write *Modeler's Aid* stating your problem and including a sketch (in black ink), if a sketch would help others better understand your problem. Your question will be printed in the *Modeler's Aid* department along with your return address, so other members can correspond with you directly with possible solutions to your problem.

Those of you responding should send a copy of your solution to both the person with the question and to *Modeler's Aid* so that it may be printed to the benefit of all.

Address all correspondence to: *Modeler's Aid* c/o the Bulletin, W232 N6633, Waukesha Ave., Sussex, WI 53089.

Question 113

I have always had some interest in circus and exhibition trains, having seen the Royal American Shows trains in Calgary while I was growing up. I hadn't, however, seriously considered modeling such a train or at least not until I saw a model at the 1987 NMRA convention that pricked my interest.

I don't know whose model it was, nor do I know many details, except that it is my major memory from the convention. I have tried to obtain information through the NMRA Circus and Circus Train SIG, PNR officials, and other sources but to no avail. I would therefore appreciate your assistance in trying to track down the modeler, or other sources, so that I could get some prototype information.

The model was of a small circus (I think a single tent, although I am not absolutely sure of that). The whole circus was carried on a series of about three or four motor trucks (and thus not a circus train), and probably dated to the mid-1920's. The model scene showed the tent(s) and the vehicles that had transported the circus, and likely had an interior display in the tent(s). My recollection is that there was also a decent write-up on the prototype for the model. The scale was probably HO.

The model was displayed in one of the main display areas with the other circus models, and was located at the end of a long table. Again, my recollection was that the display occupied about 3' x 3'.

If you could provide any information that would help me track down this modeler and/or his prototype, I would be most appreciative. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

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modeling a small Circus

by A.C. Lynn Zelmer

This article is a direct result of Question 113 of Modeler's Aid, September 1989 issue. My request received several very helpful replies, almost all of them before my copy of the September BULLETIN had even arrived "down under" at my home in Australia.

I haven't yet followed up on all their leads, however, I suspect that other modelers might also be interested in the information. This then is a measure of thanks, especially to Chester Slusser, whose model of the five-truck Miller & Ayers Circus prompted my inquiry.

While circus roots go back to Philip Ashley's equestrian acts in 1768 near London, it took a bit longer for the circus to get to either America or Australia. The circus has a long tradition in Australia, reaching back to the early 1840s in Sydney and Brisbane. It was later in that decade though before the circus properly arrived, often based around equestrian acts. Some of the resources listed below detail that history.

The circus continues in the Australian news today, with Archaos, "an anarchic Mad Mexican circus troupe," performing at the Adelaide Festival. This French circus performs a variety of non-traditional acts including one described thusly, "clowns wearing corrugated iron attack each other with chainsaws" and loud "funky rock 'n' roll music"; as well, the RSPCA banned an act that used "live chickens on a leash." As interesting as the modern circus might be, however, my intention in this article is to provide an overview to the truck-based circus.

The Mud Show

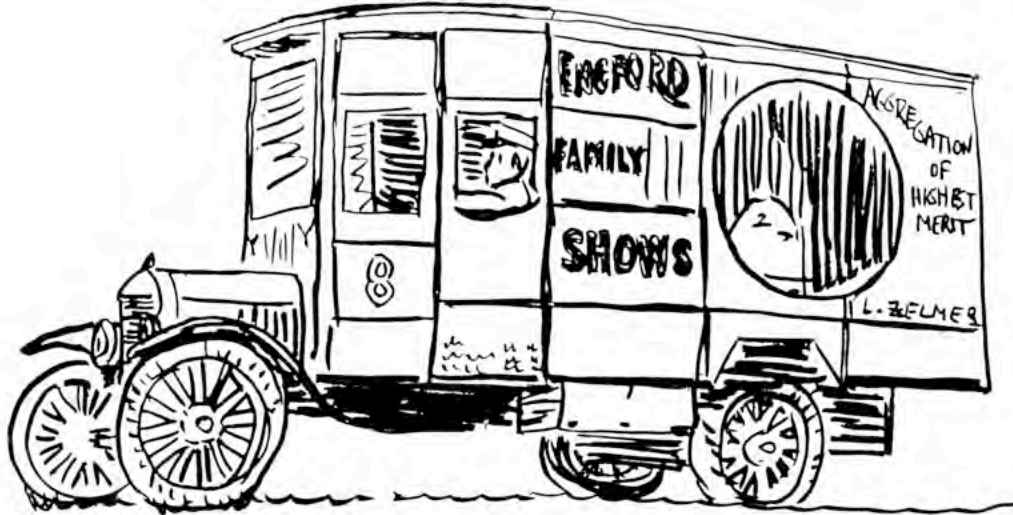
According to Mr. Slusser, most American circuses in the late 1800s were small "mud shows" or wagon shows. "A lot of these shows later became two- or three-car railroad shows. Because the show had all the [circus] equipment, they could buy a baggage car and a passenger car and travel without being on bad roads." Certainly travel by rail made more sense than on the primitive roads, however, the truck-based circus or carnival survives even today as the only outside entertainment for many smaller communities. These communities are served by a small collection of trucks and trailers carrying both antiquated and high-tech "rides" and sideshow events. The occasion might be the annual Harbour Festival, as happens in a neighboring city here in Queensland, or the opening of a new shopping mall in rural Alberta.

The Miller & Ayers model is based upon a small one-ring show that traveled the back roads of Wisconsin between 1924 and 1927. According to Norman H. Wilbert in the *BANDWAGON*, the big top was "an 80 with a 50-foot middle" that seated 500 people. As well the circus had five Ford trucks, a Kohler light plant and a \$725 air calliope. Owners Alvin and Helen Miller, the "Aerial Millers," performed along with the rest of the 12-person troupe. Ayers was Alvin's uncle who provided funding. As an academic who has often been teased for my "song and dance routine" to raise funds, promote educational programs,

etc., I found it particularly interesting to read about this real "dog and pony show" with its complement of two ponies and five dogs.

I have a variety of model interests, and while I am here in Australia I'll explore some of the local possibilities. The mud circus traditions look similar enough that I should be able to build a free-lance circus that would be at home in Australia or America. To start this off, I am lettering a 1911 Ford delivery car from Jordan Products for my advance (publicity) agent. Their Mack Stake Truck, along with a couple horse-drawn wagons salvaged from the "detail" box will equip the initial circus. Given my current time and space constraints, I am going to cheat on the "big top" . . . it should be quite easy to model a tent that is still loaded on a closed truck. I've got a pattern for both the big top and the cook tent from Mr. Slusser, so eventually . . . who knows? Maybe another BULLETIN article will show my progress.

I won't attempt to provide what would be an incomplete list of circus model suppliers for the more conventional circus modeler. Models of circus cars have been available from a variety of sources over the years, although you might have to scratchbuild or kitbash to get a specific prototype. Certainly it wouldn't be difficult to paint wooden or steel baggage cars and coaches to represent the equipment of a small mud show that has converted to rail. This would seem to be appropriate for any time from the late 1800s to the 1930s. Locomotives are no problem, the local



1921 Ford Model T truck with air calliope at Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

railroad always supplied the motive power.

Some suppliers, such as Simmons Scale Models, specialize in circus models, and their catalog sheets are probably detailed enough for the scratch-builder to model from. A quick glance through the commercial model railroad press shows a few models, including International Hobby Corp.'s HO scale (modern) carousel and sky wheel. William K. Walthers, Inc. has a wider variety of circus, carnival and amusement park equipment as well as circus cars. For less popular equipment, refer to the advertisements in the *BANDWAGON*, *LITTLE CIRCUS WAGON* and other specialized journals.

Resources

I make no apologies for the Australian flavor of these resources, the list simply details the information I have in my rather limited collection. I suspect that most North American libraries will provide readers with similar publications relating to that continent, however, there are other circus traditions too.

AMERICAN CIRCUS POSTERS IN FULL COLOR, edited by Charles Philip Fox. New York: Dover Publications, 1978, AUST\$22.95. A collection of 44 posters, starting with May Wirth, an Australian bareback-rider who was popular in the 1910s and 1920s. The posters range from the 1890s to the 1940s.

BANDWAGON, the Journal of the Circus Historical Society, 2515 Dorset Rd., Columbus, OH 43221. Subscription rates, \$17 in the U.S., \$19 per year outside

the U.S.

CIRCUS & CIRCUS TRAIN SIG, c/o Cal Thacker, 546 Patricia St., San Antonio, TX 78216. The NMRA's own forum for circus model builders.

CIRCUS PHOTOGRAPHS, Mr. Albert Conover, 927 Oakland Dr., Xenia, OH 45385. Has a large collection of negatives and sells pictures to the public.

CIRCUS REPORT, Don Marcks, 525 Oak St., El Cerito, CA 04530-3699. Weekly, \$30 U.S., \$40 Canada and Mexico, \$45 overseas, \$85 airmail.

CIRCUS WORLD MUSEUM, 426 Water St., Baraboo, WI 53913. This is the center of the world for circus fans, 50 acres of exhibits including a good collection of railroad equipment, indoor displays, library and archives.

LITTLE CIRCUS WAGON, magazine of the Circus Model Builders International, 347 Longsdale Ave., Dayton, OH 45419. The magazine gives modeling tips, advertisements for circus model equipment and a column devoted to truck shows. It was the CMB Lot 6 Gathering which hosted the circus models in Eugene. Their 1990 gathering will be in Boise with the PNR convention.

OLD-TIME CIRCUS CUTS: A Pictorial Archive of 292 Illustrations, edited by Charles Philip Fox. New York: Dover, 1979, AUST\$14.95. This is a collection of black-and-white, copyright-free circus cuts from the 1870s to the 1950s and would be suitable for anyone wanting to design a letterhead or posters for a free-lance circus.

SPANGLES & SAWDUST: The Circus in Australia, by Mark St. Leon. Richmond,

VIC, Australia: Greenhouse Publications, 1983. A well-illustrated history of the circus in Australia, concentrating on the "artistic achievement of man and horse" which characterized the period from the 1840s to the 1920s.

THE CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN, by Charles Philip Fox, director, The Circus World Museum. Milwaukee: Inland Press, 1963. This is one of several colorful publications available to visitors to the museum. My small collection includes one or two brochures and a number of postcards.

THE CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN: Nostalgia of Australian Big Tops, by Geoff Graves. Sydney, Australia: Reed, 1980. The Australian circus tradition, "almost vagabonds traveling from town to town and performing wherever they could get a cheering, whistling, audience," and who became as good as any in the world. Mostly pictures, but with some history of the main circus families.

THIS WAS TRUCKING: A Pictorial History of the first quarter century of the trucking industry, by Robert F. Karolevitz. Seattle: Superior, 1966. Photographs and modeling details of trucks built during the first quarter of this century. Purchased for a different purpose many years ago it provides essential information for a free-lance "mud-show."

THE WHITE TOPS, Dale A. Riker, P.O. Box 3187, Flint, MI 48502. Bi-monthly magazine of the Circus Fans Association of America.