

## Sidewall

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“I could sidewall you, if you like.”

With that invitation, extended in an atmosphere of elephant, I slip out of the present. It's no longer June 2007, and I'm no longer in Liberty, Indiana, walking along the midway of the Kelly Miller Circus with its General Manager. It's the summer of '39. Four years old, I'm at the Carthage Fairgrounds, holding my father's hand in the backyard of Ringling Brothers. Pa is chatting with Ringmaster Fred Bradna as performers come by on their way to the opening parade. A large white horse approaches, bearing a woman in a white tutu, perched bareback in a side-saddle posture. Fred says, “Ach! Ella, that dumb Hungarian.” As the horse ambles by, Ella rises on one leg, tilts in an arabesque, and blows us a kiss. She is the star equestrienne of the Greatest Show on Earth. I learn that “Dumb Hungarian” is a term of endearment if your husband is Austrian.

A few minutes later, a clown—it's Felix Adler—holds up the sidewall so that my older sister and I, with several friends and relatives, can crawl into the Big Top. For a birthday party the following winter in Sarasota, Felix makes up my face, and I'm fitted with a Pierrot outfit, complete with oversize clown feet. I soon outgrow the costume, but for years I take the big feet back to the Winter Quarters to have their insides fitted to my own feet as they grow.

I owe these memories to my grandmother North, five of whose seven older brothers founded the Ringling circus. My mother's own older brother, John, and her

younger brother, Henry, had recently taken control of the show, after the death in 1936 of their uncle John, the last Ringling partner. The brothers had revolutionized the enterprise, hiring Norman Bel Geddes and John Murray Anderson to design and direct the parades and spectacles. Barbette, once a famous drag trapeze artist, had been given control of an aerial ballet dubbed “the web.” The new show was a critical and popular success. It also made money, its overhead reduced by such tricks as swapping four hundred work horses for eight Caterpillars. To me, the tractor deal meant only a favorite toy, a large cast-iron model Cat with moving metal treads that the maker had given Uncle John, who was my godfather and had no little boy of his own.

Although war engulfed Europe, high spirits reigned at the Winter Quarters, where I was constantly from Christmas till Easter. Almost daily we paraded around the grounds—English style, all in hacking gear. The uncles rode King Ranch horses. Pa, when he was there, was on a palomino stallion. Sister had her own cow pony. I was furnished a notably wee Shetland wryly named “Tunny” after the notably large prize fighter.

My mother, morbidly afraid of horses, did not ride. When at six I was put bareback onto a large Dutch warm blood, my teacher sent her packing from the ring. “You, Salome, out! Me, your boy, the horse—you make us all nervous!” Oddly, though, Ma had no fear of elephants. Over my father’s objections, she casually had me hoisted on the trunk of Ruth, the show’s matriarch, and she was pleased when I perched behind the big bull’s ears and circled the hippodrome during Sunday’s outdoor previews.

For several years the pattern was the same. At the Winter Quarters nearly every day for much of the winter, I had the run of the place: the wagon shop, redolent and

vibrant with Ringling red, its smell as lively as its hue; the block-long vista of the canvas loft, where the big top was renewed every year; the cat house (I didn't understand the joke), where Sister and I played with newborn lion cubs; the indoor ring, at its most exciting when there was Roman riding; or, best of all, the elephant barn. At washing time, the occupants shook and squealed with delight, attacked from scaffolds with fire hoses and billboard brushes. Then, unexpectedly demure, they would primly offer their toenails to be filed.

I moved among the performers as they perfected their acts. Karl Wallenda might add another daughter to the stack; Truzzi, flaming torches to his juggling act; Alfred Court, a black leopard to his mixed cats; Poodles Hanneford, another dismount to his bareback turn as an acrobatic drunk; the Christianis, a third horse and more riders to their cantering pyramid, more height to their springboard act, another elephant to clear in their vaulting routine. (The Christianis would later teach me to walk a tightrope. They were the all-purpose circus family.) To these and many others around the lot I was known simply as "Salome's Boy." Thirty years later, when the Hannefords' own circus played Oxford, Ohio, Poodles' widow would still call me "Salome's Boy."

Every year, when the show came to Cincinnati, Sister and I would take our friends and relations to see it—as many as their mothers would allow to go in polio season. In my grade-school class, that opportunity vied with another that some of us prized even more. Kenny Lehkamp's father, Traffic Director for the B. & O., arranged an annual after-hours private visit to the model railroad at C. G. & E. For me, the circus was old hat. The trains were special.

When I was eleven and the circus was in town, a crew of roustabouts appeared at our place with a birthday present from the uncles, a tent that had been retired from service as the show's barber shop. Sixteen feet square and ten feet high, it became a focus of boys' adventures and the ideal place for sleepovers. Its sidewalls ended their days as tarpaulins for raked leaves.

During winter break when I was sixteen, I palled around with contemporaries on the show. I was mad keen on Ilonka Karoly, a pretty bareback rider. Her parents, fearing the exercise of *droit de seigneur* by a member of the owners' family, said, "No." Instead, I went out several times with a German roller skater whose parents knew she could easily have whirled me in a death spiral and tossed me twenty feet.

A highlight of my teen and college years was a press pass signed by both uncles: "Admit the bearer any time, any place, and show him every courtesy." This saw most of its use during the annual run at Madison Square Garden. I was there often, a would-be Cartier-Bresson. The rules were few: avoid the spotlight, and don't interfere with either the performers or the riggers, whose routines I had down pat. And no flash. Don't dazzle Harold Alzana on the high wire or Pinito del Oro on the solo trapeze, let alone distract Unus balancing on a pool cue or Dieter Tasso swaying on a slack wire on one leg and, with the other, tossing saucers and cups onto his head till they're stacked eight high. The pictures I took serve only my own nostalgia, but more than one pro's published shot owes something to my coaching on where to park and when to shoot.

In March of 1956, my parents and I were at the family house in Sarasota. My girlfriend was our guest over spring vacation. At the Winter Quarters, we stopped by the office to see Uncle John and to try the slot machine that was always there. The boss was

out, which normally meant no play, since he loved the lights and sound effects. Nevertheless, I wheedled the secretary out of a single slug for Annie, who hit the jackpot, the first in months. There was no cash, mind, but the display was as long, loud, and flashy as it was rare. Later that day, Uncle John showed up at the house. Five-foot-nine and trim, he bounced in on the balls of his feet. But for his getup, you'd have offered him a punching bag. He sported a baby blue gabardine suit, brown suede shoes, a brown fedora, and a brown shirt. His tie and matching pocket square were bright yellow. His left hand clutched pigskin gloves and a cane. He looked like a refugee from *Guys and Dolls*. To me he said, "Hullo, Nephew," and to Annie, "So you're the bitch that hit my jackpot." I was staggered. Annie beamed. After introductions, Uncle John invited us all to dine one evening on the Jomar, the boss man's private car. Dancing out, he said to Annie, "Nena warned me you were good looking." When he was gone, Annie wondered aloud if anyone else could have carried off the costume, adding that he was the sexiest man she'd ever met. Showman of fifty-two hits undergraduate's jackpot.

In June of the same year, along with several of my classmates, Annie and I spent a day with the circus in Trenton, New Jersey. Highlights included an impromptu display on the high wire by Harold Alzana—in blue jeans and street shoes, no less—and supper in the cook house. After the evening show, we all watched the teardown, then Annie and I boarded the circus train for Philadelphia. At daybreak we watched the setup, newly supplemented with a number of men who stood by idle while the roustabouts worked with their usual efficiency. From Sidewall Baldy, an old hand I'd known from childhood, we learned that these were Teamsters forced on the show by the union. They could not lace canvas or work in synchronized squads with sledges to drive stakes faster

than a trip-hammer, let alone team with elephants to drag the quarter poles upright into place. As Baldy said, “They don’t know shit.” Likely they wouldn’t even show for the teardown, but the Paymaster would still have to send their wages to the local’s office. At breakfast a little later, the show’s G. M., Rudy Bundy, told us that the company also paid three full train crews to do nothing for the four days of the run. The year before, after two good houses a day, they had left Philly in the red, a pattern repeated across the country. The year was saved only by the run in Madison Square Garden, where as part owner they played rent free. Rudy was not optimistic about the ’56 season.

Within two months, when by chance I was with Henry in Rome, Uncle John called to say that he planned to strike the Big Top after a performance in Pittsburgh, send the train home, and carry on with a reduced show traveling by road and playing in arenas. Back in the black after three seasons, the show once more took to the rails in 1960, but it never again played under canvas. A new girlfriend and I, married in 1957, took friends and their kids to the indoor circus in Washington, San Francisco, and Madison, Wisconsin. But the experience was antiseptic. There was no transformation of bare ground into a tent city with its dressing rooms, midway, menagerie, commissary, cook house, and—dominating the lot—the Big Top. No rough ground underfoot. No smell of horses, or big cats, or elephants. No encounters with performers outside the ring. No antique ticket wagon, just a normal box office. No hot canvas. No sweaty crowd perched on folding chairs, but cushy seats and air conditioning. It was an anodyne late model sedan losing out to memories of a raffish vintage open sport car.

When the show played Madison in 1967, Henry said to my wife, “If you want to ride an elephant in this circus, you’d better do it now.” A month later, in front of the

Coliseum in Rome, he and Uncle John conveyed the Circus to Roy Hofheintz of Astrodome fame.

With the sale of the Big One, I lost only my standing as a privileged hanger-on, whereas Henry's son lost his standing as the privileged insider. Born in 1940 and named for two Ringling Brothers impresarios, my cousin John had been brought up to run the circus. Although his parents were divorced when he was six, John spent a lot of summer time with the show. Left to the care of Fred Bradna's successor and tutored by Lou Jacobs, a long-time Ringling fixture, he joined in clown shenanigans and even a little juggling. From masters of the ring he learned the handling of horses; from Doc Henderson, the long-time circus vet, he learned their nurture. Meanwhile, his step-father, a successful Pittsburgh developer, became interested in show jumpers, affording John the chance to work with horses year round. And so it was that in the fateful summer of 1956 he was schooling jumpers nearby when told he'd better hie him to the Pittsburgh lot if he wanted one last chance to clown under canvas.

When the show returned to the rails in 1960, John toured with them for most of the summer; and, like me, he found the arena show unsatisfying. Besides, his uncle and father, equally unhappy with the new realities, were already trying to find a buyer. The diminished Greatest Show on Earth was not a promising career path.

After his graduation from Center College, John pursued another family opportunity, which luckily has been a perfect fit. The brothers North, in an access of nostalgia, had bought up some seven hundred ancestral acres in County Galway. In family lore, the estate had been gloriously gambled away by the older brother of our great grandfather; but we heard a different version from an elderly distant relation in

Ballinasloe: “Match race was it? Didn’t it just slip through his fingers, Joe North’s, and himself no fookin’ shakes as a farmer?” Whatever the case, Cousin John moved to Kilconnell in the late sixties and has made Northbrook western Ireland’s premier source of registered Angus beef.

Their two children grown, John and his first wife separated. His second wife, Shirley, is Galway bred and a champion show jumper, as is their daughter, Sorcha. John, meanwhile, has continued his other career as a successful trainer of steeplechasers and sometime jockey. But the cattle take most of his time, for Northbrook is no gentleman’s plaything. John runs the whole operation with only one other full-time farmer. I’ve helped him string wire and ridden out with him and Shirley on their daily round to count the broody cows and bullocks, usually around three hundred head. It’s hands-on all the way.

Life at Northbrook continued in its settled course until November of 2006, when Shirley, returning from the Dublin sales, got the surprise of her life. “I thought John would brain me,” she says, “for buying two horses instead of one, and all he said was, ‘That’s all right. I’ve just bought three elephants, a camel, and a llama.’”

The story of this surprise begins with the appearance at Northbrook of Jim Royal and his wife, Beverly, sometime in the late ’eighties. Jim, then a vice president of the Big Apple Circus, had heard that John’s father was visiting the farm and hoped to meet him. Henry had left, but the Royals were immediately invited to visit and have remained friends ever since.

Over the next several years, John saw Jim from time to time on trips to the States. In the meanwhile, after seeing the Big Apple Circus—where Jim had become G. M.—

John had even considered putting on a small indoor circus of his own for one winter in Dublin. Then, about five years ago, Jim took John to the Carson Barnes Circus in Hugo, Oklahoma. This outfit, then playing three rings under canvas, was the sort of old-fashioned show John had never thought to see again. When Jim explained that there were in fact several smaller tent shows also still touring, John jokingly said he'd be interested in buying one if it should come on the market. One did.

On the very day of Shirley's surprise, John called me to say he had put together a partnership with Jim Royal to buy the one-ring Kelly Miller Circus, also quartered in Hugo. He wanted my wife and me to come to their opening on St. Patrick's day. We went, of course.

The circus is small, but it's authentic. The big top—forty feet high—seats over fifteen hundred. Its four main poles are dragged into place, as they should be, by elephants, which, along with the big cats and horses, smell just as they should. The acts are traditional, so much so that the show features some troupers whose parents and grandparents toured with Ringling Brothers back in the day. In the small towns where it plays—a new one nearly every day for seven months—sweaty crowds jam its bleachers with evident delight. It's vintage all the way. John is the happiest small-time circus owner on the planet, and I'm once again a privileged hanger-on.

This is why last June found me walking the midway of the Kelly Miller Circus with Jim Royal in Liberty, only eleven miles from home. John was temporarily back in Ireland, so only the Royals had come by for lunch and two hours of reveling in my trove of circus memorabilia. Jim was especially intrigued by circus legends I had known and

my younger cousin had missed, including the Bradnas, Truzzi, Alfred Court (the first trainer to use mixed cats), and Walter McClain (the most famous bull man of all time).

We were headed for the Big Top when Jim made his offer to sidewall me. I had scarcely started to wave him off when he said, "Silly of me. Been there, done that." Then, seeing me drift into reverie, he was silent as we ambled along, trending now with one mind toward the main entrance, where he stopped. "You know," he said, "I'm having a regular Yogi year here, seeing you and John reach down to your circus roots, one after the other. It really **is** like *déjà vu* all over again."