



The Ringling Bros. Circus parade on July 14, 1900, at the intersection of Main and Court Streets. The height of popularity of the big circus during the latter part of the nineteenth century coincided with the transformation of Richland Center from a small village on the western edge of the wilderness to a thriving center of commerce. This photo shows the juxtaposition of the smaller frame buildings being replaced by much larger brick buildings in Richland Center's downtown. Richland County History Room photos. Advertisements from *The Richland Observer* archive.

The Circus in Richland Center - 1866 - 1959.

Richland Center Fair Grounds
AFTERNOON and NIGHT
Thursday, August 27
Legion Sponsorship

ALG. KELLY AND MILLER
Circos.

2nd Largest CIRCUS
5-TON TRAINED HIPPOPOTAMUS!
REAL LIVE GIRAFFES
JUNGLE-BRED RHINOCEROS!
21-ELEPHANTS "COUNT 'EM!"
65 ALL STEEL CARS
450 PEOPLE ★ ACRES OF TENTS
218 ANIMALS ★ \$3,000.00 PAID IN ADVANCE
2 COMPLETE PERFORMANCES!
DOORS OPEN 1:00 and 7:00 P. M. ★ SHOW STARTS 2:30 and 8:00 P. M.
FEEDING THE ANIMALS 7:00 A. M.

The earliest known circus to visit Richland Center was the Brooks & Brooks show in 1866 which consisted of nine wagons. Other early shows included the ill-fated Williams & Scarback circus in 1889 that became stranded in Richland Center for lack of funds to leave. They kept on performing and were able to depart after two weeks.

The Williams & Scarback Circus in 1889 came to town with a specialty built railroad car alleged to be carrying a huge whale that would be absolutely astounding to all who saw it. This leviathan turned out to be only fifteen feet long and quite dead.

Another aggregation that ran into trouble was the Cook & Whitby circus. They touted a hot air balloon that carried a horse, but it ended up to be only a dog which was injured when the balloon crashed. This group became infamous in Richland Center because of a large meleé that erupted between the circus people and the locals over perceived crooked shell-games. For the seasons of 1892-1894 the circus operated under the name of "Cook and Whitby's European Circus, Museum and Menagerie." In 1885 it became the "B. E. Wallace Circus" and was loaded aboard a riverboat and barges and showed along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers.

It was in 1882 that the Ringling Bros. made its first appearance in Richland Center. They came not as a circus but as "Ringling Bros. Moral Classic & Concert Co." Evidently they failed to please

AMERICA'S GREATEST CIRCUS COMING TO RICHLAND CENTER JULY 14!

RINGLING BROS.

WORLD'S GREATEST SHOWS

1000 People *
500 Horses *
300 Performers *
5 Big Arenas *
1 Aerial Enclave *
1-4 Mile Race Track *



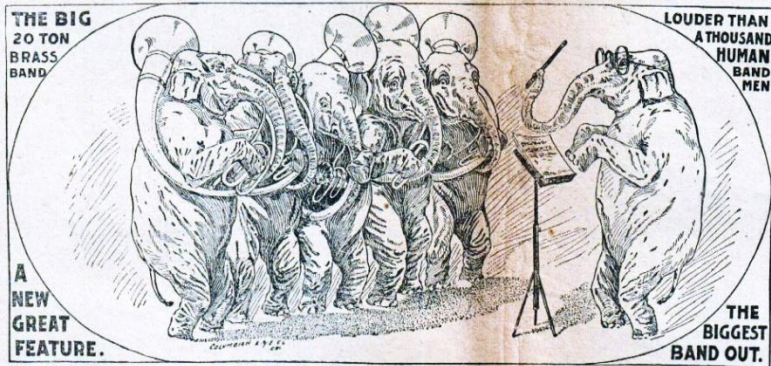
THE INVINCIBLE
MONARCH OF THE
AMUSEMENT WORLD

65 Railroad Cars *
25 Elephants *
100 Dens and Cages *
12 Acres of Tents *
\$3,700,000 Invested *
\$7,400 Daily Expenses *

A MAJESTIC, IMPOSING, IDEAL, PATRIOTIC SPECTACLE,
LAST DAYS OF THE CENTURY
OR, THE LIGHT OF LIBERTY!
OVER 1000 PEOPLE AND HUNDREDS OF HORSES IN THE CAST.

THE ONLY EXHIBITION IN THE WORLD PRESENTING
John O'Brien's
Famous Equine
Show, the . . . **61-HORSE ACT.**
61 FINE-BRED HORSES IN ONE RING, AT ONE TIME,
PERFORMED BY ONE MAN.

LOCKHART'S FAMOUS ACROBATIC, DANCING, PLAY-ACTING **ELEPHANT COMEDIANS.**



HERR SOUDER'S WONDERFUL FUNNY ELEPHANT BRASS BAND.

BIG NEW FREE PARADE IN 30 SECTIONS EVERY MORNING AT 10 O'CLOCK.
STREET

ONE 50c TICKET ADMITS TO EVERYTHING. SPECIAL CHEAP EXCURSIONS ON ALL RAILROADS.
CHILDREN, UNDER 12 YEARS OLD, HALF PRICE.

TWO COMPLETE EXHIBITIONS DAILY, AT 2 AND 8 P. M. . . . DOORS OPEN ONE HOUR EARLIER.

THE ACKNOWLEDGED GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH.

WILL EXHIBIT AT

Richland Center, Saturday, July 14

people from abroad the city, all in holiday attire. At 10 a.m. they gave their street parade, and it was a grand sight and one worth going many miles to see. In the afternoon the performance was attended by about 14,000 people, and in the evening, despite the inclemency of the weather, at least three thousand people were present. The Ringling Brothers now have the greatest show on earth. Every act was a leading feature and every performer a star. They are to be highly commended on their ability as managers and their good judgement in selecting everything they have in connection with the business. The menagerie in itself was well worth the price of admission, as was any feature of the whole show. The people in this part of the country have a warm place in their hearts for the Ringling boys and they always have the assurance of an immense crowd whenever they come to this city."

After July 14, 1900, the Ringling show failed to include Richland Center in its itinerary. It was rumored that the Ringlings became so angry because of difficulties with A.H. Krouskop over the circus grounds they vowed to never to return to Richland Center. Ringlings Bros. declared publicly that Richland Center was not included after that date because the city was on a branch line railroad and that there was too much risk in showing here where there was only one way to make an exit. A wash-out on the line could put the big show out of business for several days and that was too big of a risk for a 60-car circus to take. However, the dispute led to a lawsuit and Krouskop did win the verdict. Also, there were a number

the populace as the *Republican Observer* wrote, "Ringling's concert group gave an entertainment here last Monday evening; while some numbers were fair the audience failed to approve of the concert." Then in 1884, under the name of "Yankee Robinson & Ringling Bros. Museum and Fair," it came to Richland County with rented wagons and horses and showed at Viola and West Lima. It was not until 1885 that the "Ringling Bros. Museum & Menagerie" came to Richland Center. Although not yet billed at that time as "the greatest show on earth," the local paper noted the two performances drew large crowds. During these early days, these shows were transported by wagon. In 1890 it became known as "Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Railroad Show." That year it became a railroad show of 16 cars and played in Richland Center on July 25. By 1894, it had grown to a 38-car show of two trains and Richland Center was one of its stops, performing here on June 30 and again on July 11, 1896. The Ringling big show came to Richland Center for the last time in 1900. Their appearances up to that time always were the city's biggest, busiest days. *The Richland Democrat* in its July 18, 1900, issue reported on the Ringling's July 14 visit to Richland Center, "Last Saturday was a gala day for the performances given by the world renowned Ringling Bros. circus. As early as five o'clock in the morning people began to arrive in the city and by noon there were as many as fifteen thousand

of robberies committed during the parade that year. Sums of money and valuables were taken from the homes of O.J. Burnham, Rev. Martin and Mayor DeLap. It was only too easy to blame the circus community although disreputable locals may well have been the culprits.

The coming of the circus was a great event. People would gather at the local depot at an early hour to meet the circus train. From then on until late into the night there was great excitement in Richland Center. Although 1900 was the last time the Ringling Bros. circus performed in Richland Center, a multitude of other circuses did come here for many years. Much has been written about the "big show" and its visits to Richland Center, the street parades in which 16 horses pulled the big band wagon, the mile-long parade, the unloading and loading of the cars, the elephants being led to water and taking a bath in the Pine River below the dam. Then there was the side show which at one time featured two Richland County siblings, Joe Leffler and his sister Barbara from Hoosier Hollow, being a top attraction as albinos. Another Richland County resident, Dick Booth, was a member of the circus band for several years.



Joe and Barbara Leffler.

Barbara Ellen Leffler was born Nov. 14, 1877 and her brother, Joseph Malton Leffler was born Aug. 23, 1882, both in Indiana. They were albinos and grew up in the Hoosier Hollow area in Richland County. For many years Barbara and Joe were in the side show in the Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows of Baraboo. After they left the circus, Joe hauled milk with a team of mules in Richland County, farmed in Hoosier Hollow and married Wilma Sippy in 1940. Barbara married William Sharp and raised a large family. Barbara died Nov. 25, 1927 and Joe died June 8, 1951. While the most famous circus owners associated with Wisconsin may be the Ringling Bros., their cousins the Gollmar Bros. also originated in the state. The Gollmar Bros. started their own circus in 1891 and operated until 1916, spending the winters in Baraboo. After 1916 the Gollmar name was leased to other circuses, and last used in 1926.

The Seils-Sterling circus was started in 1918 by the Lindemann brothers, Billy, Pete and Al in Sheboygan. Well established by 1925, the Lindemanns adopted the name Seils-Sterling and their circus became one of the country's greatest motorized shows. The Seils-Sterling circus was recognized as the largest motorized circus touring America in the mid-1930s. The show moved on 56 semi-trailer trucks, had a 36 cage menagerie,

including elephants. In 1937 its 29-week itinerary included stops in 10 states, but the depression of the 1930s led to the end of Seils-Sterling's travels. The final performance was in Iron Mountain, Michigan, July 4, 1938.

The last big show in Richland Center took place on June 26, 1918, when the Hagen-Beck Wallace Circus came to town just after a tragic train wreck had decimated the circus train. The Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus was a circus that traveled across America in the early part of the 20th century. At its peak, it was the second-largest circus in America next to Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. It was based in Peru, Indiana. On June 22, 1918 near Hammond, Ind.,

the Hagenbeck -Wallace Circus suffered one of the worst tragedies in U. S. circus history. At 3:56 a.m. the Hagenbeck-Wallace train stopped to check an overheated wheel bearing on one of the flatcars of the 26 car circus train. A empty troop train with 20 Pullman cars was on the same track moving ahead at full throttle, with the engineer asleep in the cab. The train slammed into the circus train. Of the 400 circus personnel aboard the train 86 died and 127 were injured. A fire spread quickly through the train burning many of the bodies beyond recognition. The circus continued on and played their engagement in Richland Center on June 26, four days after the train wreck.

A NEWLY GATHERED CIRCUS OF ALL NATIONS

A VAST ARRAY OF FOREIGN FEATURES ENTIRELY NEW TO AMERICA

15 MINUTES OF WILDEST WILD WEST

CARL HAGENBECK WALLACE CIRCUS GREATEST OF SHOWS!

NOTHING ELSE LIKE IT IN ALL EARTH'S HISTORY

\$3,000,000 Actual Capital Invested

3 - R. R. Trains - 3 400 - Performers - 400
50 - Clowns - 50 3 - Herds of Elephants - 3
500 - Horses - 500 400 - Wild Animals - 400
22 - Tents - 22 8 - Military Bands - 8
200 - Acts, Features and Sensations - 200

CARL HAGENBECK'S Trained Wild Animals

1,001 Wonders, filling 3 Rings, 2 Stages, Steel Arena, Hippodrome and dome of the world's biggest tent.

3-MILE GALA. GOLDEN STREET PARADE 10 A. M.

Tents illuminated by electricity at night.

Two performances daily, 2 and 8 p. m. Doors open 1 and 7 p. m.

Operatic Concert by Prof. Jewell's Band of 45 Soloists 30 minutes preceding each performance.



The Great Wallace Shows parade on Court Street - 1898.



G. WALLACE

THE GREAT WALLACE SHOWS

COLOSSAL 3 RING CIRCUS, 2 ELEVATED STAGES.

FINEST HORSES OF ANY SHOW ON EARTH

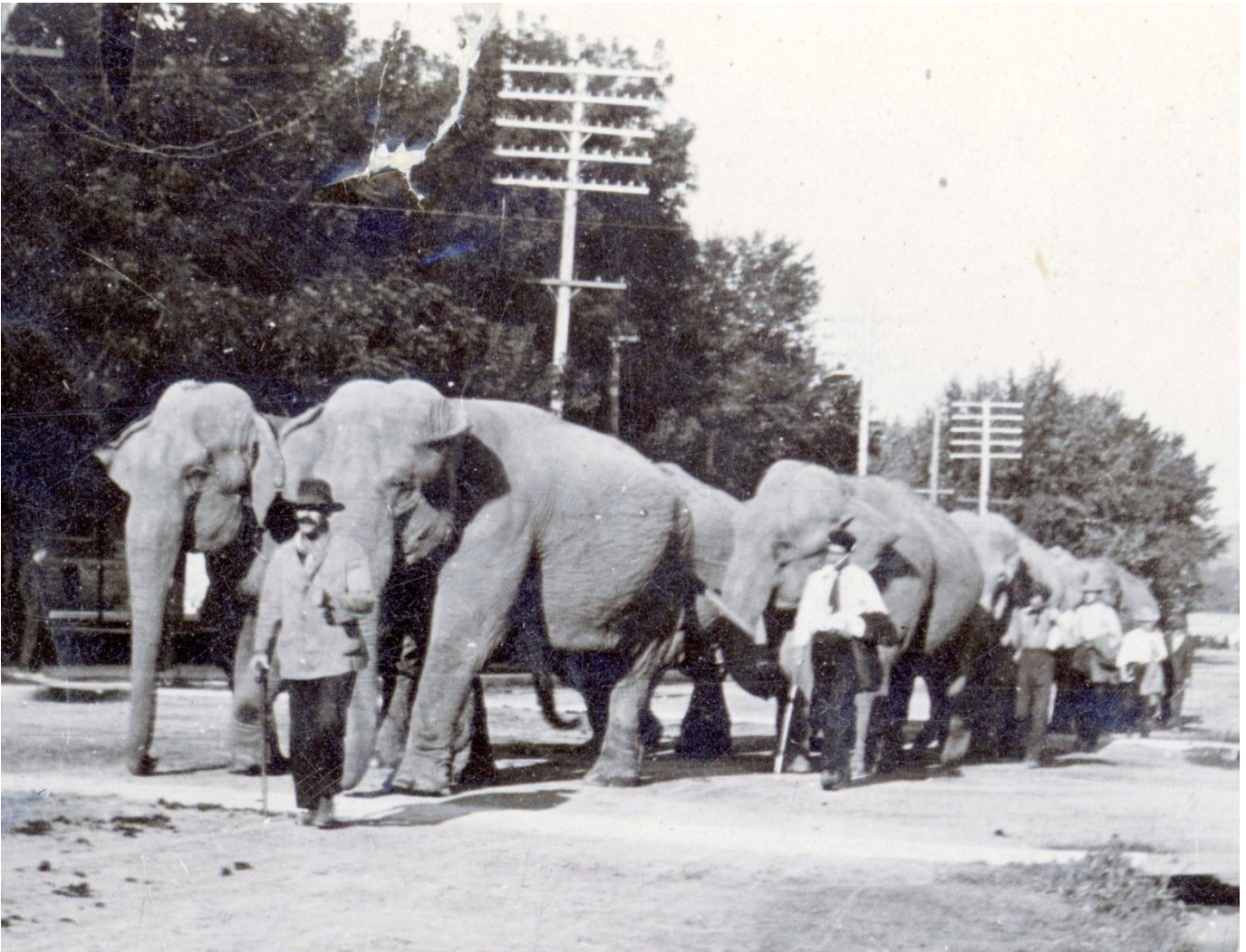
MUSEUM AND MENAGERIE

THE HIGHEST CLASS CIRCUS IN THE WORLD



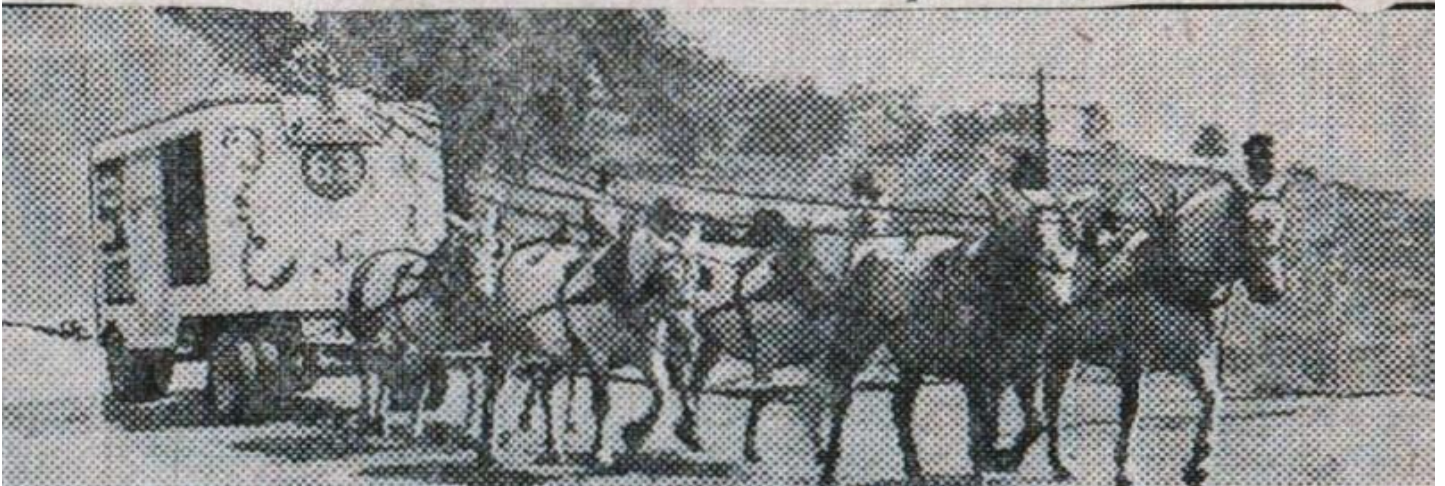
STIRK FAMILY

THE RENOWNED STIRK FAMILY, WHOSE "FAME FOLDS IN THE ORB 'O THIS EARTH". THE GLASS OF FASHION AND THE MOLD OF FORM. THE HIGHEST OF HIGH CLASS ACTS. MARVELOUS AND ORIGINAL EVOLUTIONS BY ADULT AND JUVENILE EXPERTS. AN ENORMOUSLY EXPENSIVE FEATURE OF THE WORLDS BEST SHOW.



Ringling Bros.' elephants on Seminary Street in Richland Center. Linda Thomas photo.

**AL G. KELLY & MILLER BROS.—FIRST
BIG CIRCUS HERE IN YEARS
Richland Center, Thursday, August 27**



The last circus to play Richland Center was the Kelly-Miller show on August 27, 1959.



It took hundreds of horses to operate the big shows. Below: Richland Center railroad depot.

