

## BARABOO'S RICH CIRCUS HISTORY

Baraboo is aptly nicknamed Wisconsin's "circus city" because of the show world greats that emanated from the small rural community. The home of circuses past and circus museums present, Baraboo's history is entwined with that of the great American circus.

**Ringling Bros. Circus** – On May 19, 1884, Al., Alf T., Otto, Charles and John Ringling produced their first circus performance in Baraboo. The show's winter quarters were located along the Baraboo River from 1884 to 1918. As the Ringlings' fame and fortune grew, so did their stature and reputation in the show world. In 1907, the powerful Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows bought its major competitor, the Barnum & Bailey Circus - The Greatest Show on Earth. In 1919, the Ringling brothers merged the two gargantuan shows to become the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows – The Greatest Show on Earth. Living up to the posters that bore their names and mustachioed likenesses, the Ringling brothers were indeed Kings of the Circus World.

**Gollmar Bros. Circus** – Although lesser known than their first cousins, the famous Ringling brothers, the Gollmars made lasting contributions to American circus history. The Gollmar Bros. Greatest of American Shows operated out of winter quarters on Baraboo's Second Avenue from 1891 until 1916, with brothers Walter, Fred, Charles, Ben, and Jake Gollmar as proprietors. For the following decade, the Gollmar name was leased to other circuses, last being used in 1926.

**Moeller Bros.** - Henry and Corwin Moeller, first cousins to the Ringling and Gollmar brothers, played a role in the success of Baraboo's circuses and others operated elsewhere by leading showmen. Operators of a blacksmith shop and wagon manufactory still standing on Third Avenue in Baraboo, the Moellers built many of the elaborate circus parade, cage and baggage wagons for the Ringlings' show, including the Ringling Bros. Bell Wagon of 1892. They also fabricated and repaired wagons for several other circuses through 1928.

**Other Circuses** with Baraboo roots include John Robinson's Circus (1898), Adam Forepaugh and Sells Bros. Enormous United Shows (1910-1911), Hodgini Bros. Combined Railroad Shows (1915), Fun on the Farm Circus (1924), and Wilbur W. Deppe's Classic Country Circus (1961-1966).

**Circus World** – Owned by the Wisconsin Historical Society and operated by the not-for-profit Circus World Museum Foundation, Circus World is located at 550 Water Street in Baraboo. Since its opening on July 1, 1959, Circus World has been located at the original winter quarters of the Ringling Bros. Circus (1884-1918). Circus World preserves an unparalleled collection of circus artifacts and archival items, including circus wagons and

vehicles, posters, business records, manuscripts, programs, hand bills, journals, oil paintings, photographs and negatives that document circuses from Wisconsin and around the world. During its summer live performance season, Circus World presents many entertaining, family-friendly shows daily, including live Big Top Circus Performances. For more information, call toll-free 1-866-693-1500 or visit <https://circusworldbaraboo.org>.

**International Clown Hall of Fame & Research Center** – A celebration of the clowning arts, the International Clown Hall of Fame & Research Center is located at 102 Fourth Avenue in downtown Baraboo. The museum features exhibits that recognize the artistic achievements of famous clown performers from around the globe, including costumes, props, miniature cars, posters and other memorabilia. The facility also maintains a research center of clowning-related artifacts and archival items. For more information, call (608) 355-0321 or visit <https://theclownmuseum.com>.

**Al. Ringling Theatre** – Built in 1915 as a gift to the citizens of Baraboo by the eldest of the world-famous Ringling brothers, the Al. Ringling Theatre is located in the heart of the city's downtown at 136 Fourth Avenue. Known as "America's Prettiest Playhouse," the theatre is a fine example of the elaborate movie palaces of a century ago. In constant operation for nearly a century, the Al. Ringling Theatre features live touring shows, classic films, local theater productions, school programs, facility tours and demonstrations on its Mighty Barton Organ. The Al. Ringling Theatre is slated to be closed for several months in 2015 for a major restoration. For more information, call (608) 356-8864 or visit <https://alringling.com>.

**Al. Ringling Mansion** – Built in 1905 for the eldest of the Ringling brothers, Al, and his wife Lou, the mansion, 623 Broadway Street, is open for tours and events year-round. Tour goers learn about the 1905 red stone mansion's ornate murals, hand-painted ceilings, original furnishings and elaborately carved woodwork. For more information, call the Al. Ringling Mansion at (608) 448-7455 or visit [www.ringlingmansion.com](http://www.ringlingmansion.com).

**Charles Ringling Mansion (Ringling House Bed & Breakfast)** – The Charles E. Ringling House was built in 1900-01 for one of the famed Ringling brothers. The large, wood frame Georgian Revival residence graces one of Baraboo's main thoroughfares at 201 – 8<sup>th</sup> Street. Since circa 1936-37, the home has featured a vibrant canary yellow and white paint scheme. Owned by the Ringling family for over 100 years, the home is now operated as the Ringling House Bed & Breakfast. In addition to providing a unique lodging experience, the home is also the site of special events and tours. For more information, call (608) 356-4229 or visit [www.ringlinghousebnb.com](http://www.ringlinghousebnb.com).