



Announcer: 00:01 This is the *Thank You, 72* podcast brought to you by the Wisconsin Alumni Association. This podcast salutes outstanding Badgers from every one of Wisconsin’s 72 counties. Here’s your host, Tod Pritchard.

Tod Pritchard: 00:13 Thank you, Manitowoc County, for the 1948 UW Madison grad who helped preserve the rich history of the American circus for us today and for generations to come.

00:26 William Schultz, known to everyone as Bill, was born into a circus family in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, on November 25th, 1923. His father, who used the stage name Billy Lester, was an outstanding acrobat and aerialist touring with many circuses and performing on the vaudeville circuit.

00:44 When the Depression hit in the 1930s he came back to Manitowoc, got married, and put together local circus performances with area kids, including his own son, Bill. As they say, the apple did not fall far from the tree. Bill inherited his dad’s agility and performed feats of strength. During World War II, young Bill joined the marines and raised money for war bonds by boxing and wrestling Hollywood actors, including legendary film star John Wayne.

01:13 After the war, he enrolled at UW–Madison, where he studied physical education and led the gymnastics team to a Big Ten title. During football and basketball games, he entertained halftime crowds with cartwheels and handstands, some performed in the rafters of the Wisconsin Field House.

01:30 Though the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus recruited him, Bill instead went to work for the YMCA after earning his master’s degree.

01:38 His athletic skills helped him win national championships in paddleball in 1962 and racquetball in 1968, but eventually,

circus life called him back. And in 1972, he became the executive director of the Circus World Museum in Baraboo.

- 01:55 He retired in 1984 only to enter his father's field as a substitute teacher. He passed away in 2009. Thanks in part to Bill's vision and dedication, the Circus World Museum in Baraboo is still going strong. In fact, the museum is celebrating its 60th anniversary this summer.
- Announcer: 02:14 You're listening to the *Thank You, 72* podcast brought to you by the Wisconsin Alumni Association. Once again, here's your host, Tod Pritchard.
- Tod Pritchard: 02:22 We are so honored to be here at Circus World Museum today with Executive Director Scott O'Donnell and Performance Director and Ringmaster Dave SaLoutos. Thanks for joining me for the podcast today.
- Dave SaLoutos: 02:33 Yeah, glad to be here.
- Scott O'Donnell: 02:34 Our pleasure. Welcome to Baraboo.
- Tod Pritchard: 02:36 Well, thanks. Thanks for being here. It's awesome being here, and congratulations again. Circus World Museum is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year.
- Dave SaLoutos: 02:43 It is. We look good, don't we?
- Tod Pritchard: 02:45 You do for 60. Absolutely. I want to talk about that 60th anniversary here in a second, but first let's talk about Bill Schultz and what he meant to this place. Dave, I understand you worked with Bill here at Circus World.
- Dave SaLoutos: 03:00 I actually did. It was my first high school job. I was hired in the concessions department here while Bill ... I think was his first year at Circus World. And then 1978, I got a call, and he asked me if I wouldn't want to be a ringmaster here, and secretly, as a kid growing up in Baraboo, I had always wanted to try my hand at being a ringmaster. And so we arranged, in 1978, I was the first young ringmaster here at Circus World.
- Tod Pritchard: 03:32 Wow, '78 that's awesome.
- Dave SaLoutos: 03:35 Yeah.
- Tod Pritchard: 03:35 What was he like to work with?

Dave SaLoutos: 03:38 He knew what he wanted. He could be a bit demanding, but he could also be supportive in a lot of ways. So it was a good mixed bag. A good person to have at the circus.

Tod Pritchard: 03:51 I'm sure you have to have a certain amount of command of what's going on. It's a circus after all, right? It's crazy. There's all sorts of things going on. So you have to be sort of on task, right?

Dave SaLoutos: 04:01 You do. It's a weird combination of being strict, but yet it's artistic form, too, so you got to kind of let the artistic personalities find their way. And that's what gives you the best product.

Tod Pritchard: 04:15 So what do you think Bill's legacy is for this place?

Dave SaLoutos: 04:18 I think one of his big triumphs was the acrobatic school that he started here. And that came out of his YMCA training and his background, and I think he had a love of circus through his father. But then the YMCA and the acrobatic training he did at UW found its way in here with a young acrobatic school. And I think for three or four years that it operated. He enthused a lot of young people and we actually got some big-name circus performers that came out of it. Mark David Pilger being the number one local boy who went on to star as a trapeze artist all around world.

Tod Pritchard: 04:58 Scott, Circus World opened July 1st, 1959. Tell us, how did that all come about?

Scott O'Donnell: 05:06 Oh my golly, what a story. So Baraboo was founded in 1882. The Ringling Brothers start their circus in 1884. So almost as long as there's been a Baraboo, there's been a circus connection to it.

Scott O'Donnell: 05:18 One of the first city attorneys for Baraboo was John M. Kelley. He was here after his degree from UW in law and Charles Ringling engaged John M. Kelley as the city attorney to help them with a lawsuit that they had been facing, and he got them off of the ...won the lawsuit, I guess I should say. And the brothers were so impressed, they decided to hire him and brought him on as their attorney. And he was their attorney from 1907 to 1937. After that, he worked a lot with the Wisconsin Dairy Council, as well.

Scott O'Donnell: 05:56 He was actually born in Portage, Wisconsin, to a dairy family, and his association with the Wisconsin Dairy Council. He also became a show producer himself with the Fun on the Farm Circus, which melded the state's two great cultural identities, I guess I would say, dairy farming and circus. It was a great

amalgamation. I think a lot of people are amazed, and this is sort of tangential to your original question, but over a hundred circuses have come from the state of Wisconsin.

- Tod Pritchard: 06:28 Really?
- Scott O'Donnell: 06:28 Yeah. The Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey being the two largest and most well known globally, but basically if you take a map of the state and throw a dart at it, you're going to hit a town or be close to a town where a circus came from. So it's an amazing legacy here.
- Tod Pritchard: 06:42 Why do you think that is? Why did that happen?
- Scott O'Donnell: 06:44 Oh my golly. Well, there's a couple of reasons. Early circuses that emanated from the East Coast made it, sort of, this far in their purge west or their expansion west, I should say, not purge. It got this far and some of them went out of business. So some circus performers found themselves here in the great state of Wisconsin, and it had a couple of great elements, early elements, that benefited them.
- Scott O'Donnell: 07:09 If you are a family that might have large animals that eat large amounts of food, i.e., an elephant that eats about 300 pounds of food each a day, this is a very fertile state, and it had great crops and abundant and affordable. So it became a great, affordable place to be.
- Scott O'Donnell: 07:30 It also had early great transportation. This state did. So it allowed people that were here to expand either east or west. It was sort of centrally located. And like all circus performers, they either work for a circus or they tend to start their own circus in many ways. So as some circus performers were here and started their own circus, they brought performers here, and they liked the state and found themselves here and then branched off and opened their own circuses. Sort of like that Wella Balsam commercial. She told two friends and so on and so on. It really exponentially grew here in the state of Wisconsin.
- Tod Pritchard: 08:04 And so the genesis of the Circus World Museum was because of the Ringling Brothers, right?
- Scott O'Donnell: 08:10 Yes. This is their hometown, of course. They were here from 1884 until the winter of 1917, 1918. John M. Kelley's hometown as well. And him wanting to really preserve their legacy and the state's legacy and their role in this great American art form and cultural institution that we call the circus, it really became a passionate project for him in the twilight of his life. It's really in

his eighties and nineties that he becomes the champion of wanting to form this world-class museum dedicated to the circus arts.

Scott O'Donnell: 08:47 The original winter quarter buildings were still here. It was a preserved winter quarters of a circus that did not exist in the scale and capacity that it did here in Baraboo. Arguably, the buildings have been transformed. Some of them were being used as chick hatcheries. Some of them were being used for school bus companies and transportation companies, but they were still here. The buildings were still here and their legacy was here.

Scott O'Donnell: 09:13 So he starts an early conversation, really in 1951, he starts corresponding with the director of the Wisconsin Historical Society at that time. His name was Clifford Lord, and he starts a conversation with him wanting to see if this museum could come to be. So, long story short, they incorporate Circus World Museum in 1954, and they start a period of fundraising, which allows them to acquire a couple of the original and winter quarter buildings and a couple of circus wagons and a collection, and they're off to the races.

Scott O'Donnell: 09:49 They opened July 1st, 1959, here in Baraboo. It corresponded with the worldwide debut of a Hollywood movie called *The Big Circus*, which had its debut here on opening day at the Al Ringling Theatre. And it had such Hollywood stars as Victor Mature and Red Buttons, Rhonda Fleming, Vincent Price, Peter Lorre. So a lot of them were here in town at the Al Ringling Theatre. There was a parade that came through town, and it ended up here at Circus World for the grand opening on July 1st, 1959. And the rest has been a glorious, circus-filled, sawdust and spangled ride. From sort of passionate dreams and a humble beginning of a couple of the buildings and a couple of wagons, it's grown into the world's largest collection of circus artifacts and ephemera and the largest living history museum dedicated to the circus arts.

Scott O'Donnell: 10:44 We have the largest collection of circus wagons still in existence: over 200-plus of those wagons. We have the largest clumping or grouping of national historic landmarks, which are all of the original circus winter quarter buildings. There's so many of them in succession here along Water Street that it's actually a national historic district, as well, which is called Ringlingville.

Tod Pritchard: 11:14 It's an amazing place, and you have so many treasures. What do you think your favorite treasure is, Dave? I'll ask you that. I know it's fairly hard to pick your favorite child.

Scott O'Donnell: 11:26 We say *Dave*.

Dave SaLoutos: 11:30 Yes. Cause I go back a ways. But really, it's, I think, the foundation of the original Ringling winter quarters, which includes where they worked on the train. It's a huge complex. The building that houses has three railroad tracks running through it. Each one can hold up to eight cars. So that's where they kept and worked on the railroad equipment over the wintertime. And it's the only one of its kind in the world, the largest wooden railroad structure in North America. It's just a phenomenal asset. Someday we hope to open that to the public too, cause it's really great.

Dave SaLoutos: 12:12 But the winter quarters is the foundation, and then our library and research center is a wonderful asset for the entire state and for the world. We get requests from people all around the world looking for circus history tidbits, and it could be from their family wanting to know what Uncle George, "We heard he traveled with the circus. Can you help us?" And lots of times we can help them with that question on genealogy, and other times it's a specific thing about a seat truck that traveled on a Clyde Beatty Cole Brothers Circus back in the 1940s or something like that.

Tod Pritchard: 12:52 Not only do you have all these treasures, but you're one of the few places in the country that still has live circus performances.

Dave SaLoutos: 12:59 Yes.

Scott O'Donnell: 12:59 Yeah. Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey ceased touring operations in 2017, after 146 years. That's a legacy American brand that's been around longer than Coca-Cola, the Kentucky Derby, and baseball. It wasn't a death knell of circus here in America. There's still 50-plus active circuses that are still crisscrossing America in different sizes and configurations. Some under a big top, some in arenas, some in high school gyms. It really is a versatile and nimble art form, and really the death knell, so to speak, of this industry has been rung so many times throughout its history. And because it's so nimble and because it has this wonderful currency of fun and awe and wonder and it really celebrates the human condition and what is possible, it really is able to reinvent itself, and I really feel that we're in a chapter of that currently, right now.

- 13:58 The big portion of that, I think, is in the youth circus movement. Less than a decade ago, there was probably maybe a handful, a dozen, youth circus programs here in America. Now, there's almost 500 of them. And the art form is really transitioning from not being audience based, in the sense that people just come and watch people do this, now, it's more interactive and you get to jump into the circus arts and learn the dexterity that it takes to juggle or what it might be like at to hang on one of the aerial apparatuses. It's interesting because this art form, the more we've got connected on our digital devices in this world, the more disconnected I feel that we've become as a society. But the more people have connected to the circus arts concurrent to this digital trend we find ourselves in. It sort of runs in contrast as sort of logic at the moment because it really allows people to step beyond the seat and beyond the spotlight at the center ring and into the art form itself. And we are seeing such beautiful reconnection with different generations.
- 15:15 Hollywood, as well, has helped here in the last so many years. Really, *The Greatest Showman*. It's so wonderful to see kids coming in dressed as PT Barnum and they're so just thirsty and voracious to learn all that they can about these circus arts. And we had a young gentleman here that just visited this week with his grandparents and said, "This is so cool. I'm going to see it live. Not like the movies where I know they do make-believe stuff. This is so cool." That's our currency here. It's fun. It's cool. It's better live.
- 15:49 I love watching our guests walk in and the younger generations' faces buried in a digital device and "What are we here to see?" and "I don't get it." By the time they leave, that cell phone or iPad's packed in their pocket or their bag, their face is painted, they're zipped up on cotton candy, and they're like, "Wow, this was so cool. When are we coming back?" And that's the timeless art form of the circus that we celebrate here every day.
- Tod Pritchard: 16:15 Yeah, well said. That's exactly right. I've seen that look on my son's face when I brought him here a few years ago. And I totally get that. It's seeing that performance live really makes a huge difference.
- Scott O'Donnell: 16:26 Sure does.
- Tod Pritchard: 16:27 So 60th anniversary. Tell us about what you guys doing for the celebration of that.
- Dave SaLoutos: 16:32 Oh, boy. Other than taking a breath.

Scott O'Donnell: 16:36 Yeah. It's a fantastic summer-long, full of celebrations. Of course, because it is our 60th anniversary, we have themed all of our events to the 1960s. We went with an amazing decade of really social growth in American, an amazing musical calendar and dossier to run with. So the show is *A Summer of Love Under a Big Top*, and it is filled to the gills with just amazing world-class talent.

Scott O'Donnell: 17:07 Outside of that, we're doing a classic car show because classic cars and circus is Norman Rockwell Americana at its best. This community, as well, celebrates every July, the third Saturday in July, with Baraboo's Big Top Parade and Circus Celebration. It, as I just said, it really, truly is Norman Rockwell Americana come to life. I mean the beautiful downtown square here in Baraboo and these majestic circus wagons that get pulled by majestic Percheron horses, and it transports you to maybe a simpler but more amazing time here in the American experience, and our community swells to three times its population in one day. You not only get to see the circus, but you get to be the circus, and we invite everybody to come celebrate with that.

Scott O'Donnell: 17:59 What other stuff we've got on? Watermelon party.

Dave SaLoutos: 18:02 Yeah. Watermelon party with the elephants.

Scott O'Donnell: 18:04 If you've never —

Dave SaLoutos: 18:05 Because they love that.

Scott O'Donnell: 18:05 — never seen elephants devour and enjoy and explore the classic American summertime treat of watermelons, and we invited everybody to come see that. We have a military service day where we honor all active duty and veterans and their families here at Circus World for a day.

Scott O'Donnell: 18:25 So it's really celebrating our tradition of being here for 60 years with families in Wisconsin, but that tradition within the family unit itself. I always say, if we had a dollar for every time we have people walk through the door here and say, "Boy, the last time I was here I was this tall." But that's a wonderful thing that generations of Wisconsinites and Americans have come to our home and brought their family to be entertained and to be educated. I always say it's a more wonderful connection that you make if you have fun while you're being educated. And I think that that's our lane here at Circus World. And inviting people within our doors because where else can you sit five feet away from an elephant and have this sensory experience that is

the circus. You're going to see it and smell it. And if your mouth isn't close, you're gonna taste a little of it. That's awesome.

Scott O'Donnell:	19:23	You can't get that from a digital screen or a scratch-and-sniff book or an encyclopedia. You've got to come experience it because that is the currency of the circus.
Tod Pritchard:	19:35	Well, congratulations again on your 60th anniversary and many, many more years to come. Thank you so much for being on the podcast today.
Dave SaLoutos:	19:42	Thank you.
Scott O'Donnell:	19:42	Thank you.
Announcer:	19:47	Thanks for listening to the <i>Thank You, 72</i> podcast. The Wisconsin Alumni Association brings you stories of amazing Badgers. For more podcasts, visit thankyou72.org . That's thankyou72.org .