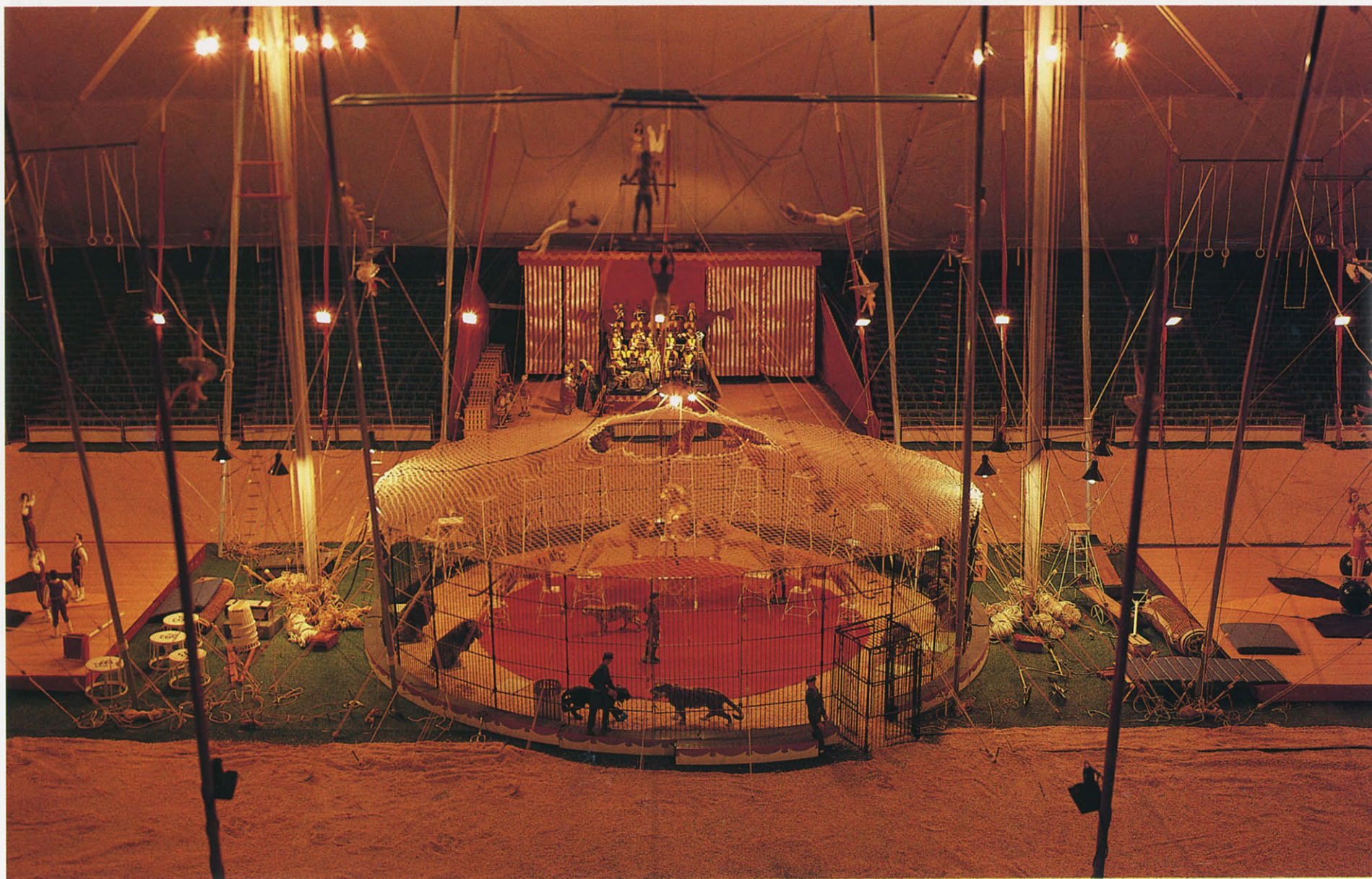


# THE BIGGEST LITTLE SHOW ON EARTH







# **THE BIGGEST LITTLE SHOW ON EARTH**

A Tribute to the Combined Collections  
of Howard Tibbals and Harold Dunn

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DUNN  
BROS.  
CIRCUS





## HOWARD TIBBALS

To understand why Howard Tibbals, Executive Vice President of Hartco Flooring, has devoted 26 years of his life to building "The Biggest Little Show On Earth," you have to know the boy inside the man.

Tibbals' fascination with the circus began when, as an 8-year-old, he watched it unload, set up and spring to life in a vacant lot near his grandmother's home in West Virginia. As a teen-ager, he would spend hours on the circus lot with his camera — seduced by the aromas of the cookhouse, dazzled by the sheer numbers surrounding him and awed by the size and scope of the circus organization.

"The thing that got me hooked on the circus was the tremendous movement of that show from daylight to dark," Tibbals, something of an engineer and student of the way things work, says. "The amount of activity and construction . . . and the fact that it didn't matter if it rained or not — they still did it."

After seeing a magazine article which gave the actual dimensions of the Ringling Bros. Big Top, Tibbals set out to sew his own scaled-down version. A couple of years later he happened upon an ad that rekindled his interest in the project. It announced the showing of Mr. Harold Dunn's miniature circus at a department store in Raleigh, N.C., where he was attending college.

"I guess I acted just like the typical college kid — coming around asking dumb questions. He wouldn't give me the time of day," Tibbals recalls.

Actually, unbeknownst to him, Dunn was

quite impressed:

"I had a premonition there was something in him. He seemed so dedicated in his talk that I figured if he were really that way, it'd really be something."

From that meeting in 1958, Tibbals and Dunn began a rewarding friendship and collaboration. Working from photographs and actual measurements supplied by Dunn, Tibbals was able to greatly expand his own miniature circus.

The influence of the older man on the younger can be seen in several ways. "Harold and I are like two peas in a pod in our likes and dislikes," Tibbals says.

Both love the same era of the circus, its so-called "Golden Days," covering the period from 1925 to 1938. Both also prefer the organizational side of the show — the wagons, the tents, the stages, the super-structures — to the actual performance aspects. Both, furthermore, believe there's just one way to build and transport a miniature circus.

"Anything you make that you take out of the wagons and set up, ought to go back into the wagons just like in a real circus," Tibbals asserts.

And that's just where you'll find "The Biggest Little Show On Earth" when it's not set up — occupying over 90 wagons neatly lining the shelves of Tibbals' basement.

When asked why he continues to pursue his hobby so avidly, Tibbals waves aside suggestions of altruistic motives:

"I do it for the fun of it. Period. If it weren't fun, I wouldn't do it."



# HAROLD DUNN

For Harold Dunn, it wasn't enough to just dream of joining the circus. From the time he saw his first show at age 5, he wanted to own his own.

"It wasn't a childish desire. It was more the iron-clad determination of an adult. The older I got, the more intense it got," he says.

The oldest in a family of German immigrant woodcarvers, Dunn was literally forced to learn the family trade from an early age by his grandfather. "I had to practice an hour a day, six days a week. And if I missed a day, I had to make it up."

Around the fourth grade, Dunn began to carve circus animals and, by the time he was a young man, he had amassed quite a respectable collection.

His first show happened almost by accident when he jokingly offered to exhibit his miniature circus to raise money for an orphan's home. The success of that show convinced Dunn that there was a market for his product, and what had been a hobby became a full-time job.

Soon Dunn Bros. Circus (as he called the show after the manner of Ringling Bros.) was among the most popular retail promotional devices in the country. Thousands flocked to stores like Bamberger's, Gimbel's and the May Company to see it. By Dunn's own estimate, over 15 million people have oohed and aahed over his miniature circus during its 193 engagements here and abroad, including appearances at five world's fairs.

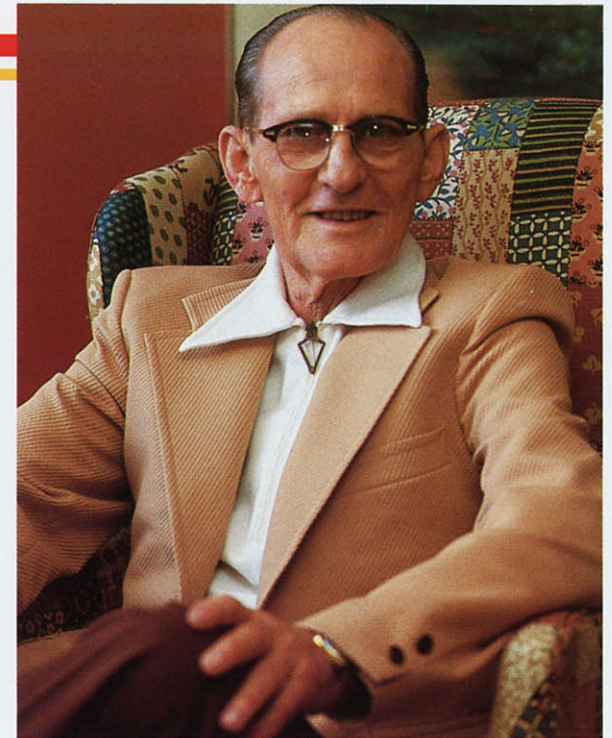
From 1940 - 1956, Dunn also spent 10 days to two weeks a year traveling with the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus. He used part of this time to document the circus with photographs and measurements so that he could make his own circus more authentic. He also used the opportunity to learn as much as he could from the various people who made up the show — workers, bosses, trainers, performers and owners.

Dunn shares Howard Tibbals' amazement for the organization of the circus in its heyday:

"For me, it was the absolute impossibility of it all . . . seeing it go from a vacant lot to a giant city in just a few hours and knowing that it happened that way day after day after day."

In transporting and setting up his own circus — an operation likewise involving millions of pieces loaded into hundreds of wagons and then hauled on a semi-trailer truck — Dunn discovered ways to do certain things better, cheaper and more efficiently.

One person who made good use of Dunn's circus knowledge was Cecil B. DeMille, who employed him as a sort of technical adviser during the filming of The Greatest Show On Earth. DeMille's set for the movie was based on hundreds of photographs he had taken of Dunn's miniature display. He also used Dunn's train, the same one shown at The 1982 World's Fair, to film the famous train wreck sequence that appeared in the picture. Several years later, Dunn was called back to Hollywood to assist in the making of Ring of Fear, the life of famed animal trainer, Clyde Beatty.



*Best Wishes from  
JH Dunn Oct 18/1982*







# THE EXHIBIT

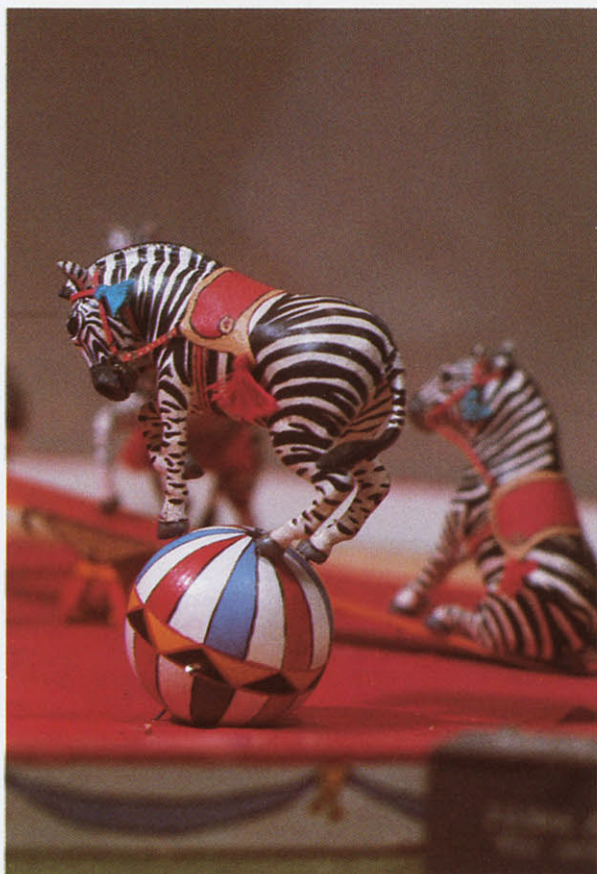
Parked between the workbenches of Howard Tibbals and Harold Dunn is the most telling piece in the entire exhibit. The menagerie pole wagon — built by Dunn, painted by Tibbals — is a symbol of the gigantic joint effort it took between the two men to make "The Biggest Little Show On Earth" a reality.

Set-up of the display began February 16 and was not completed until 4 a.m. May 1, just hours before The 1982 World's Fair formally opened its gates. In putting together this massive miniature circus over 15,000 stakes were driven and nearly five miles of rigging cord used. Another 500 light bulbs were employed to illuminate the animal cages and other pieces of exhibitry.

The number of pieces on the big display table alone approaches a million. And every piece can be stored inside and carried away by 98 compact circus wagons. In the outer area of the exhibit, fifteen glass cases hold thousands of more items.







Pictured throughout the exhibit, which consists of Tibbals'  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch scale miniature circus and selected pieces from Dunn's  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch scale replica, are hundreds of scenes necessary to the day-to-day operation of the circus. Among them:

## The Parade

In the glass cases housing Dunn's collection are several outstanding examples of the colorful spectacle the circus parade was before its demise in the 1920's due to automobile traffic and street congestion.

Depicted are the Fairyland Parade Section, added to the Barnum & Bailey show in 1883 to create interest among children. Also on display is a replica of Buffalo Bill's "Wild West" Show as it played London in 1898.

The spectacle which marks the beginning of most modern-day circus performances is all that remains of the once-glorious and promotionally-important circus parade.

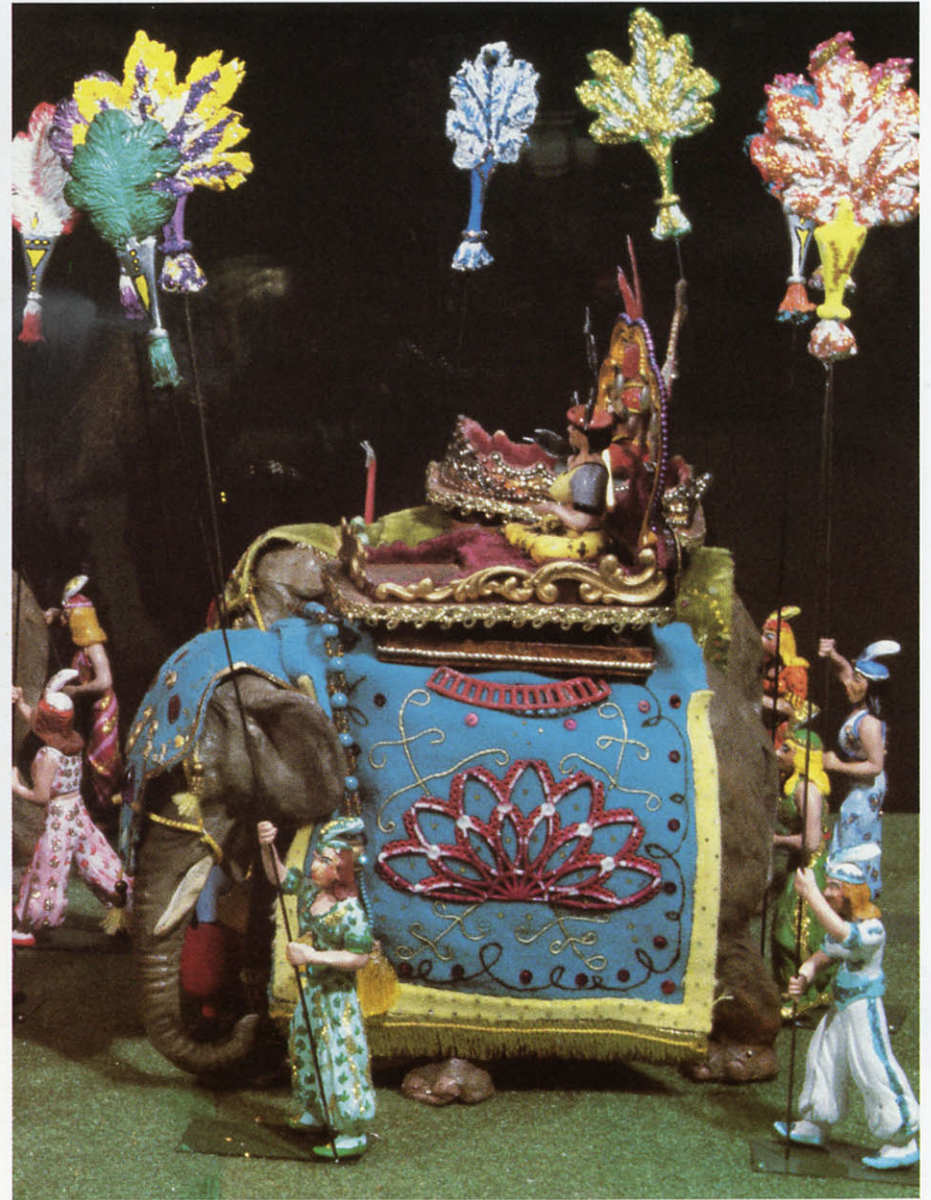




## The Menagerie

Howard Tibbals considers the menagerie tent with its bright colors, intricately gold-trimmed wagons and majestic line of elephants to be the most spectacular part of this exhibit. And judging from audience reaction, he's right.

The menagerie, the forerunner of the modern zoo, gave circus patrons a chance to view such exotic creatures as sea elephants and rhinoceroses at close range.







## The Side Show

One of the most popular and profitable parts of the circus was the side show. Some of the more standard oddities and curiosities to be found here included fat ladies, bearded ladies, tattooed ladies, midgets, giants, sword swallows, strong men and snake charmers.

The "freaks" formed an especially close-knit group among circus people — often eating, traveling and socializing exclusively with one another.

## The Performers

Certainly the most glamorous job in the circus belonged to the featured performers who literally risked life and limb once, often twice, a day as they executed their feats of daring.

One of the most publicized circus tragedies involved the Great Wallendas and their seven-man high wire act. Through the craftsmanship of Harold Dunn, visitors to "The Biggest Little Show On Earth" can see the act at the top of its form, prior to the series of accidents during the 60's and 70's which left four members of the family dead and one paralyzed for life.

## The Band

The band is one important, and often overlooked, part of the circus performance. It not only added to the sense of drama and excitement under the Big Top, it also helped to keep the acts running on schedule. By playing faster or slower or changing songs, the band cued performers to execute or finish up various parts of their acts.







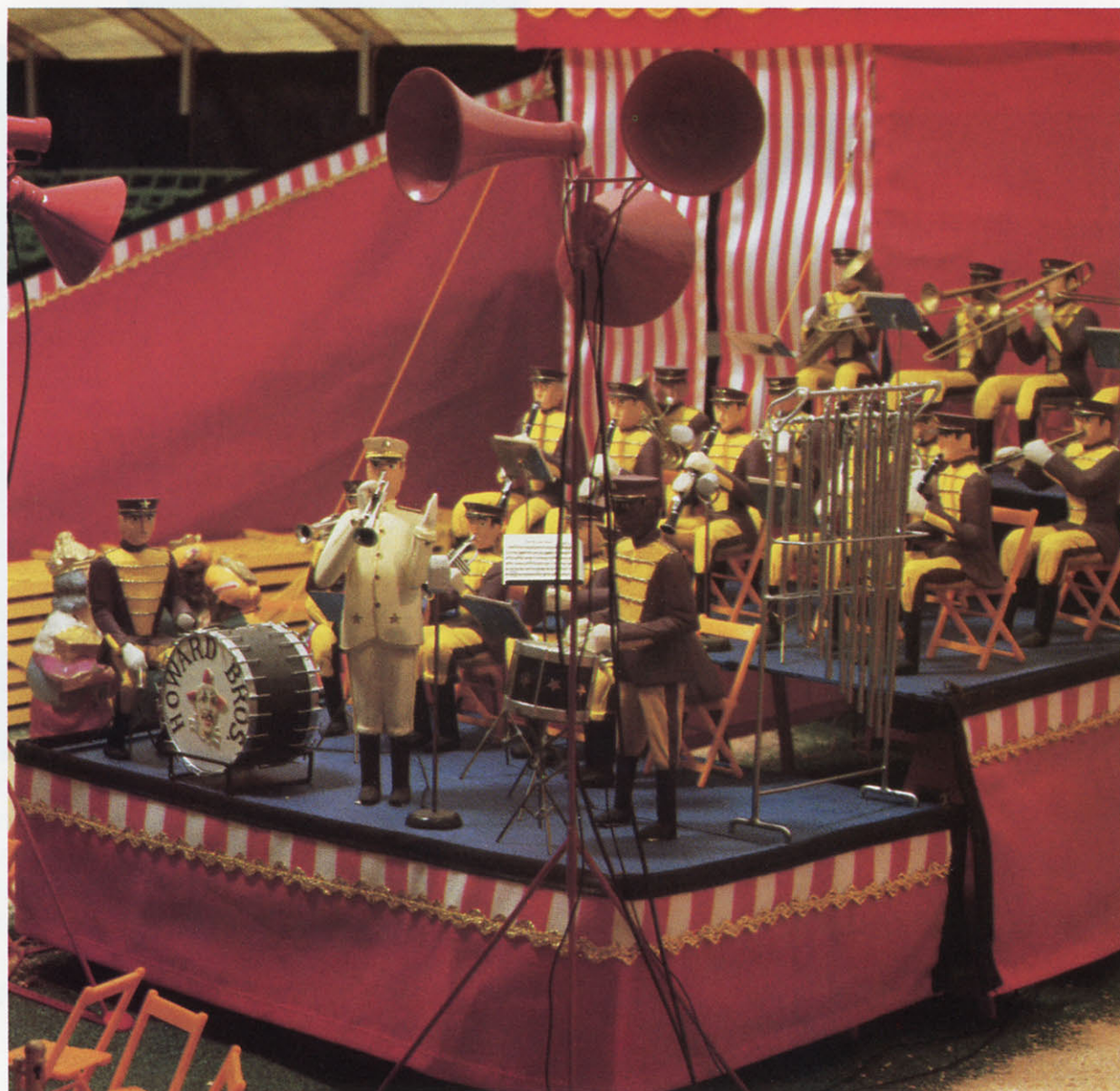




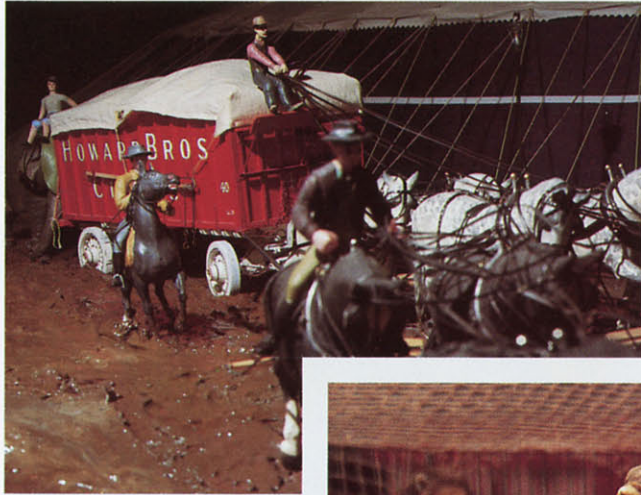
## The Big Top

To Howard Tibbals and other technical people, the Big Top is by far the most interesting part of the circus. One particular source of pride in this exhibit is the arena seating system featuring some 7,000 working folding chairs, which when folded fill five wagons.

It took Tibbals approximately 14 – 15 years to complete the entire Big Top section. He devoted an extra five months to the stages alone because he wanted them “to be a credit” to his family’s maple flooring business.









## The Trains

When the circus began to move itself from town to town by train, it gained tremendous operating efficiency. The Ringling train system, for example, consisted of four sections. The first, dispatched at 9 p.m., was made up of flatcars carrying the cookhouse, horse department, stake-driving equipment and other non-performance parts of the show needed to start setting up on the next day's lot. The last, consisting of sleeping cars carrying the performers and circus executives, often didn't pull out of town until 3 a.m.

Many big circuses owned their own rail equipment and essentially "rented" an engine and caboose from whatever line they happened to be traveling. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement, with the circus providing the railroads with the traffic and revenue they needed to expand their operations.

## The Organization

The logistics of moving 1400 – 1500 people, hundreds of animals and tons of equipment day after day, month after month are staggering. Few people realize the crack business organization the Ringling Bros. Circus was in its heyday. In fact, one admirer, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, sent his military officers to America to study the movement of the circus — and many believe his early success in World War I was due to what they learned.

Harold Dunn and other circus buffs feel the circus lost much of its magic



when it stopped performing in tents in 1956 and moved to indoor arenas. "The circus has a performance now," he says sadly, "but that's all it has."



# MEMORABILIA

"The Biggest Little Show On Earth" is really two shows in one. In addition to the incredibly detailed models of Howard Tibbals and Harold Dunn, it features a priceless collection of circus memorabilia.

The collection, amassed by Dunn during years of travel across the country with his miniature circus, was purchased by Tibbals several years ago. "A person just has no idea what's there until they've tried to find it themselves," Tibbals says. "Turning one page at a time, it would take you three weeks just to go through the poster collection."

The Jumbo Elephant poster display, hyping what was perhaps P.T. Barnum's greatest attraction, is just one of the many treasures to be found in this section of the exhibit. Short just one of the posters making up the Jumbo series, this collection alone has been valued at thousands of dollars.

Other notable pieces of memorabilia include costume sketches from the 1891 Barnum & Bailey Show, a letter from P.T. Barnum and a program from Buffalo Bill's "Wild West" Show.

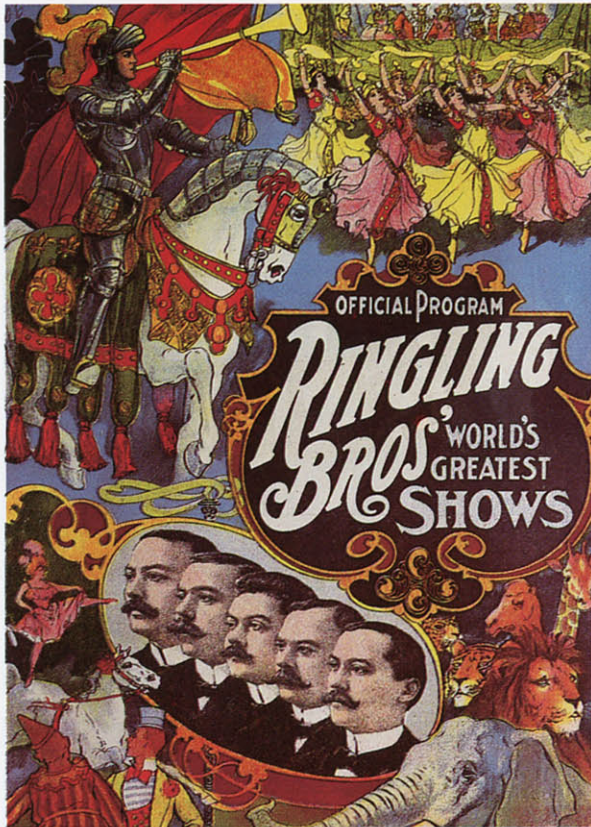


A Ringling Bros.' poster circa 1923.

Tibbals points out that this is a growing collection dedicated to the preservation of circus history. Anyone with anything they'd like to sell, trade

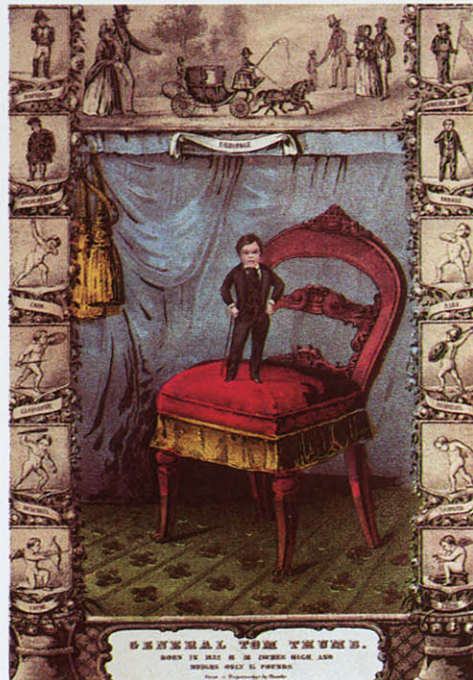
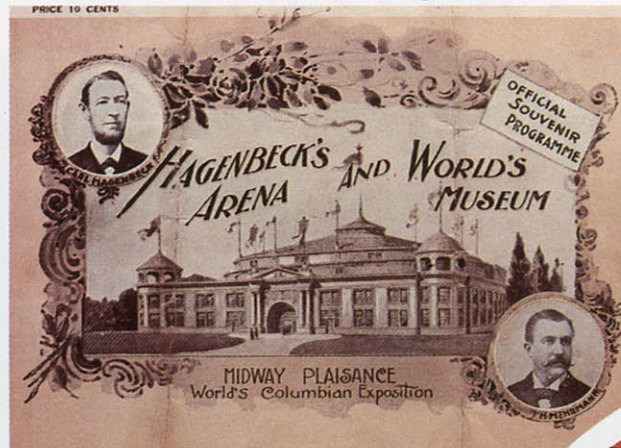
or give to the collection should contact him at: Tibbals Flooring Company, P.O. Drawer A, Oneida, TN. 37841.





A Ringling Bros.' program dating from early 1900 featuring the Ringling brothers.

A program from the Carl Hagenbeck Circus performance at the Columbian Exposition.



A poster touting tiny Tom Thumb (real name, Charles Stratton), one of the P.T. Barnum's most famous attractions.





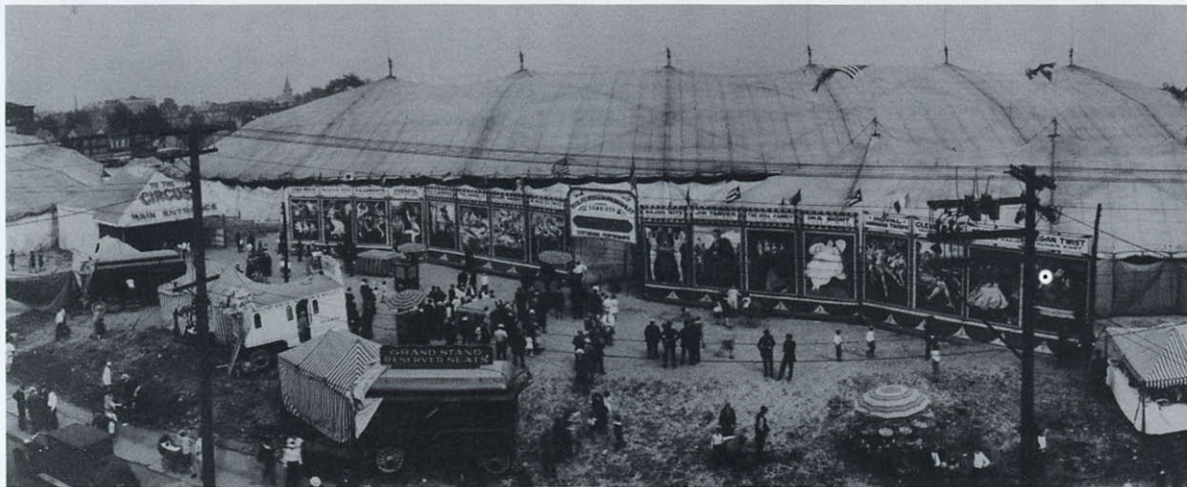
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# OLD DAYS



The Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey combined show as it played Chicago in 1939 near Grant Park.





The circus memorabilia collected by Harold Dunn and Howard Tibbals has another important purpose aside from preserving the history of the American circus. It is an invaluable source of information for the two model-builders.

Extraordinary pains are taken to make each piece of the miniature circus an exact replica of the thing it represents in the real circus. Size, color, hardware — even the amount of space between bolts — are carefully based on photographs, written records and sometimes some very creative detective work.

Actually, the challenge of making his circus historically accurate may be what Tibbals enjoys most. He has been known to pay outrageous sums for seemingly worthless photographs because in his mind there was some “lingering question,” some mystery to be studied and solved. Dunn recalls fondly many nights when the two friends stayed up for hours, “thrashing a picture out.”

Having traveled on the showtrain for 16 years, Dunn also relies on his keen memory and copious notes from that period.



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Many of his admirers feel the performance and parade aspects of his miniature circus displayed at The 1982 World's Fair represent his greatest work to date. Perhaps some of the feeling in those models comes from Dunn's close personal relationships with many of the circus' most celebrated performers: the Great Wallendas and May Wirth, to name just two.

"Every person on my show actually lived, breathed, ate and slept in the real circus," he says, underlining his comments with a few short taps. "It was my intent never to make anything on my circus that wasn't history. I wanted to make it a monument to the circus itself. So people who never had the privilege of seeing it could know what it was really like."

To that end, Dunn has spent countless hours of his own time and thousands of his own dollars traveling the country, cataloguing collections and searching for circus artifacts.







*PINGLING BROS. AND BARNUM & BAILEY CIRCUS  
- BROOKLYN N.Y. - 1931 -*





## AT WORK

Creating a miniature circus requires a battery of various talents and skills. Constructing a wagon is a totally different operation than, say, carving an animal act or sewing a tent or painting a facial expression.

Most circus model-builders are stronger in some areas than others. Harold Dunn, for example, by his own admission, "can't paint the broad side of a barn." Through the years, he has had to rely on friends and family members to do his painting for him.

Howard Tibbals, a great believer in "Where there's a will, there's a way," says he's convinced his friend has never learned to paint — because he's never really had to. Tibbals cites his own experience with woodcarving:

"One day I needed to have this little man for the circus band and I knew I had to learn how to do it (carve).

"So, I'd go to church and imagine Brother So-and-So with a trombone. I'd make a mental picture of how his leg was crossed, where his hands were and so on — and then I'd go home and try to carve him," he says.

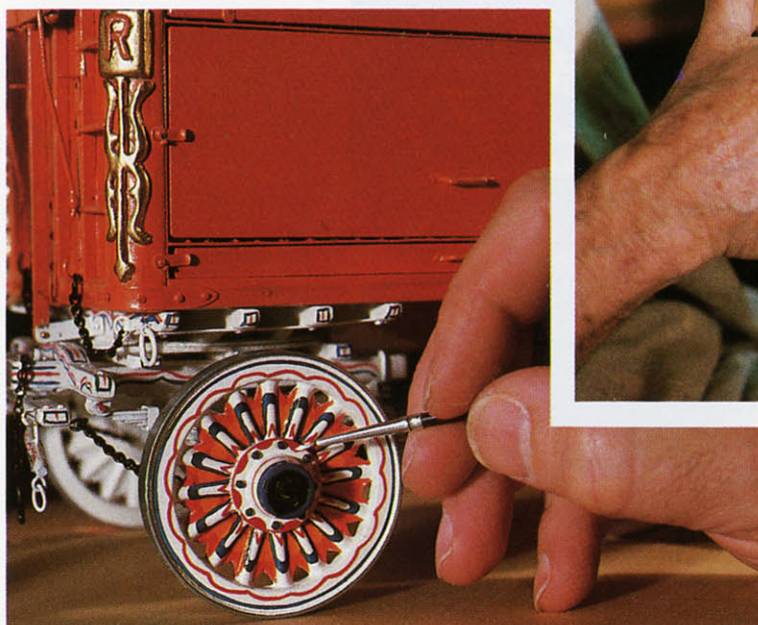
"I did the whole band that way. Now I may have some weird looking musicians, but, by golly, I did it."

Although he's gotten progressively better at it over the years, Tibbals says he'd still rather build a wagon than carve a figure anyday. Anyone who's ever watched Dunn at his workbench will be surprised to hear he shares Tibbals' dislike.

"The woodcarving part of it, even now, I just hate it with a passion," he confesses. "But it was the only way I could get the stuff I needed. I had to do it."

Shown on the following pages is a series of photographs bringing into sharper focus the model-builders and their work.





Shown here, the skilled hands of Harold Dunn as he carves one of the thousands of pieces making up his collection. Above, a close-up of the intricate detail involved in the painting of just one wagon wheel. Above right, Howard Tibbals shown in the early stages of assembling his circus.







More close-ups demonstrating the amazing exactness with which each piece of the "Biggest Little Show On Earth" is made. Notice the hardware on the truck and wagon above. The poster in the upper left-hand corner is a miniature reproduction of an actual circus poster.





Scenes from the 6,500 - sq. - ft. exhibit featured at The 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville, Tennessee, which handled an estimated 10,000 visitors daily.







**THESE TWO TENNESSEE COMPANIES PROUDLY SPONSORED  
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