

# **Ringling Circus Museum**

<http://www.ringling.org/circusmuseums.aspx>

## **Ringling's Museum of the Circus**

Ironically, John Ringling made no provision in his document for a museum to for the illustrious history of the Ringling brothers and their circus. However, the museum's board of directors approved construction of a circus museum on the site of Mable's garage.

The Museum of the Circus opened to the public in 1948, giving visitors their first glimpse of memorabilia from America's most famous circus - Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Many famous Sarasotans earned international acclaim as circus artists, and their personal mementos are on display in the circus museum, including clowns Lou Jacobs, Otto Griebing and Emmett Kelly; animal trainers Clyde Beatty and Gunther Gebel-Williams; the Zacchini Human Cannonballs; and the famous Wallenda highwire-walking family.

In 2006, the Tibbals Learning Center opened as part of the museum of the circus. Built through seed money donated by philanthropist and master model builder Howard C. Tibbals of Tennessee and Longboat Key, Florida, the 30,600-sq.-ft. facility houses the Howard Bros. Circus, the world's largest miniature circus, which Tibbals constructed over a 50-year span.

The Circus Museum celebrates the American circus, its history, and unique relationship to Sarasota. Established in 1948, the museum was the first in the country to document the rich history of the circus. View colossal parade and baggage wagons, sequined costumes, and a sideshow banner line that document the circus of the past and of today. See memorabilia and artifacts documenting the history of the Ringling family Circus, John Ringling as the Circus King, and the greatest circus movie, **The Greatest Show on Earth, which was filmed in Sarasota.**

Also on exhibition in the Circus Museum is **the Wisconsin, the private rail car of John and Mable Ringling built in 1905.** Built during the golden age of rail, the *Wisconsin* car provides a unique view into the splendid travel accommodations that John and Mable Ringling enjoyed on their travels around the country on business and with the circus.

Enter the Circus Museum's **Tibbals Learning Center** and see an exhibition of **circus posters**. Ranging in size from window to barn sized, these colorful posters were plastered on buildings, walls and fences all across America and broadcasted in no uncertain terms that the circus was coming to town.



The cornerstone of the Circus Museum's Tibbals Learning Center is the world's largest miniature circus, **The Howard Bros. Circus Model**. The model is a replica of *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus* from 1919 – 1938. It was created over a period of more than 50-years by master model builder and philanthropist **Howard Tibbals**. The second floor of the Tibbals building documents the history of the American circus from ancient times to the present.

## Howard Bros. Circus Model



“Ladies and Gentlemen . . . Step Right Up and See the Largest Miniature Circus in the World – the *Howard Bros. Circus!*”

The *Howard Bros. Circus*, complete with eight main tents, 152 wagons, 1,300 circus performers and workers, more than 800 animals and a 57-car train, is on permanent display in the Ringling Circus Museum's Tibbals Learning Center. The *Howard Bros. Circus* is a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-to-the-foot scale replica of *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus* when the tented circus was at its largest (circa 1919-1938), and occupies 3,800 square feet in the 30,600 sq. ft.-Tibbals Learning Center. The “largest miniature circus in the world” was created over a 50-year time span by master model builder and philanthropist Howard C. Tibbals of Tennessee and Florida.

### Howard Tibbals Biography

Howard Tibbals saw his first circus as a three-year-old and at the age of five he watched with fascination, a circus through a telescope from a neighbor of his grandparents' home as it set up on a nearby vacant lot, and the impression stayed with him for life. As a teenager, he read “Here Comes the Circus” by Clifford Hicks in a 1952 *Popular Mechanics* magazine that detailed the logistics of moving *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus*. The article contained a schematic of the 79-car train; a cut-away layout of the circus grounds; and a diagram illustrating the rigging and set up of the Big Top tent. Tibbals was hooked, and by 1956, while a student at North Carolina State University, he started sewing a replica of the six-pole Big Top tent that *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus* used in 1938. His pastime turned into a life-long passion for accuracy when he met noted circus model builder Harold Dunn in 1958. After picking up tips on model building from Dunn, Tibbals began to create the greatest model circus in the world – the *Howard Bros. Circus*.