

RINGLING HOME (*Ca' d'Zan* Mansion) IN SARASOTA, FL

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

***Ca' d'Zan* Mansion**



The Ringlings' dazzling palatial mansion is a tribute to the American Dream and reflects the splendor and romance of Italy. Described as “the last of the Gilded Age mansions” to be built in America, *Ca' d'Zan* has 56 incredible rooms filled with art and original furnishings. With its Venetian Gothic architecture, the mansion is a combination of the grandeur of Venice’s Doge’s Palace, combined with the gothic grace of *Cà d’Oro*, with Sarasota Bay serving as its Grand Canal.

In 1924, construction began on *Ca' d'Zan*, which means “House of John” in Venetian dialect. The house was completed just before Christmas 1925, at a cost of \$1.5 million.

John and Mable Ringling greatly admired the unique architectural style of the Danieli and the Bauer-Grunwald hotels in Venice, as well as the palaces that face the Venetian canals. This architectural style, called "Venetian Gothic," greatly influenced the *Ca' d'Zan's* design, which architect Dwight James Baum and builder Owen Burns helped bring to Sarasota for the Ringlings.

Mable Ringling had an oilskin portfolio filled with postcards, sketches, photos and other materials that she gathered on her travels to aid the architect with his design.

Ca' d'Zan is 200-foot long encompassing approximately 36,000 square feet with 41 rooms and 15 bathrooms. The structure is five stories and has a full basement. The pinnacle of the structure is the 81-foot Belvedere tower with an open-air overlook and a high domed ceiling.

Ca' d'Zan is constructed from terra cotta “T” blocks, concrete, and brick, covered with stucco and terra cotta, and embellished with glazed tile. The original roof was made from 16th century Spanish tiles imported by the builder Owen Burns. The bayfront terrace is made of domestic and imported marble.

In April 2002, comprehensive restoration and conservation was completed on *Ca' d'Zan*. The six year, \$15 million initiative restored the mansion to the era of Mable Ringling.

RINGLING MUSEUM IN SARASOTA, FL
<http://www.ringling.org/About2.aspx?id=930>



Ringling Museum History

John Ringling, one of the five original circus kings of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, was blessed with entrepreneurial genius and through his success with the circus and other investments, became quite wealthy. In 1911, John (1866-1936) and his wife, Mable (1875-1929) purchased 20 acres of waterfront property in Sarasota, Florida. In 1912 the couple began spending winters in Sarasota and later decided to build a home there. Their property included a house built by one of Buffalo Bill's circus managers, Charles Thompson. The Ringlings dreamed of helping Sarasota develop into a metropolitan boom town and they became involved in the community, bought real estate, and eventually owned approximately 25 percent of Sarasota's total area.

The couple's first project in Sarasota was the splendid Venetian Gothic mansion *Cà d'Zan*, built between 1924 and 1926 for a then staggering sum of \$1.5 million. Mable had developed an affection for Venetian buildings on their travels and collected sketches and photos to incorporate into the design of the house which reflects both her and John's taste and passion for opulence. She supervised the construction of the house with architect Dwight James Baum, designer of several New York mansions.

In the spirit of America's wealthiest Gilded Age industrialists, John Ringling gradually acquired a significant art collection, including paintings by Peter Paul Rubens, Velàzquez, Poussin, van Dyck and other Baroque masters, as well as rare antiquities from Cyprus. He built a palace for his treasures in a 21-gallery Museum of Art on his Sarasota property.

The Florentine style building emulates the Uffizi Gallery and was specifically designed to house his collection of European paintings and art objects. The Ringlings had accumulated a treasure trove of objects, the result of many trips to Europe while searching for new circus acts. For years they acquired columns, architectural details and many fine art pieces. The result is a museum with a courtyard filled with bronze replicas of Greek and Roman sculpture, including a bronze cast of Michelangelo's *David*.

John Ringling bequeathed his art collection, mansion and estate to the people of the State of Florida at the time of his death in 1936.

For nearly ten years after John Ringling's death, the Ringling Museum was opened irregularly and not professionally maintained. *Cà d'Zan* was used privately and remained closed to the public, while the State of Florida fought with creditors over the fate of the estate. By 1946, the State prevailed, and title was transferred to the people of Florida.

Under normal circumstances, the \$1.2 million endowment that John Ringling left with his estate would have grown over time, its proceeds preserving the estate and its treasures.

Managed by government, the funds languished without the benefit of strategic investing. Meanwhile the local community, convinced that the Ringling Museum was the State's responsibility, did little to support the Ringling Museum. Gradually, the care that historic buildings require – weatherproofing, mechanical upgrades, and occasional refurbishing – was put off or handled piecemeal. As neglect led to crisis, private supporters came forth to keep the Museum open, while dedicated and under-funded staff struggled to fulfill the Museum's vast potential. But over time the challenge became overwhelming.

By the late 1990s, the decay from deferred maintenance had reached a critical point. The *Cà d'Zan* mansion was falling apart, the roof of the Museum of Art leaked, and the building completed in 1957 to house the Historic Asolo Theater was condemned. Antiquated security systems no longer provided adequate protection for art. Weathered footpaths and cracking roads gave the once venerable estate a tired look of ruin. The future of the Ringling Estate was uncertain.

In 2000, Ringling's original \$1.2 million endowment had hardly grown to \$2 million. Governance was transferred from the State of Florida's Department of State to Florida State University establishing the Ringling estate as one of the largest museum/university complexes in the nation. As part of the University, the Museum has experienced a rebirth. In 2002, when \$42.9 million was provided through the State for new buildings, it came with a condition that the Ringling board raise \$50 million in endowment within five years. Impossible as the task then seemed, more than \$55 million was donated or pledged by 2007. The transformation that culminated in 2007 restored all the existing buildings and expanded the Estate with four new buildings on the Museum's Master Plan: the Tibbals Learning Center, the John M. McKay Visitors Pavilion – housing the Historic Asolo Theater, the Education/Conservation Building and The Ulla R. and Arthur F. Searing Wing. The Museum's financial footing was also secured with the beginnings of a healthy endowment.

RINGLING ESTATE

<http://www.sarasotacircushistory.com/articles/ringlingsandsarasota.php>



Museum of the Circus

Many 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.



Sailor Circus

Sarasota's Sailor Circus, named for Sarasota High School's mascot, is the oldest continuously running youth circus in America. Founded in 1949, Sailor Circus began as an extension of the school's gymnastics program to include basic circus skills taught by volunteer circus performers. The Police Athletic League of Sarasota County has run the program since 2004.



Ringling Circus Museum

The Circus Museum celebrates the American circus, its history and unique relationship to Sarasota. Established in 1948, the museum was the first in the county to document the rich history of the circus. The museum boasts features such as colossal parade and baggage wagons, sequined costumes, and a sideshow banner line that document the circus of the past and of today.

The Ringlings and Sarasota



Nearly a century ago, in the 1910s, brothers John (above) and Charles Ringling decided to invest in the future of Sarasota.

John and Charles Ringling - two of the five original Ringling brothers who turned a small traveling circus into an international entertainment empire - wielded incredible influence on the economy, development, culture, and character of this same quaint village on beautiful Sarasota Bay.

John Ringling was reputed to be the fifth wealthiest man in the United States when he and Charles bought an estimated 67,000 acres of what is now Sarasota and Longboat Key as investment property.

When the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus moved its winter quarters to Sarasota in 1927, the serene seaside resort became the hub of circus activity, attracting famous circus families and artists from around the world. Sarasota quickly became known far and wide as Circus City, USA.

In 1960, Ringling moved its winter quarters to Venice and the impact of the circus expanded into the larger Sarasota County area.

Today, the influence of the Ringlings and their circus is still prevalent throughout Sarasota county - from the Ringling estate that is home to the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, their personal home Cá d'Zan, and the Ringling Circus Museum and its new Tibbals Learning Center to the Circus Ring of Fame on St. Armands Circle.

John and Mable Ringling's Estate

When John and Mable Ringling first came to Sarasota, they used an existing frame house as a winter retreat until 1925 when construction was begun on Cá d'Zan - an opulent mansion where the Ringlings lived until their respective deaths. After John's death in 1936, the entire Ringling estate was donated to the State of Florida as a gift to the people of Florida. In 2000, the entire Ringling Estate was placed under the auspices of Florida State University.

Cá d'Zan (meaning "House of John" in the old Venetian dialect)

Recognized today as a showcase for the Mediterranean Revival Style of architecture, Cá d'Zan was designed by Dwight James Baum of New York City. The inspiration for Cá d'Zan was taken from the architectural styles of Mable's favorite Venetian hotels - the Danieli, the Bauer-Grunwald and the Doges Palace.

It took two years and an estimated \$1.5 million to build the mansion, plus an additional \$400,000 for lavish furniture, fine art, and collectibles from around the world. John and Mable moved into Cá d'Zan a few days before Christmas, 1926.

Cá d'Zan remained vacant after the deaths of John and Mable Ringling, but was opened to the public as part of the Ringling Estate. A \$15 million restoration project began in 1996 to fully restore Cá d'Zan to its original splendor. It was reopened to the public in 2002.

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art

Lovers of the fine arts, John and Mable Ringling were also avid collectors. From the mid-1920s through the early 1930s, they amassed more than 600 paintings, sculptures decorative pieces and 25 tapestries from the works of major baroque artists from 1,500 through 1,750, such as Rubens, Hals, Van Dyck and others.



The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

To preserve, house, and display his impressive fine arts collection, John commissioned architect John H. Phillips of New York City to design a museum on his property in the late 1920s.

Designed in the Italian renaissance style, The John and Mable Museum of Art features a large interior courtyard surrounded on three sides by loggias, and populated with statues of Greek and Roman gods. An actual-size bronze cast replica of Michelangelo's David overlooks the courtyard.

To offset expensive building costs, John hired circus employees to help in the construction; and circus elephants were employed to hoist large pieces of stone into place.

Construction on a new wing of the museum was begun in 2005, the first addition since the museum opened.

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.

Asolo Theatre

John and Mable Ringling were frequent travelers to Italy, but it was not until the 1950s that the museum's board agreed to the purchase of an 18th-century Venetian theatre from Asolo, Italy, for only \$10,000. The intimate Asolo Theatre had been dismantled in the 1930s and placed in storage until it was reassembled on the grounds of the Ringling estate in 1951, becoming "the only state theatre in Florida."

From 1951 through the late 1990s, the Asolo Theatre Repertory Company presented live performances of popular plays.

The Asolo theatre was once again dismantled for restoration and installment into the new Visitors Pavilion. Fully refurbished by the museum's restoration department, the Asolo reopened to the public in 2006.

Charles and Edith Ringling

Charles and Edith Ringling visited Sarasota for the first time in 1912, and like John and Mable, decided to make Sarasota their permanent home.

The house cost \$880,000 to build, with an additional \$300,000 to furnish. Shortly after Charles and Edith moved into their new home in 1926, he died unexpectedly. Edith lived in the house with her children, Robert and Hester, until her death in 1953.

Hester and her husband built a home on the north edge of the property, where she lived until her death in 1965. A theatre enthusiast, Hester had at one time purchased an abandoned theatre and with her son Stuart, founded the Palmtree Theatre that was used for local plays. Today it is the home of Theatre Works.

The Charles and Edith Ringling home is now the centerpiece for the University of Florida's New College; and Hester's home is now New College's Cook Hall.

Charles invested heavily in real estate, purchasing a large tract of land that became downtown Sarasota.

Always actively promoting business development in downtown Sarasota, Charles Ringling was working president of the Sarasota Chamber of Commerce when he died in 1926. In 1925 he donated land for county courthouse, and built the 125-room Sarasota Hotel across Ringling Boulevard (named for Charles). Today the hotel serves as a county government building.

Ringling Isles

John Ringling bought vast tracts of land on what is today Longboat Key and Lido Key for development and named it Ringling Isles. With local developer Owen Burns, he sold more than \$1 million worth of lots soon after he opened his development. Today, lots on Longboat Key, Lido Key and St. Armands are worth several million dollars each.

In 1922, Ringling bought New Edzell Castle on Bird Key in hopes of convincing President Warren Harding to adopt it as his Winter White House. In an attempt to make the entire area more presidential, Ringling named streets on the Ringling Isles after former presidents, and named the circle Harding Circle (which was later changed to St. Armands Circle).

Unfortunately, President Harding died before the plan could be carried out and John's sister Ida Ringling lived in the spacious mansion until her death. Ida and her husband Harry Whitestone North were parents to John and Henry Ringling North, nephews of John and Charles Ringling, who eventually won majority ownership and management of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus after John's death and settlement of his estate. In 1967, the North brothers sold the legendary circus to brothers Irvin and Israel Feld, concert promoters from Washington, D.C., and Astrodome developer Judge Roy Hofheinz, for \$8 million. The sale marked the first time that the legendary circus was personally owned by any individual outside the Ringling, Barnum and Bailey families.

Ringling Causeway

Ringling Isles was located on the barrier island west of Sarasota, and could be reached only by boat when Ringling and Burns opened their development. John Ringling decided to build a bridge to connect his land development to the mainland, an undertaking that would take one year and almost \$1 million to complete.

The bridge ran from the end of Golden Gate Point to the island. Construction began on January 1, 1925.

One year to the day after construction began, John Ringling personally christened the Ringling Causeway by driving his Rolls-Royce across the span. It was heralded by the local newspaper as "one of the greatest engineering accomplishments in the South."

Eighteen months after it opened, Ringling donated the bridge to the city for maintenance. By 1959 the causeway had deteriorated and was demolished, making way for a new bridge that opened on January 10, 1959.



The Howard Bros. Circus, the world's largest miniature circus.

Ringling College of Art and Design

In addition to being a collector of fine arts, John Ringling was a supporter of the arts, so much so that he founded the Ringling College of Art and Design - a highly regarded art school that today serves more than 500 art students in 14 school buildings on a 30-acre campus.

When the Bay Haven Hotel, located on 27th Street (now Martin Luther King Boulevard), went out of business in the early 1930s, a group of educators under the guidance of Dr. Vernan Kimbrough and Dr. Ludd Spivey, president of Florida Southern College in Lakeland, Florida, sought the financial backing of John Ringling to form an art school within it. Ringling bought the abandoned hotel and placed the newly founded school under the auspices of the John and Mable Museum of Art.

The School of Fine and Applied Art of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art opened on October 2, 1931. The school's name was later changed to the Ringling School of Art and Design and is now called Ringling College of Art and Design.

Winter Quarters (1927-1959)

Of course, despite the Ringling family's great influence on the development of Sarasota, they remain best known for their circus.

On March 23, 1927, prior to the circus' opening in Madison Square Garden, John Ringling announced that Sarasota would become the new home of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. The Greatest Show on Earth would move its winter quarters to 200 acres on the east side of town.

In exchange for free advertising space for Sarasota in Ringling's souvenir program, the Sarasota County Fair Association deeded its entire 200 acres to John Ringling to use as the circus' new winter quarters.

Winter quarters provided an annual respite for circus performers while giving management and the creative staff an opportunity to create and produce a new show for the following year. The rehearsal period lasted from late November until early March when the circus loaded all its equipment, animals and performers to head north for its annual New York City opening.

John Ringling realized that the public had a great interest in a "behind-the-scenes" look at circus life, so he opened winter quarters on Christmas Day, 1927, and charged \$.25 for adults and \$.10 for children.

Ringling's winter quarters boosted tourism for Sarasota, and reaped a great deal of publicity for the state of Florida. By 1940, the winter quarters in Sarasota drew 100,000 visitors in one season, making it one of Florida's earliest and most heavily visited tourist attractions.

However, the folding of the Big Top tent for the last time in Pittsburgh on July 16, 1956, drastically changed the structure of the three-ring circus. Without the Big Top tent, several additional service tents and moving equipment, the need for 1,000 roustabouts, a 75+ car train, or a 200-acre winter quarters greatly diminished.

After the circus pulled out of Sarasota on its 1958 tour, John Ringling North announced that winter quarters was moving 25 miles south to Venice. The 1959 season marked the last year that winter quarters were held in Sarasota, and as soon as the circus left town, the Ringling organization began taking up the train tracks and dismantling the circus buildings. The land became the subdivision of Glen Oaks Estates in 1963.

Today a historical marker stands at the neighborhood's entrance off Beneva Road at Calliandra Drive to memorialize the 33-year history of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus' winter quarters in Sarasota.

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Sarasota, FL Home of the Circus

<http://www.sarasotacircushistory.com/articles/index.php>



The five Ringling brothers.

No other area in the country can claim the rich cultural heritage, the abundance of circus families, and the homebase of as many circuses as Sarasota, Florida, and its surrounding communities. As a hub of circus activity for more than three-quarters of a century, Sarasota has earned its rightful title of "Home of the American Circus."

John and Charles Ringling - two of the five original Ringling brothers who turned a small traveling circus into an international entertainment empire - wielded incredible influence on the economy, development, culture, and character of this same quaint village on beautiful Sarasota Bay.

When the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus moved its winter quarters to Sarasota in 1927, the serene seaside resort became a ring of circus activity, attracting famous circus families and artists from around the world, as well as thousands of tourists to its famed winter quarters. Sarasota quickly became known far and wide as Circus City, USA.

In 1960, Ringling moved its winter quarters to Venice, (25 miles south of the city of Sarasota), and the impact of the circus expanded into the larger Sarasota County area.

Ringling Bros. Winters in Sarasota

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Today a historical marker stands at the entrance to the Glen Oaks Estates off Beneva Road at Calliandra Drive to memorialize the 33-year history of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus' winter quarters in Sarasota.

Before the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus left Sarasota, it made its big-screen debut.

Filmed at the circus' winter quarters and throughout the city of Sarasota, the 1952 Academy Award Best Picture of the Year premiered on January 31, 1952, at the Florida Theatre. The theatre's marquee was tented in the fashion of the entrance to the Big Top, and Cecil B. DeMille joined Charlton Heston, Betty Hutton and Dorothy Lamour in a re-enactment of a movie's street parade down Main Street to the theatre for its first public screening.

On January 21, 1960, the Florida Theatre was also the site of the world premiere of another circus movie entitled Toby Tyler, starring Kevin Corcoran in the title role.

The Sarasota Opera bought the Florida Theatre in 1979, reconditioned it for \$7 million, and renamed it the Sarasota Opera House. In 1983, it was placed on the National Registry of Historic Places.

The Sarasota Opera House was also the site of the 30th (and last) session of the famed Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College in 1997.



Circus performers parading in Venice.

Venice and the Circus

Venice's first experience with the circus occurred in 1946 when longtime Ringling family friend James Edgar leased the rights to the former Sparks Bros. Circus and signed a five-year agreement with Mayor Clyde Higel naming Venice as its winter quarters. The Sparks Bros. Circus rehearsed for the 1947 season in a tent on a vacant lot off U.S. 41 adjacent to the Venice airport.

The season was not as successful as Edgar would have liked, and the show ended the year on September 7 in Tacoma, Washington. With less than adequate funds to make the long haul to Venice, Edgar decided to get out of the circus business.

Although Venice held the dubious distinction of being the winter quarters of a circus that never played in its hometown, the Sparks Bros. Circus experience put it on the circus map.

Other circuses continue to reside in Sarasota County. Among them are Sailor Circus and Circus Sarasota.

Sailor Circus

Sarasota's Sailor Circus, named for Sarasota High School's mascot, is the oldest continuously running youth circus in America. Founded in 1949, Sailor Circus began as an extension to SHS's gymnastic program to include basic circus skills taught by volunteer circus performers.

Initially only students from Sarasota High School were allowed to participate in Sailor Circus, but its popularity became so great that admission was opened to any interested youngster from the larger Sarasota area.

In 1952, Sailor Circus gained permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus to call itself "the greatest little show on Earth," marking the only time that such copyright permission has been granted to any performing arts troupe outside the Ringling organization.

In 1969 Sailor Circus moved to its present location on Bahia Vista adjacent to Sarasota High School, and performed under canvas. It moved into permanent facilities in 1981.

Ownership and management of Sailor Circus was passed from the Sarasota County School Board to the Police Athletic League of Sarasota County in 2004. While its goal remains teaching circus skills to young people, its mission is to use the positive atmosphere of the circus as an alternative teaching method and intervention program for youths at risk in the community.

Sailor Circus holds two sessions each year. Sailor Circus is presently conducting a \$6 million capital campaign to build a new 31,000 sq. ft. arena as its home.



A Circus Sarasota performance.

Circus Sarasota

Many circuses have called Sarasota home, but one of the latest and most dynamic is Circus Sarasota. Founded in 1997 by aerialist Dolly Jacobs, daughter of famed clown Lou Jacobs and aerialist Pedro Reis from South Africa, Circus Sarasota is a non-profit circus committed to "broadening the artistic contribution of the circus while raising the level and perception of the American circus."

Circus Sarasota made its debut under canvas on a lot near the intersection of Fruitville Road and Interstate 75. Known for its highly artistic performance, the hometown circus features outstanding circus artists from around the world during its annual three-week performance schedule.

Circus Sarasota's new location is on Beneva Road near the Ed Smith Stadium, and site of the Cincinnati Reds' spring training baseball diamond.

Showfolks

An international alliance of circus artists, executives and associates, Showfolks of Sarasota was formed in 1964. Today, it presents performances every December. Its historic clubhouse holds memorabilia, including photos and hand-painted murals.

Circus Hall of Fame

The idea to create a hall of fame that honors outstanding circus artists and families was formulated in 1954 by circus fans and enthusiasts in the Sarasota community. The founders wanted to create a museum that would memorialize the rich cultural heritage of the American circus, as well as the contributions made by Sarasotans. In 1956, the idea became a reality when the Circus Hall of Fame opened its doors to 5,000 attendees on U.S. 41 near the airport and the Ringling Estate.

Its seven buildings provided 29,000 sq. ft. of exhibition space that was filled with circus memorabilia from costumes and props to posters and circus wagons.

Also among its collection were Tom Thumb's carriage; the Swedish Nightingale Jenny Lind's sleigh; personal remembrances from P.T. Barnum, James A. Bailey, the Ringling brothers, Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley; and mementos from aerialist Lillian Leitzel and Alfredo Codona, the Flying Concellos and the highwire-walking Wallendas.

The Circus Hall of Fame was open year-round (including Christmas and New Year's), and presented circus acts four times a day from mid-December through April and from early June through Labor Day.

CBS-TV and host Garry Moore broadcast "The World's Greatest Circus Stars of 1966" from the Circus Hall of Fame on December 11, 1966. Appearing in the show were many famous Florida-based circus performers, including Emmett Kelly, the Wallendas, the Clyde Beaty-Cole Bros. elephants, Harold Alzana on the highwire and an animal act presented by Jon "Tarzan" Zerbini.

Although many thousands of tourists visited the Circus Hall of Fame each year, it was unable to remain profitable and closed in 1977.

Ring of Fame at St. Armands Circle

The Ring of Fame was established in 1988 to "recognize those who have made significant contributions to the circus." Each member is honored at an annual induction ceremony and a bronze plaque that is permanently embedded in concrete around St. Armands Circle.

Governed and administered by The Ring of Fame Foundation, new inductees are nominated by a committee comprised of former circus artists, employees and fans. About one-third of all Ring members are still living, most of them in the Sarasota area.

As of 2006, there were 88 members in the Ring of Fame, including circus owners P.T. Barnum, James A. Bailey, the five Ringling brothers and John Ringling North and present Ringling circus owner Kenneth Feld; circus aerialists Fay Alexander, Lillian Leitzel, La Norma and Dolly Jacobs; animal trainers William and Barbara Woodcock, Mable Stark; clowns Dan Rice, Otto Griebing, Emmett Kelly and Lou Jacobs; Ringmaster Fred Bradna and Bandleader Merle Evans; and famous families such as the Wallendas, the Cristianis, the Gaonas, and the Zacchinis.

The Circus in Venice, FL

<http://www.sarasotacircushistory.com/articles/circusinvenice.php>



Students practicing at the Tito Gaona Flying Trapeze Park.

Incorporated in 1927, the town of Venice established ties with the circus within its first 20 years of existence.

Venice's first experience with the circus occurred in 1946 when longtime Ringling family friend James Edgar leased the rights to the former Sparks Bros. Circus and signed a five-year agreement with Mayor Clyde Higel naming Venice as its winter quarters. The Sparks Bros. Circus rehearsed for the 1947 season in a tent on a vacant lot off U.S. 41 adjacent to the Venice airport.

The show was scheduled to make its world premiere on March 2 with proceeds going to the local American Legion post. But torrential rain forced its cancellation, and it moved on to Fort Myers with the promise of giving a performance for the people of Venice when it returned at the end of the season.

The season was not as successful as Edgar would have liked, and the show ended the year on September 7 in Tacoma, Washington. With less than adequate funds to make the long haul to Venice, Edgar decided to get out of the circus business and sold off all the equipment.

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Ringling Winter Quarters Moves to Venice

At the conclusion of the 1959 season, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus made its usual "home run" to the Suncoast area, but instead of stopping in Sarasota, it continued south to its new winter quarters in Venice.

A new Circus Arena was under constructed on the same site used by the Sparks Bros. Circus in 1947 when the downsized 15-car circus train rolled into Venice on November 29, 1960, to a welcoming committee of 5,000 townspeople. Legendary circus band leader Merle Evans marched with the Venice High School band in a parade from the train station to the winter quarters site.

Although the new 55,000 sq. ft. Circus Arena was only 90% complete, the circus used it as a rehearsal building with the public watching on.

In January 1962, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus made its world premiere in the completed Circus Arena.

In 1963 Desilu Productions filmed a television series called "The Greatest Show on Earth" at the Circus Arena with Jack Palance as circus boss and actress Tuesday Weld as star aerialist.

Each year from 1962 through 1992, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey presented its world premiere in the Circus Arena. A host of great circus stars and acts made their American debuts in Venice, including Gunther Gebel-Williams; Michu, the world's smallest human on Earth; the mighty elephant King Tusk; and The Living Unicorn.

Deterioration of the rail spur from Sarasota to Venice forced the circus to move its winter quarters to the State Fairgrounds in Tampa. The departure of the circus from Venice after the 1992 world premiere marked the end of 75 years in Sarasota County.

The Tito Gaona Flying Trapeze Park

The Gaona circus family moved to Venice in 1964 from their native Mexico. Young Victor "Tito" Gaona became the star of the troupe at age 12 by becoming the youngest flyer ever to accomplish the difficult triple somersault on the flying trapeze. The Flying Gaonas joined Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1966, and Tito became a trapeze superstar, setting a record for successfully completing the triple somersault in 657 consecutive shows.

Known for his winsome boyish smile, Tito appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show twice, and made his acting debut with Barbra Streisand.

After retiring, Tito opened the Tito Gaona Flying Trapeze Park on the back lot of the Circus Arena in 2000. He teaches kids from ages 8 to 14 to fly on the trapeze, as well as a number of other circus arts.

Tito also founded the Venice Circus Arts Foundation to raise support and money to preserve the abandoned Circus Arena building, and to "reintroduce Venice to the history of the marvelous circus." But in June 2006, the Venice City Council unanimously passed a resolution to seek funding for demolition of the derelict building, finding a restoration project too costly and financially unsound.



Gunther Gebel-Williams.

Venice's Favorite Circus Son

Shortly after the Feld family group of Washington, D.C., took ownership of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus in November 1968, circus owner and producer Irvin Feld revealed plans to launch a second unit of The Greatest Show on Earth. Without sufficient circus performers in the United States to build a second unit, Feld acquired the rights to Germany's Circus Williams, including its budding new star Gunther Gebel-Williams.

On January 6, 1969, Gebel-Williams made his U.S. debut at the Circus Arena in Venice, and by the time the show reached New York for its annual Madison Square Garden engagement, the circus world was abuzz with news about the young animal trainer who mixed natural enemies in the same act - various big cats in one cage, and tigers riding on elephants and horses. Before the end of Gebel-Williams' second season and multiple national television appearances, he had become a household name.

Gebel-Williams set a performance record of never missing a show in more than 12,000 consecutive shows. It is estimated that he entertained more than 200 million circus-goers during his 20-year reign as Lord of the Rings. He officially retired at the end of the 1989 season, but returned to the spotlight on special occasions.

Gebel-Williams died on July 19, 2001, and funeral services were held in the Cathedral at Our Lady of Lourdes. More than 2,000 people attended the service, many representing circus families from around the world, and many local residents who counted the Gebel family among their friends.

A bronze statue of The Greatest Wild Animal Trainer of All Time was commissioned to Apollo Beach sculptor Ed Kasprowitz, and placed outside the Venice Train Depot, where it remains today.

RBBB Clown College

In preparation for the two units of The Greatest Show on Earth for the 1969 season, Irvin Feld could not find enough circus clowns to fill the clown alleys of the two shows. So he founded Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey College for Clowns (later changed to Clown College), and held its first session with 26 students at the Venice Circus Arena in early fall 1968.

Clown College quickly became recognized as the only facility in the world solely dedicated to teaching and preserving the "ancient and honorable art of clowning." The college offered classes in makeup, costume construction, juggling, wire walking, arena choreography and even pie-throwing.

Clown College was convened at the Circus Arena from 1968 through 1992 before moving to Wisconsin. The school returned to Sarasota in 1997, staging its last class at the Sarasota Opera House.

From three decades, Clown College held eight-to-ten-week sessions, the vast majority in Sarasota County, and issued diplomas to almost 1,300 students, officially proclaiming each as a professional clown.

Circus Wedding of the Century

Trapeze aerialist circus stars Miguel Vazquez and Rosa Sergrera were married at the Epiphany Cathedral in downtown Venice before joining a parade in their honor to a huge public reception at the Circus Arena. The young couple thrilled 1,500 onlookers as the pair took their first flight on the trapeze as husband and wife. The wedding and reception were covered on the front page of the New York Times on Saturday, December 2, 1983.

Miguel Vazquez went on to make circus history in 1982 when he became the first circus performer in history to complete the illusive quadruple somersault on the flying trapeze in Tucson, Arizona on July 10, 1984. The event also made the front page of the New York Times, giving Vazquez the rare distinction of being the only circus performer known to have appeared on the front page of the lauded newspaper twice (within seven months).

Circus Bridge

In October 2005, the Venice City Council passed a resolution to re-name the bridge on U.S. 41 over the canal near the arena the Circus Bridge in honor of the circus animals and equipment that paraded over the bridge from the train yard to the Circus Arena each year from 1960 to 1992 (when Ringling left Venice for the last time).