

A FESTIVAL UNDER CANVAS

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

One of the big events of the year 1886 was described in glowing terms as being a novelty with glamour and the thrill of anticipation and excitement for all ages. The big event was indeed a festival under canvas in the form of the Frank A. Robbins' Show held at Richfield Springs in September of that year.

The list of what would be available to see for those wishing to attend seems impossible for a two-ring circus with additional exhibits and two performances. The glowing terms of the article announcing the coming of the show follows:

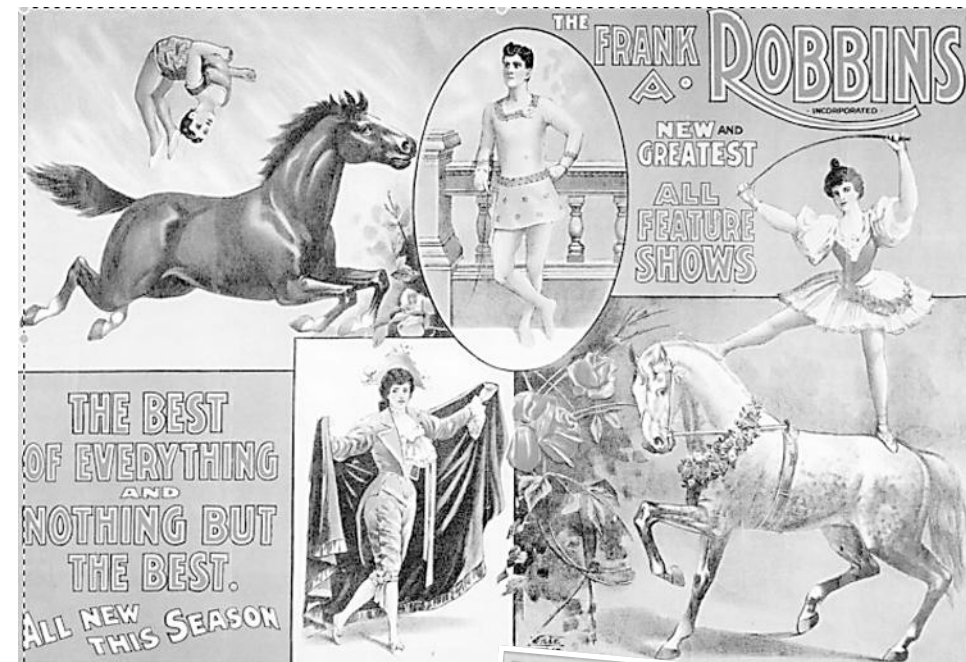
"Human ingenuity has well nigh exhausted itself in preparing feats of amusement for the multitude, but it has remained for Frank A. Robbins to cap the climax of circus enterprise with the monster exhibition he has organized for the season of 1886. Mr. Robbins never deceives the public; his promises go at par every time, and are always duly honored. What he promises on paper will be found beneath the canvas. It is a veritable wonder world; everything is novel and interesting. Every act is startling in its originality; every curiosity interesting for its rarity; every animal challenges admiration for its beauty and perfect keeping and every portion of the vast concern excites the warmest

commendation by its cleanliness, neatness, perfect order and system, and the entire absence of all objectionable features. In the ring and on the elevated stage, a continual succession of interesting acts are presented, among them being leaping, tumbling, bareback riding ceiling walking by the human fly, serial bicycling, roller skating, trapeze performances, aerobatic evolutions, performing Arabs, Turks, Moore, Egyptian and Mexican exhibitions, besides dozens of other festivities of more than ordinary merit. In the menagerie, with its many cages of wild animals, are also to be seen numerous trained animals in the exhibition arena, including the wonderful tamed Baby Clown Elephant who does more clever things than was ever performed by a elephant before. The most novel and interesting feature of the exhibition is the Elephant Band, composed of seven of the huge beasts who have been taught to perform with all sorts of different musical instruments with the precision of skilled musicians. This great novelty cost Mr. Robbins \$125,000 and can be seen in no other show."

Robbins was said to be an excellent example of the career circus man of the late 19th century. He was only fifteen when he joined his first circus in 1870, working for a year for P. T.

Barnum. When he started his own hometown circus he was an immediate success. Some of the performers doubled as stage hands and workmen. Others were animal handlers and there were a few advance men who would place advertisements, tack up posters and rent suitable grounds for the show. It was a racially mixed group that covered performers as well as all other employed. Unfortunately, this cause difficulties in some locals in both the United States and Canada when the show was on tour. A two-ring show was advertised with several first-rank performers. Not to be forgotten where the snake charmer, several gymnasts and a trick marksman.

An impressive amount of planning went into each show with exact co-ordination and precise timing. The troupe usually arrived at their destination as early as 6 a.m. if possible when they had to be provided with breakfast, after which tents and equipment had to be unloaded and animals fed and cleaned and groomed.



A parade through town was a must - perhaps at 10 a.m. to bring attention to their arrival. Performances, lasting about two hours would begin at 2 p.m. and again 7 p.m. with the grounds opened an hour before each performance. By 10 p.m. the dismantling operations were underway and they were on their way to their next stop by 2 a.m. if everything went well.

Not an easy life but the results of the efforts of these talented people brought chills, thrills and memories to all who attended.