

## To the golden west

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*The circus was a feature of the emerging popular culture of the industrialising world and they appeared in Australia as early as 1833. MARK VALENTINE ST LEON examines the special opportunities and challenges that visits to Western Australia posed for circus managers.*

In 1779, Philip Astley presented organised equestrian entertainments in the first circus of modern times, a permanent building on the south side of London, which he named Astley's Amphitheatre.<sup>1</sup> The establishment was popularly referred to as 'the circus', a word used at the time to describe the open-air circular recreational riding tracks in and around London and not, as is popularly thought, the circus of ancient Rome.<sup>2</sup> Long after Astley's death in 1814, Astley's Amphitheatre remained the international fountainhead of circus well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Entertainments, imitative of those given in Astley's and provincial English circuses, were given in the Australian colonies as early as 1833 when ropewalkers appeared on the stage of Sydney's Theatre Royal.<sup>3</sup> Circus was unequivocally established in Australia when, in 1847, an English-born publican, horse trainer and jockey, Robert Avis Radford (1814–65), opened his Royal Circus in Launceston and gave the first comprehensive demonstration of the circus arts on local soil.<sup>4</sup> Circus in Australia began to assume an itinerant character with the visits in 1851 of the first companies to the Bathurst goldfields, west of Sydney.

Colonial circus men found, as had the wandering minstrels of mediaeval Europe and the circus men of the American frontier, that it was easier to change audience than repertoire. To change

audience, they had to change location.<sup>5</sup> The first peripatetic circuses relied on transportable but cumbersome pavilions or 'booths', semi-permanent timber structures as used on the English fairgrounds. These were 'erected' and dismantled at each location. But, as circus proprietors on the American frontier had already found, tents were cheaper, more easily transported, raised and lowered. By the summer of 1853–54, we have clear evidence of the regular use of tents by colonial circus companies.<sup>6</sup>

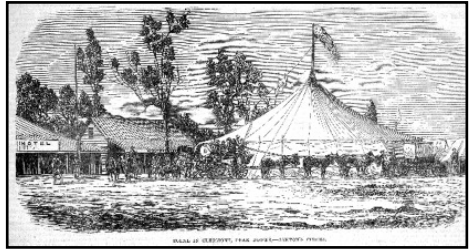
### **Early circus activity**

By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, circus performers and troupes crossed the Atlantic, enriching the arts and management of circus on both sides, while small circus troupes roamed the world in search of audiences. In 1841, the Italian, Luigi Dalle Case, a self-styled professor of gymnastics, and his small troupe of performers, visited Sydney.<sup>7</sup> In 1851, the small American circus troupe of John Sullivan Noble landed in Adelaide.<sup>8</sup> With the pronounced decline in goldfields activity in Victoria and New South Wales after 1854, the early circus proprietors had to seek fresh horizons to sustain their revenues. The gold rush era had generated the first large waves of free immigration as well as the emergence of interior townships and trade routes connecting them.<sup>9</sup> Itinerant circus companies emanating from Sydney or Melbourne began to regularly service the interior towns of Victoria and New South Wales but also reached: Hobart (1853), Moreton Bay (1855), Wellington, New Zealand (1855) and Adelaide (1856).

Western Australia's remoteness, economic backwardness and small population initially discouraged visits by circuses and other companies from the eastern seaboard. However, by the 1860s, intercolonial shipping services had expanded to embrace Western Australia while transportation of convicts ceased in 1868 and improved the colony's prospects for commercial and trade integration with its sister Australian colonies.<sup>10</sup> In April 1869, the first circus reached Western Australia when Stebbing's Intercolonial Circus arrived by sea from Adelaide and gave an inaugural performance for 800 people on the Fremantle cricket ground.<sup>11</sup> Stebbing was a German gymnast who, as one of the

duo ‘Dherang and Stebbing’, arrived in Melbourne in 1854 under engagement to Astley’s Amphitheatre.<sup>12</sup>

However, Stebbing’s visit, while apparently successful, was not soon repeated. Two years later, a census (1871) counted the population of Perth as only 5007, hardly numerous enough to encourage circus excursions from the east.<sup>13</sup> In comparison, Rockhampton, a major central Queensland coastal port, with 6906 people (1871), received at least occasional visits from circuses in the 1860s and 70s and served as a springboard for excursions further north. By the late 1870s, ‘a chain of rich goldfields ran parallel to the Pacific Ocean for nearly a thousand miles’ along the Queensland coast and the frequency of circus activity increased dramatically despite the inadequacy of road and rail systems.<sup>14</sup>



*Ashton's Circus at Clermont,  
Peak Downs Queensland, 1873.  
Courtesy : State Library of NSW*

After Stebbing, the next significant figure in Western Australian circus activity appears to have been William H. Hayes. Hayes and the clown Henry ‘Merry’ Benham were engaged from London for an Australian tour for Henry Burton’s Circus in 1878. However, the two broke their contract with Burton soon after arrival ‘furious at finding themselves being dragged away into the bush with a wagon show’.<sup>15</sup> Hayes and Benham conducted their own circus for a time but, by early 1880, Hayes was one of the proprietors of Hayes, Leopold & Smith’s Great London Circus which arrived in Fremantle from Melbourne by the *Cleopatra* in April 1880. The company comprised 13 artists, many of whose names had been conspicuous in circus in the eastern colonies, a ‘large and splendid marquee capable of holding 2000 persons, brilliantly lighted with gasaliers’ and a ‘grand band chariot imported direct from Europe’. From Perth, the company visited Guildford, York, Northam, Newcastle

[now Toodyay] and other towns during a stay in the colony of about two months.<sup>16</sup> The company sailed for Singapore by the *Spinaway* on 28 June 1880 but without its young groom, Dan FitzGerald.<sup>17</sup> FitzGerald 'did not care about leaving Australia' and opened 'a small variety and circus entertainment' in Perth. With this small company, FitzGerald toured to Bunbury and Pinjarra. This inaugural experience as an independent showman proved to be the makings of FitzGerald's career as a circus proprietor. Interviewed in 1895, by then one of the proprietors of FitzGerald Bros Circus, Australia's largest, Dan remembered the 'Westralia' of 1880 as 'a dull show place' and 'old-fashioned to what it is now'.<sup>18</sup>

Hayes returned to Western Australia with another circus in 1886 and several times in the subsequent years in between tours of the eastern colonies and New Zealand. He died of pleuropneumonia at Fremantle Hospital on 12 February 1897, aged 54 years:

... Mr Hayes, who is said to have made and lost several fortunes during his career, died in poverty; but on such an occasion the brotherly spirit of the members of his profession is never found wanting in practical expression. Messrs. Fitzgerald Bros., whose season is now in progress between James and Roe streets, and Messrs. Jones and Lawrence, proprietors of the Old English Fayre, combined their efforts to give the deceased a suitable burial.<sup>19</sup>

The only other circus of consequence to visit Perth in the 1880s was R.W. Fryer & Co's Circus, Equescriculum & Trained Animal Show. This small but capable American company toured Australasia during 1885–87. Returning to Australia from



*Perry Brothers Circus and Zoo*

Batavia, after touring South-east Asia, the company called into Perth in December 1886.

Fryer's Circus opened in Perth on Monday evening in a large marquee near the Governor Broome Hotel... From start to finish the performance was of the most enjoyable character, one surprising feat following another in rapid succession...It far surpassed our expectations.<sup>20</sup>

Between 1873 and 1900, the Australian mainland was visited by 11 circuses from the United States including some of the largest such as Cooper, Bailey & Co (1876–77, 1877–78) and Sells Bros (1891–92). However, apart from Fryer's, the only American circus to reach Western Australia was the Flying Jordans' Circus and Carnival. The Jordans passed through Western Australia twice, on their way to South Africa late in 1897, and during a second Australasian tour when they also visited the goldfields, late in 1899.<sup>21</sup>

The Flying Jordans and their company arrived in Perth from Adelaide 'en route for China, Japan and India' by the ss *Innamincka* to open in its 'snow white tents' on Tuesday, 28 December 1897. The tents were erected on Sir George Shenton's paddock in Roe Street. The company now featured Lamont, 'The Human Arrow' who nightly made a 'terrific dive' of 90 feet into a safety net. In a separate tent was a 'perfectly equipped theatre'.<sup>22</sup>

The crowning performance of the show, however, is that given by the Jordan family. A more graceful, highly finished series of acrobatic tricks has never been presented in this city...The show as a whole must be spoken of as refined and entertaining throughout, and if a joke here and there smacks of the chestnut, it is forgiven because of the many that are new.<sup>23</sup>

The performance on Saturday evening, 1 January 1898, attracted an audience of over 4000 people.<sup>24</sup> At the interval, one of the company, a Mr Howard, came out in front of the curtain to address the audience to announce that the company's engagement



*Acrobat on horseback*

in Perth would have to conclude the following Saturday due to advance arrangements. His announcement was met with cries of disapproval. From Perth, the company proceeded to Coolgardie where it opened on Tuesday, 11 January, 1898.<sup>25</sup> The following Monday, 17 January 1898, the company opened in Kalgoorlie for a season of four nights opposite Burgess's Kalgoorlie Hotel, on the corner of Wilson and Hannan Streets.<sup>26</sup> Returning to Perth, the Jordans' company played to 'big business' at the Theatre Royal.<sup>27</sup> A tour of South Africa followed before the company returned to Australia more than a year later. The Jordans gave a final season in Perth 6–16 December 1899 after which the company toured the goldfields.<sup>28</sup>

An unconventional English company, Bostock & Wombell's Novelty Circus and Complete Menagerie, arrived at Fremantle from Cape Town on 29 September 1905 by the 5672 ton ss *Fifeshire* to commence its Australasian tour. The company's 14 lions and other animals were carried in cages that were fixed to the ship's deck for the voyage.<sup>29</sup> After playing the West including the goldfields, the company shipped for the eastern States and New Zealand. Bostock & Wombell's possessed no horses and presented its birds, wild and other animals and vaudeville-style acts on a stage instead of within a customary circus ring.<sup>30</sup> In 1927, E. H. Bostock set down some of his memories of the Australian visit:

Although I greatly reduced the circus company by bringing some of the artists back to England, it was still too big and expensive. The cost of freightage and fares to Australia was actually £2084...All our wagons for transporting our huge show on rail were too high for the Australian lines and to meet the situation the wheels had to be taken off the wagons for each journey, a difficult and somewhat dangerous process.<sup>31</sup>

Bostock & Wombell's was the last major circus to visit Western Australia from across the seas for nearly 60 years until, in 1965, the Perth-based entrepreneur, Eric Edgley, in partnership with the Bullen circus family, brought the Great Moscow Circus to Perth for the commencement of its first Australasian tour.<sup>32</sup>

With the gold discoveries of the 1890s, Western Australia's feasibility as a circus touring destination improved significantly. As *Table I* shows, the surge in population gave larger Australian circus companies a stronger incentive to ship for the western colony.

*Table I: Population and circus activity, Queensland and Western Australia, 1850s–1890s*

Sources: W. Vamplew, *Australians: Historical statistics*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, Sydney, 1987, p.41; M. St Leon, *Circus in Australia, Vol 2: Index of show movements*, The author, Sydney, 2005.

| Decade | Qld     |       | WA      |       |
|--------|---------|-------|---------|-------|
|        | Pop'n   | Tours | Pop'n   | Tours |
| 1850s  | 30,000  | 8     | 15,000  | 0     |
| 1860s  | 119,000 | 7     | 23,000  | 1     |
| 1870s  | 212,000 | 23    | 30,000  | 1     |
| 1880s  | 390,000 | 36    | 50,000  | 3     |
| 1890s  | 499,000 | 53    | 184,000 | 14    |

The steep increase in circus activity in Western Australia in the 1890s is at least partly attributable, albeit briefly, to locally generated circus activity such as George A. Lovett's World Circus (January 1892) and Thomas Dobbie's World Circus (June 1893).<sup>33</sup> Despite these local offerings, the large circus companies of Wirth Bros and FitzGerald Bros were the major examples of circus

MILO & WEST BROS  
ALL STAR  
**CIRCUS**

EVERYTHING  
UP-TO-DATE

CLEAN  
CLEVER  
CLASSY

Introducing  
**NEW ACTS &  
NOVELTIES**

Popular Prices  
3- 2- Children 1-  
PLUS TAX

**THIS IS  
A REAL CIRCUS**

Poster for Milo & West Brothers circus

activity in Western Australia after the onset of the great gold rushes.

### Wirth's Circus

In July 1893, Wirth Bros Circus opened in Perth having shipped from Adelaide by the *Bullara*.<sup>34</sup> The Wirth brothers, the sons of an itinerant German musician who arrived in the colonies in the 1850s, built their circus up since starting out from Sydney as a wagon show in 1882. The company grew quickly in size and reputation and switched to rail-based transport in 1888.<sup>35</sup> By the time of its first visit to Western Australia, this company was a large one by Australian standards, replete with three rings, hippodrome track, wild west show and menagerie.



However, despite strong business in Perth and provincial towns the company's size defeated plans to reach the new goldfields which were not yet accessible by rail.<sup>36</sup> The eastern colonies mired in depression after the land boom, the Wirths returned to Adelaide from where the company shipped for Cape Town, the first port-of-call on a seven-year odyssey that later touched on South America, England, India and South East Asia.<sup>37</sup>

During the Wirths' absence, their major rival, FitzGerald Bros, grew into Australia's largest circus. By 1895, it was importing its annual attractions from England, America and Continental Europe. FitzGerald Bros spent most of 1897 in the West, arriving at the port of Albany. The Great Southern Railway took the FitzGerald company back and forth between Albany and Perth during 1897.<sup>38</sup> Opening in Perth on 9 February, the company later moved through the regional towns before moving onto the goldfields, now served by a rail link opened the previous year.<sup>39</sup> There were estimated to be some 65,000 people on the goldfields at that time, many of them escaping the devastating impact of the depression in the eastern colonies.<sup>40</sup> By visiting the West that year, the FitzGeralds also escaped that depression. A visiting American showman wrote from New Zealand to the *New York Clipper* to sum up the situation:

...After the great boom in variety business in Australia the calm has come and left many good people to hustle for a cold winter. The Palace Theatre, Sydney, one of the finest of modern times, closed up Saturday, and stranded specialty companies are reported in many of the colonies...All who linger get stuck. The only thing that catches the people here is a circus, band, wagons, sawdust and spangles.<sup>41</sup>

Despite improved rail connections, the FitzGerald company made use of camel-based transport to travel between locations on the goldfields, as a contemporary photograph shows.<sup>42</sup> The 'splendid business' done on the goldfields evidently persuaded the FitzGeralds to close up for the winter at Albany and tour the colony again in the spring. After closing a season at Fremantle

in October, the company was loaded on to a special train for Coolgardie.<sup>43</sup>

With improvements in access to Western Australia, by ship, and its interior mining centres, by rail, during the 1890s, the FitzGerald put the remaining link in a touring circuit that embraced all six Australian colonies, and New Zealand as well. The circuit was tailored to match each region's period of warm weather, major agricultural shows and racing festivals.<sup>44</sup> The Wirths and, later, other major Australian circuses such as Perry Bros (which emerged in the inter-war period) and Bullen Bros (which flourished in the post-war period) relied on similarly structured routes. The last visit of the original FitzGerald Bros Circus to Western Australia was in April 1904. The company shipped across the Great Australian Bight by the *Kyarra* and returned by the *Kanowna*, 'two big ships [of] seven thousand tons each'.<sup>45</sup>

In August 1900, nearly seven years after departing Adelaide for South Africa, the Wirths shipped from Java for Fremantle by the



*Peggy St Leon, one of the Five Riding St Leons, with Wirth's circus in the late 1940s*

*Karrakatta*, making their first landfall at Broome:

We spent the night there and went ashore [in rowboats] to the hotel and gave a sort of musical evening to the people there...The audience threw shillings and half crowns, all silver...We had a good trip over and landed at Fremantle...[My brother] George already had Fremantle billed for us. We had a wonderful show and did good business.<sup>46</sup>

Wirth's opened in Fremantle on 11 August 1900 with a 'very strong' program and subsequently visited Perth, Kalgoorlie, Boulder City, Coolgardie, Southern Cross, York, Northam and Guildford, before returning to Fremantle to ship for Adelaide. On its departure in 1893, Wirth's had been Australia's pre-eminent circus, but on its return in 1900, FitzGerald Bros occupied that position.<sup>47</sup> The intense rivalry between FitzGerald's and Wirth's was concluded when the two FitzGerald brothers, Dan and Tom, died, only months apart, in 1906.<sup>48</sup> Tom FitzGerald's widow failed in her attempt to recover the FitzGerald name and reputation and by 1909 Wirth's position as Australia's major circus was secure.

With the completion of a rail line across the Nullarbor Plain in 1917, it was possible for any circus to reach and tour all of Australia's five mainland States by rail, the inconvenience of dissimilar rail gauges notwithstanding. Wirth Bros was the first to reach the West by rail. The company made the crossing in 1919 on a 'westbound special', its five elephants housed in modified cattle wagons. Thereafter, Wirth's made the crossing in most years until the early 1960s despite the ever-increasing cost of rail transport. Interviewed by the *West Australian* in 1931, Philip Wirth had complained of:

...the railway bills that are almost killing us to-day. It cost us £716 to come from Port Augusta to Kalgoorlie, and that's only one part of the journey!<sup>49</sup>

The author Katharine Susannah Prichard travelled with Wirth's, gathering material and reflecting on her experiences in her

novel, *Haxby's Circus*, published in 1930.<sup>50</sup> The special train that brought Wirth's to Western Australia in 1931 was nearly a quarter of a mile long and weighed more than 600 tons:

Transporting such a huge combination over 1000 miles of sparsely inhabited country is a big undertaking that calls for extensive organisation by the Circus and railway managements. The floor of each of the cattle trucks used to carry the elephants had to be specially strengthened with 2½ inch boards. The roofs were raised 9½ inches...It was necessary for fresh water to be transported for more than 500 miles to Cook.<sup>51</sup>

The Wirth circus train, which crossed the Nullarbor from Adelaide to Kalgoorlie in 1940, was drawn by two locomotives, took 20 minutes to walk its length and was the longest train to have made the desert crossing up to that point.<sup>52</sup>

In the early 1900s, while the large circus companies of FitzGerald Bros and Wirth Bros extended their operations throughout the cities and major towns of Australasia, small circuses began to confine their activities to areas rarely visited by circuses or other travelling entertainments. Thus was Tullipan's Circus identified with North Queensland from about 1905.<sup>53</sup> Holden Bros focused its touring activity within provincial Victoria from about 1910. The progeny of a London-born contortionist and ropewalker, Joseph Worley, may have some claim to founding South Australia's own travelling circus as early as 1888. Worley's Circus was, by 1905, travelling as Barton Bros Circus.<sup>54</sup> Barton's called into Fremantle, Carnarvon and Broome on its way to and from Java in 1928.<sup>55</sup>

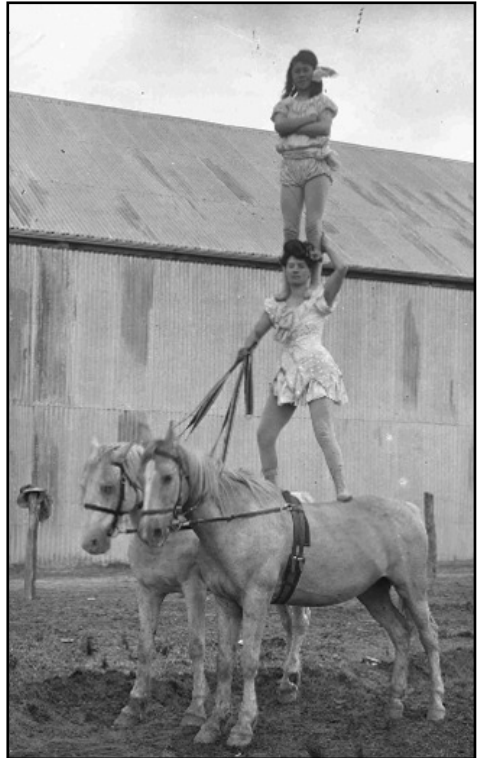
### Hyland's Circus

The founder of Hyland's Circus, John Thomas Roberts (1854–1911), was 'a great bushman' and station manager on the Cape River in eastern Queensland. He began to put on exhibitions of trick riding. By 1890, Roberts' displays were transformed, with the addition of his family, into a small travelling circus. Roberts adopted the professional name of Hyland and his circus became

known as Hyland's Vice-Regal Circus. The name of Hyland was eventually accepted as the family name as well. Roberts married Elizabeth Ah Pan, the daughter of a Chinese prospector, in 1878. Ten of their twelve children survived to adulthood. Most of the Hyland children became accomplished circus performers and musicians, although all were eventually afflicted at different ages with Leber's disease, a form of congenital blindness inherited from their mother.<sup>56</sup> The Hyland boys were remembered as 'marvellous [horse] breakers but blind as a bat'.<sup>57</sup> The eldest daughter, Agnes, performed as an equestrian in the 'Wild Australia' exhibition in London in 1911 at celebrations for the coronation of King George V. She toured the United States with the Hagenbeck-Wallace circus before returning to Australia.<sup>58</sup> Another daughter, Maude, was possibly Australia's first female jockey. Although unable to obtain registration in Western Australia, she surreptitiously rode in her first race at Leonora and competed at country picnic races while the circus was on tour.<sup>59</sup>

We always had a governess with [the] circus see that's how we got schooling [but] we didn't get much schooling because we was too much with the horses and practising.<sup>60</sup>

Late in 1905, after some 20 years touring the eastern seaboard and New Zealand, the lure of gold attracted the Hyland circus family to Western



*The Hyland sisters.*

*Courtesy Battye Library, State Library of WA*

Australia. The company shipped from Adelaide to Albany by the steamer *Hobart*.<sup>61</sup> Opening in York Street in a ‘large marquee’ on the evening of Monday, 11 December, the extraordinary equestrian performance of the blind Tom Hyland captured the attention of a reviewer:

In addition to many clever and interesting feats while the horse is in motion, he held the audience spellbound while doing the great American jockey act. The horse is sent around the ring at a swinging gallop and the jockey standing on one side after the horse passes him runs around the ring and jumps on his back, This riding act is looked upon as a daring one throughout the world when done by men with their full sight, but when the performer is blind the feat is little short of miraculous.<sup>62</sup>

From Albany, the company worked overland to Perth by way of Bridgetown, ‘the first circus [that] was ever seen around those parts’. Billed as ‘Professor D’Arch Hyland’s Vice-Regal Circus & Trained Equine Paradox’, the company opened in Perth on Saturday, 23 December 1905.<sup>63</sup> Before departing Adelaide, the Hylands received advice from the ‘cattle king’ Sidney Kidman that Western Australia was ‘such a little place, you won’t stay long there’. Expecting to be back in three months, the Hylands left many of their horses, including thoroughbreds, in Kidman’s care:

[We] only brought over a few good what was trained... Instead we never got back again. So Mr Kidman kept the horses and everything there and our trophies, what the horses used to win in show prizes... We did every little town and we made great friends because people were pleased to see you.<sup>64</sup>

The Hylands remained in Western Australia to become the state’s *de facto* circus, delivering entertainment on the goldfields and to remote interior settlements as far north as Broome. At Meekatharra, the Hylands bought an old Cobb & Co coach in which they travelled as far as Sandstone.<sup>65</sup> In September 1908, it was reported that the family was settled 30 miles out of Sandstone ‘[gold] mining but they follow[ed] up the race meetings with a

show occasionally'.<sup>66</sup> There, at Maninga Marley, the circus ponies and drags were put to work helping the family work its mine until, in 1909, 'we packed up and [went] off to Carnarvon' as Hyland's Circus once again. There, the circus 'made a fortune' at the Gymkhana and gave shows at surrounding stations.<sup>67</sup> From Carnarvon, the Hylands shipped for Broome intending to reach Singapore. Finding they would not be able to bring their horses back from Singapore, the Hylands settled at Broome where they bought the Star Hotel, 'the liveliest hotel in the town', and livery stables. The family mounted a circus program on an adjacent vacant block twice a year and later ran a 'picture show', the first to be seen in Broome.<sup>68</sup>

Bitten with the 'circus fever', John Roberts Hyland intended to start up his circus again but perished while returning overland from Halls Creek to Broome in November 1911 after an abortive pony-buying expedition. The family reorganised the circus late in 1912 and starting at Geraldton travelled until the start of the Great War in 1914. The eldest of the Hyland children, Agnes, had returned from London and was promoted as the 'boom girl' [featured attraction] in the circus publicity.

We did a trip right around Western Australia, never missed a town. We got old Cobb & Co coaches and trucks [*sic*] and travelled the outback...And then I'm blown we got to the south west, the war breaks out in 1914 and we bought a little place at Yarloop...That's why we had to close because everything was charity.<sup>69</sup>

The Hylands again closed their circus and were settled at Yarloop during the war years. Some of the family gave a brief, wartime season in Darwin in 1918. From there two of the Hyland brothers, both blind, took what remained of the circus to North Queensland 'because they couldn't do anything else but circus'.<sup>70</sup>

### Other circuses

Wirth's toured Western Australia almost every second year but, with continuous improvements in intra-colonial transportation, tours of an increasingly populous and prosperous Western

Australia by smaller circuses from the eastern seaboard became feasible. In 1908, the St Leons, in partnership with an English showman, Sammy Gooseman (professionally known as Sammy Bernard), organised a circus in Sydney for a West Australian visit.

[We] done the whole of the West. We were travelling by train... We done all out to Leonora, wherever the trains went. We done all the West... Right out to the end of the line. Leonora I think is the name of the place... We went on the *Riverina*, a steamer. We were in Albany when the American White Armada came out. They couldn't find any anchorage but Albany, good water there. We showed there and FitzGerald's came in — Mrs Tom FitzGerald. She tried to run the show after Dan and Tom died... She ran opposition to us in Albany. We used to get a fair crowd... All the Yankee sailors would pay well. Of course, in those days, amusement was cheap, two or three shillings for the price of a ticket... Both shows did a fair bit of business.<sup>71</sup>

In the 1920s and early 1930s, most road-based circuses forsook their horsedrawn transport in favour of motor vehicles, the switch driven as much by prestige as by expediency. With the opening of rail access across the Nullarbor, road-based circuses from the eastern seaboard made their first crossings to the West by rail, often hooked up to the 'Tea and Sugar' train as far as Kalgoorlie before taking to the road again with their motor vehicles. These companies included Eroni Bros (1921), Perry Bros (1922) and Sole Bros (1924), each circus representing the various progeny of the Perry family which had commenced travelling with its own circus in outback Queensland in 1889.

In 1930, with its Reo, Ford and Chevrolet trucks, St Leon's Circus travelled overland to Adelaide to play during the city's first Industrial Exhibition. From Adelaide, the circus and its vehicles were taken on the 'Tea and Sugar' across the Nullarbor for an abortive tour of Western Australia. The 'Tea and Sugar' stopped periodically to offload provisions for the fettlers along the line. Anybody who successfully 'jumped the rattler' [train]



could not be put off because they would perish but the police would be waiting at Kalgoorlie to round up any stowaways.<sup>72</sup>

The St Leons' tour of Western Australia proved 'a disaster' and reached Geraldton before 'a few good houses' were achieved. The Western Australian tour was 'the end of the good show'. Soon the family was 'just paying wages' and no other expenses. The money ran out and, with the country sliding rapidly into depression, a much-depleted St Leon circus returned east, hooked onto a regular goods train service.<sup>73</sup> A young man in the circus at the time, Mervyn King recalled:

We battled around there for a little while. I suppose it might have been three months before we headed back. It took a bit of scratching to get enough money to get back. We took the show [over] on about three flat tops. We put it all on one [flat top] to bring it back...[We got] into Port Augusta without unloading anything. Then we headed back down to Melbourne.<sup>74</sup>

Late in 1938, Bullen Bros crossed by the 'Tea and Sugar' having already accomplished the difficult crossing by road with motor vehicles the previous year. Bullen's remained in the West until the outbreak of war in September 1939, when it was at Kalgoorlie. Bullen's then made its way by road back to its quarters at Yeppoon, near Rockhampton, where it spent the remainder of the war.<sup>75</sup>

We had quite a struggle getting there as petrol rationing had started [July 1940] and a circus was certainly not high on the priority list but as usual in war time business was good.<sup>76</sup>

For smaller circuses, the transition from the horse-drawn to the fully motorised was gradual. Well into the 1930s, some circuses still relied on horse-drawn transport and, despite the availability of shipping and rail access, some of these are known to have crossed the Nullarbor with their horses and wagons. In or about 1929, Lennon's Circus made the crossing. In the summer of 1935–36, the Aboriginal circus proprietor Bob West, his wife and their nine children took their circus across the Nullarbor

Plain by wagons, with horses, donkeys and mules tailing, possibly the last epic journey by a wagon-based Australian circus.<sup>77</sup>

### **Contemporary circus**

A rich era in Australian circus history came to an end in the 1960s with the closure of the once pre-eminent Wirth's Circus (1963) and its main rival in the post-war era, Bullen's Circus (1969). At times, Australia had been serviced by over 20 circuses. By the early 1970s, only a few circuses of any consequence were left to travel Australia, each by motor vehicle. These included: Ashton's, Sole Bros, Circus Royale and Alberto's. Increasing urbanisation and the spread of television contributed to the decline. Between 1911 and 1996, the proportion of Australians living in rural areas declined from 43 to 14 per cent of the population. City life provided greater diversity of entertainment for young country people moving to the cities. From 1965, Australia's need for circus entertainment of an international standard was satisfied by the regular tours of the Great Moscow Circus, initially organised out of Perth by the Edgley family in association with Bullen's Circus.<sup>78</sup>

In retrospect however, the evident decline of the domestic circus industry was not so much the end of the genre but the beginning of a period of adaptation of the institution of circus in Australia to changing economic, social and cultural realities. During the 1970s and 80s, a new, contemporary circus movement emerged, challenging the form and content of conventional circus with approaches informed by the radical arts practice of the late 1960s and 1970s in such areas as the use of performing animals, the nature of training and performance and the development of performance narratives. This era saw the rise of contemporary circus groups such as Circus Oz, conceived in Melbourne in 1978. Circus Oz first visited the West in 1982 after its appearance at the Adelaide Festival.

Circus Oz inspired other contemporary circus activity, including the formation of youth and community circus groups throughout Australia. Nevertheless, many important initiatives

in the contemporary circus movement took place independently in Western Australia inspired and guided by the late Reg Bolton (d. 2006). As well as Bolton's Suitcase Circus, small Western Australian circus groups and individuals contributed to a lively contemporary circus culture such as Festival Circus, Bizircus and Flip 'n' Flop. These groups often combined circus-style performances with training for children. Matt Yates' Lunar Circus, established in 1997 in Margaret River, is known for its bold contemporary energy. The town of Denmark has hosted three clown conventions and a juggling festival in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1987, the New Circus Festival was held at Mount Lawley and, in 2001, the National Circus Festival was held on Rottnest Island. The YMCA ran a circus school in Melville 1996–97 and Fremantle's Cirque Bizirque is its successor.

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