

Innocent amusement for all classes: early circus activity in Queensland, 1847-1942

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Building on the British model, Australia's circus entrepreneurs and families developed a domestic circus industry. As the imperatives of settlement and economic activity demanded, and as infrastructural improvements allowed, itinerant troupes and companies gradually extended their routes throughout Australasia. Until the 1960s, the circus remained an important feature of the Australian leisure landscape, especially in entertainment-deprived regional areas.

This paper aims to demonstrate the relevance of some of the major themes and personalities of Australia's circus history to some aspects of the history of Queensland. Specifically: what special opportunities and challenges did visits to Queensland pose for circus managers; what factors led to the integration of Queensland within wider Australasian touring circuits; and what has Queensland contributed to the annals of the circus? This essay may guide – and hopefully inspire – deeper investigations into circus and other itinerant entertainments which toured Queensland.

In 1779, Philip Astley presented organised equestrian entertainments in the first circus of modern times, a permanent building on the south side of the Thames which he named Astley's Amphitheatre.¹ Astley's remained the international fountainhead of circus well into the nineteenth century. Although Astley never used the word, his edifice 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.² Despite much written to the contrary, the circus of modern times is, at best, only tenuously related to the circus of ancient Rome.³

As early as December 1833, the ropewalkers George Croft, a former convict, and John Quinn appeared on the stage of the Theatre Royal, Sydney.⁴ Croft was a 'cook and confectioner' when transported for stealing to New South Wales on the *Midas* in February 1827. He probably acquired his ropewalking skills in London prior to his conviction.⁵ Quinn was apparently colonial-born and Croft's pupil. The names of Croft and Quinn appear sporadically in colonial entertainment annals until the early 1850s.⁶

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In 1847, an English publican, horse trainer and jockey, Robert Avis Radford (1814-1865) gave the first comprehensive demonstration of the circus arts on Australian soil when he opened his Royal Circus in Launceston.⁷ For a period of a little over two years, Radford and his small, constantly changing company of acrobats, equestrians, ropewalkers, musicians, actors, singers and dancers – some of them former convicts – entertained Launceston and Hobart Town with remarkable programs culled from English circus and music hall.

Moreton Bay

In April 1847, some eight months prior to Radford's pioneering circus venture in Launceston, George Croft presented a brief series of circus-style entertainments in his amphitheatre at Moreton Bay. We are left with no indication as to the design or structure of Croft's amphitheatre except that it was 'entered' and well lit by candles or float lamps.⁸ In stark contrast to the splendid circus buildings to be found in London and Paris, this colonial amphitheatre was probably a makeshift construction of timber and canvas. Croft performed 'a series of evolutions on the tight rope' as well as various acrobatic feats in the company of two clowns of unknown origin named Feathers and Benson. When 'improper songs' were sung and Aborigines admitted, patronage waned.⁹ After a few months, Croft closed his amphitheatre. Moreton Bay's population (2525 in 1846) was too small to support ongoing circus or theatrical activity.¹⁰

The early colonial circus men found, as did the wandering minstrels of medieval Europe and the circus men of the American frontier, that it was more economic to change audience than program and to change audience, they had to change location.¹¹ Over the latter half of the nineteenth century Australia's first generations of itinerant showmen:

developed a constant rhythm to their movements across the landscape, shaped both by the seasons and the timing of capital city shows where the big money was made.¹²

Australia's circus routes did not spring into existence fully formed with the first bursts of touring activity. Livestock and grain movements had fostered the development of overland routes before the gold rushes and an itinerant circus could economically 'roll' along these routes with other trade and commerce to reach the emerging townships of the interior. A tented circus, unlike an amphitheatre, could also be shipped between colonial ports. Thus, during 1855-1856, the circus routes began to extend beyond the familiar precincts of the main coastal settlements and goldfields of New South Wales and Victoria. Sea-lanes were used to reach New Zealand, Tasmania and South Australia and with the population

of Moreton Bay more or less doubling every five years from 1851, the regular visits of circuses from the south were feasible by the 1860s.¹³

In June 1855, La Rosiere's Licensed Travelling Circus travelled overland from New England to reach Moreton Bay. In December 1855, Adams & Melville's National Circus & Hippodrome arrived by sea from Sydney. The visits of these two circus companies preceded by a decade the opening in 1865 of Brisbane's first permanent theatrical venue, Mason's Concert Hall.¹⁴

La Rosiere's Licensed Travelling Circus

Edward Hughes, better known by his professional *nom d'arena* of Edward 'La Rosiere', was born in Ireland about 1824, the son of Edward Hughes, a farmer.¹⁵ He first comes to attention as a performer in Sydney in December 1841.¹⁶ He was an accomplished slackrope walker, stiltwalker, clown and contortionist. He claimed a 'high reputation' on the 'continent of Europe' and the 'approbation' of 'several kings and nabobs before whom he performed on the continent of India'.¹⁷ None of these claims has been substantiated although it is known that La Rosiere visited India during 1849.¹⁸ With one of Robert Radford's equestrians, John Jones, La Rosiere opened the Royal Australian Equestrian Circus in 1850, Sydney's first successful circus.¹⁹

With the first discoveries of gold near Bathurst, La Rosiere and other circus people moved onto the goldfields to entertain the diggers. La Rosiere soon formed his Olympic Circus, first noted at Goulburn in February 1853.²⁰ His touring activities were initially confined to the central west and New England regions of New South Wales but, in June 1855, La Rosiere's 'talented company of performers' arrived at Moreton Bay to offer a treat 'never before witnessed' in Brisbane.²¹ The visit broke the drought of circus entertainments in Moreton Bay since Croft's failed amphitheatre eight years earlier and was the first of several visits by La Rosiere to Moreton Bay and the Darling Downs. In May, 1856, he opened with his circus in Brisbane again, followed by a visit to the Darling Downs.²² Visiting Ipswich in March 1857, Monsieur La Rosiere's Licensed International Circus included the 'graceful rider' Mdlle La Rosiere (Jenny Kendall, La Rosiere's sister-in-law), Master Gaynor 'the Australian rider [who] will appear as the Wild Indian', Master Carrole as clown, and two other infant performers, the Masters Alexander and Pierro [or Pero], who were apparently natural brothers.²³ These young performers were probably apprentices or adopted children. Although the company at this stage bore 'no great variety or novelty in the scenes, characters or groups' it was nevertheless capable of 'attracting large numbers at very high prices'.²⁴

When the company re-opened in Brisbane in April 1857, however, the press was short on enthusiasm:

Equestrian performances are generally more popular in the country than dramatic ones; but on this occasion, La Rosiere's Circus has not been so well patronised as it was on the previous visit to Brisbane. This no doubt is greatly owing to the 'hard' times but may be partly attributed to the sameness of the performance, little variety having been introduced since the circus was here before.²⁵

The 'sameness' may also be explained by the deterioration in La Rosiere's health. Three months later he died at Ipswich, aged 33 years.²⁶ His company was dissolved and his widow, Ann, left circus life. She remained in Ipswich and the following year, 1858, married a local merchant, Daniel Collins.²⁷ She remained a friendly point of contact for travelling circus people for years afterwards, even serving as midwife at the birth of children of itinerant circus families.

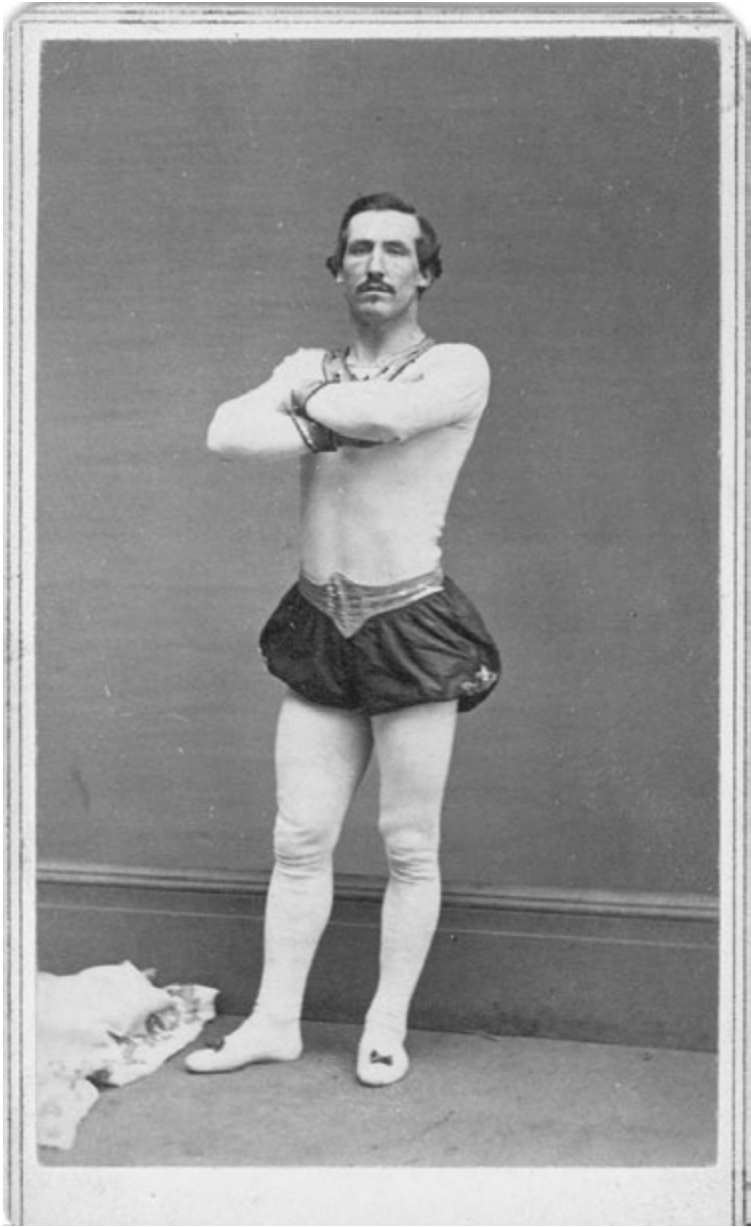
Although Edward La Rosiere left no family to carry on a circus dynasty, the circus career of his sister-in-law Jenny Kendall flourished as a colonial equestrienne under her inherited *nom d'arena*. As Mdlle La Rosiere, she became 'a splendid and fearless rider', the star equestrienne in a major colonial company, Burton's National Circus. The Rockhampton historian, J Grant Pattison, later wrote:

In '69, [Henry] Burton again returned with a fine show. He had some beautiful horses. The draw of the show was Mademoiselle La Rosiete [*sic*]. She was a fine equestrienne, and was one of the few lady riders who did the bounding jockey act.²⁸

Adams & Melville's National Circus & Hippodrome

Born in Inverness, Scotland in 1837, James Munro came with his family to Australia as an infant.²⁹ His grandfather, father and uncles were 'boat men' by profession. The young James' interest in circus riding was aroused by the early circus equestrian performances he saw in the Royal Australian Equestrian Circus in Sydney during 1850, a complete novelty to a youth who had grown up in the colonies. In 1881, by then one of the highest paid equestrians in American circus, Munro recalled his days as an apprentice in Sydney's Royal Australian Equestrian Circus:

There was no objection to apprenticing lads to be made riders in those days and the boys were better for it. It was hard work though. We had to help clean horses, bed them down, lead them around for exercise when they were not at work, and we had to go to school and know our lessons too. Then we were taught gymnastics and the first points of equestrianism.³⁰



In the summer of 1855-56, equestrian James Melville (1837-1892), later famous in American circus, brought one of the first circus troupes to Brisbane.

(Photograph courtesy of Picture History, MES27647)

Munro – who took, or was given, the professional *nom d'arena* of James ‘Melville’ – was remembered as ‘the best Australian circus rider of his day’.³¹ His reckless, daredevil equestrianism was later described as ‘a series of wildly beautiful pictures, which once seen can never be forgotten’.³² By May 1855, Melville was a member of James Ashton’s circus company and following Ashton’s financial failure, Melville and the renowned English rider Henry Adams organised their National Circus and Hippodrome.³³ On 11 December 1855 they shipped from Sydney by the 408-tonne steamer *Boomerang* for Moreton Bay.³⁴ They opened their circus on ground opposite John Campbell’s *North Brisbane Hotel* in Queen Street and an observer was quick to make comparison with La Rosiere’s company:

The company of performers...are very far superior to anything of the kind before witnessed at Moreton Bay. At first there was some difficulty in selecting a site for the tent and the heavy rain of Tuesday night flooded the ring in the low position they had occupied; but the tent is now pitched in an excellent situation, on the high ground near the gaol. The performance of Mr Melville, as an equestrian and in feats of posturing and strength with Master Hernandez, are admirable, and the graceful and easy attitudes of the boy, in the most constrained positions are equally remarkable. Mr De Vere excels in leaping. His somersault over three horses, with two men and a boy on the top, elicited deserved applause, as did his slack rope exercises. Mr Robinson’s cannonball exercises and above all the feat of balancing Mr De Vere on a pole some eighteen feet long, while the latter climbs to the top with the agility of a cat, and his extraordinary act of horsemanship in poisoning Mr Melville in the air while riding and managing two horses gave great satisfaction. Mr Adams is a very clever actor in broad burlesque ... Mrs Melville is a graceful rider and dancer and her performance on *Cachouca* on Thursday deserved far better music than she had, one of the band being unfortunately maimed [*sic*] and absent... Ladies will find nothing to offend, we feel assured; and ... it is to be hoped that there will be crowded houses.³⁵

After returning from a visit to Ipswich, a performance was given under the patronage of the ‘Government Resident ... together with most of the leading gentry and a large number of ladies’. On 16 January 1856, the little company returned to Sydney by the *Boomerang*.³⁶ Later in 1856, Melville and Adams departed Australia for Chile before moving on to California.³⁷ In the United States, in 1861, Melville organised his own circus, Melville’s Australian Circus and, during the Civil War, ‘moved along the Mississippi River in a sternwheel steamboat, landing and giving performances often to Union soldiers one day and Confederates the next’.³⁸ ‘One of the most famous bareback riders in the world’, Melville died at his home in New York City in November, 1892.³⁹

Separation

The emergence of numerous provincial towns during the 1860s and 1870s challenged itinerant showmen to develop ever more lengthy and ambitious touring routes. As far as Australia's free-spirited circus people were concerned, touring activity was determined by a capricious combination of demographic, economic, climatic and logistic considerations. As was the practice in other colonies, Queensland instituted its own theatrical licensing system. Touring companies were required to obtain a theatrical license of 12 months duration from the Colonial Secretary at a cost of one guinea (£1 1s.). While hardly an onerous impost and rarely refused, the resulting records of licenses allow researchers to gather some impression of the diversity of entertainment that toured through Queensland in the colonial period, 1859-1900.

With Separation in 1859, there was an initial burst of circus touring activity into southeast Queensland where the population was concentrated. Perhaps the most conspicuous was Ashton's Anglo-Saxon Circus which entered Brisbane in 1860, its 'celebrated' brass band performing musical selections from 'their new and classical gorgeous chariot', personally driven by Ashton, followed by 'the magnificent baggage vans', the whole procession forming a 'Grand Cavalcade de Triomphe'.⁴⁰ On that tour, according to Pattison, Ashton travelled as far north as the vicinity of Rockhampton to 'work around' St Lawrence, Clermont, Yaamba and Gracemere.⁴¹

The early excursions by Ashton and others, however, made apparent the new colony's limitations as a touring prospect. Queensland comprised an area some 13 times greater than the area of England. Its population of 30 059 (1861) was a fraction of the population of either Victoria (536 628), New South Wales (350 860) or South Australia (126 830). Furthermore, by 1861, only a small proportion of this population, 6051, was located in Brisbane.⁴² The remainder was widely dispersed.

The paucity of connecting roads in Queensland was another obstacle confronting the early circus companies well into the twentieth century. The developing settlements had too many demands and limited financial resources to undertake significant roadworks.⁴³ Pending the availability of well-formed roads and, later, rail networks, circus tours of Queensland's coastal and interior settlements were major and often hazardous undertakings. Mervyn King, who, at the age of seven, was 'apprenticed' to Gus St Leon's Circus in 1915, later recalled:

It was a habit in those days of only taking half your show up north because there was no transport. There was very little train travelling. Roads were very

bad. Bridle tracks we used to call them. So they used to do a run of probably eight to ten weeks north and come back down through to Tenterfield.⁴⁴

Rail transport was a major factor in the success of touring companies and the failure of the various colonial governments to settle on a unified rail gauge retarded Australia's passenger and freight distribution capacities.⁴⁵ At Wallangarra, where the Queensland and New South Wales lines met in 1888, each circus company was required to transfer equipment from standard to narrow gauge before entering Queensland. For the larger rail-based circuses such as FitzGerald Bros and Wirth Bros, this meant considerable labour and delay. In addition to the inconvenience of transferring between railway gauges, the circus ring stock (horses) were subject to quarantine inspection on reaching the Queensland border. Marizles Wirth Martin noted in a 1903 diary entry:

We were kept at the border at Wallangarra [sic] for two days. It was very cold. The horses had to be dipped and so we had great trouble to get through. We lived on the train.⁴⁶

Only three years earlier, the plans of the Wirth management to return to Australia by way of Thursday Island on the last leg of their seven-year overseas tour were aborted when it was found that 'the [Queensland] authorities would not let the horses land from Java'. Instead, the Wirths shipped for Singapore and then trans-shipped for Fremantle.⁴⁷ In 1906, the visiting English circus of Bostock & Wombell made plans for a tour of Queensland and incurred 'great expense' in advertising throughout 'this district' [sic]. However, a tick plague led to the cancellation of the planned visit.⁴⁸

Although the coastal rail line reached the major coastal ports of Bundaberg (1881), Gladstone (1897) and Rockhampton (1903), it was 1924 before Cairns was reached without interruption. For a large touring circus, such as Eroni Bros, this was a major inconvenience:

You could only go as far north in the early days as Gladstone. They had a dead end there because you couldn't move, no trains, no roads.⁴⁹

Circus proprietors were at least vaguely aware of their position in relation to each other as well as to other travelling entertainments and methodically avoided competition by servicing areas overlooked by other companies:

occasionally a circus would go to New Zealand and disappear from the Australia scene. This would allow somebody else to make a tour of Queensland who normally couldn't make it.⁵⁰

Apart from coastal sugar and interior pastoral development, the principal factors to drive circus touring were gold and population growth, neither of which were exclusive of each other. In 1866, Queensland lacked any

‘good’ goldfields but within a decade ‘a chain of rich goldfields ran parallel to the Pacific Ocean for nearly a thousand miles’.⁵¹ The population not only grew but also urbanised and was enriched ‘by the web of commerce that gold spun’.⁵² Gold either established or magnified in importance the towns along the Queensland coast as far north as Cooktown and eventually Normanton. Gold was the ‘magnet’ that spurred Ashton northwards to Charters Towers in 1873. The goldfield proclaimed only the previous year was Australia’s ‘great gold town’ by 1886.⁵³

Touring the colony for a third time in 1873, Ashton’s visit was given prominent attention by the *Australian Town & Country Journal*. From Clermont, where there was ‘very little in the way of amusements ... except billiard playing and other games attached to a public saloon’, a correspondent wrote:

[Ashton’s] cavalcade consisted of 12 buggies, carriages and other conveyances, with fully 30 horses, and you imagine how the people, and especially the young folks, look upon them with admiring wonder ... [A] large measure of success has followed Mr Ashton’s efforts to provide innocent amusement for all classes. In these remote districts this is a benefit which dwellers in cities can hardly appreciate ... During the sojourn of the troupe here no less than 600 persons attended nightly (I am including Copperfield), and the profits must have been considerable, judging from the amount of admission, which was 6s and 4s. I understand that Mr. Ashton cleared over £800 in less than three weeks. While here he gave several benefits for public institutions, the proceeds of which realised something



Drawing of Ashton’s Circus in Clermont, 1873.

(Picture Queensland Collection, State Library of Queensland)

like £160. At Maryborough he was presented with a handsome gold watch and albert, worth £40, and at Rockhampton a silver jug. His testimonials are numerous, and wherever he has been the press has spoken very highly indeed of his liberality. The troupe left here for Charters Towers, a distance of 300 miles northwards, with the good wishes of Clermont and Copperfield. The ... weather is beautiful, plenty of grass and water everywhere. The district as a whole is in a flourishing condition.⁵⁴

Ever since he travelled overland from Port Philip to Sydney in 1849 with his little equestrian troupe, Ashton vigilantly explored new territory to open up new circus routes. In Queensland, Ashton and others steadily pushed northwards with their circus activities.⁵⁵

Settlement	Estab	First known circus	Visit
Gayndah	1848	Ashton's	1860
Clermont	1855	Ashton's	1860
Maryborough	1847	Ashton's	1861
Gladstone	1847	Ashton's	1861
Mackay	1862	Ashton's	1873
Charters Towers	1872	Ashton's	1873
Bowen	1861	Ashton's	1873
Townsville	1864	St Leon's	1876
Cooktown	1873	Great Asiatic	1876
Cairns	1876	St Leon's	1885
Normanton	1868	Woodyear's	1886

Returning to New South Wales with '25 performers and a fine stud of horses' by way of Brewarrina and Bourke, a correspondent for the *Maitland Mercury* was 'favoured with a glance' of Ashton's diary, kept during three years' travelling Queensland. It was:

a most interesting manuscript, recounting as it does the chequered events of the player's life, and extending to the most remote northern settlements of that colony. What Belphegor and Grimaldi have been to old world biography, Ashton should be to colonial biographers in the same line.⁵⁶

Alas, Ashton's diary has been lost.

If gold and population spurred circus activity in Queensland northwards, pastoral expansion in the interior gradually pulled circus activity westwards into the interior.⁵⁷

Settlement	Estab	First known circus	Visit
Roma	1862	Ashton's [?]	1868
Blackall	1868	Benhamo's	1882
St George	1846	Benhamo's	1883
Tambo	1860	St Leon's	1887
Charleville	1865	St Leon's	1887
Barcaldine	1886	St Leon's	1887
Winton	1876	St Leon's	1894

In 1884, the fledgling Wirth Bros Circus travelled central Queensland, and entertained in towns such as Tambo, Blackall, Barcaldine and Longreach. One of the Wirth brothers later wrote:

This was well out in the west, where men are men, and women are women – whatever their means. At any rate, the people of western Queensland, far out on the open, rolling plains, are the most hospitable, open-handed, open-minded folk I have met.⁵⁸

However, not all encounters with the folk of outback Queensland were as friendly. Touring the state about 1927, the people of Perry Bros Circus had the following experience:

[We] came to a mining town. It could have been Ipswich or Gympie ... There had been some disturbance with the tent hands and the miners during the



A large circus tent, possibly belonging to Perry Bros, photographed at Roma about 1934. The tent is still to be dressed with the canvas sidewalls.

(Picture Queensland Collection, State Library of Queensland)

day in a pub. There had been a fight. There were quite a lot of fights between the townspeople and the circus people. Apparently the tent hands had beaten up these miners. The miners got their friends together and said they were going to do the circus over, after the show ... Sure enough, when the circus finished with the high jumping horses, the people in the audience, who were mostly miners, pulled out their sticks, weapons and chains and were about to start attacking the circus and doing damage like rooting up the tent and things like that. So the Perry boys armed the elephants. They put chains in the elephants trunks and let the elephants loose. Then they mounted all the people who could ride on to the horses and gave them chains also. They rode through the middle of these miners and dispersed them in no time.⁵⁹

By the early 1900s, the large Wirth circus made tours of Queensland by its own 'special' train almost every year. Single rail lines were constructed inland from Brisbane, Rockhampton and Townsville to reach, respectively, Charleville (1887), Longreach (1892) and Winton (1899). For circuses willing to negotiate the logistics involved, these westward lines increased inland touring possibilities. A circus could play by rail to the end of one line, then take to the road to reach another line by which to return to the coast. A large circus, Perry Bros relied on both forms of transport when touring Queensland in the late 1920s:

The railroads in Queensland starting from say, Townsville, go due west, or they go from Rockhampton due west. So if you had a town to play, you'd take the show on the train. The train would pull into a siding. You'd take to roads again and play two or three towns and come back to the train.⁶⁰

Forced to cease travelling because of wartime travel restrictions, the Bullen circus family closed their circus at Yeppoon, outside Rockhampton, in 1942 only to find thousands of American GIs camped in the vicinity with both money and spare time. In canvas sidewalls, the Bullens entertained the troops, several times a day, and amassed the fortune necessary to finance their return to active touring after the end of World War II:

[It] was 25 miles from Yeppoon [*sic*] to Rockhampton ... the camps went from A to Z ... [each camp] used to fill the big top ... Oh they were very good people to work to ... [but] they had a couple of MPs at the front door and a couple of MPs at the back door to see them off the location ... It was all through the war ... We had trucks when the war was on but see we didn't have to move very far, you know, to get to the next camp. We'd stay a week in one camp.⁶¹

Without sufficient road or rail systems to service the centres of population, the viability of the towns along the Queensland coast as far north as Cooktown and eventually Normanton, depended on shipping access. From the 1850s, Australia's economic expansion encouraged the development of coastal shipping services. At the forefront was the

Australasian Steam Navigation Company which, by the 1870s, operated a network that stretched from Northern Queensland to Western Australia.⁶² When touring Queensland, circus companies relied on coastal shipping services to an extent not noted elsewhere in Australian circus touring. At least until the early 1920s, coastal shipping was the only means by which circus companies could systematically reach the major ports along the Queensland coast and avoid tough and protracted overland travel and discontinuous rail lines.

Although some colonial companies such as Burton's had used Queensland's coastal shipping services in the 1860s, the visits of the large American circuses popularised the practice. The Californian showman, John Wilson, arrived in Rockhampton in 1876 with his Great San Francisco Palace Circus & Roman Hippodrome, entering Keppel Bay by the *Lady Bowen* 'with a discharge of cannon and the music of the band'. Another large American circus, Cooper, Bailey & Co., (later known as Barnum & Bailey), called in to Queensland's coastal ports as far north as Cooktown in 1877 en route to Java.⁶³

As musicians, dancers, boxers and circus performers, the Perry family were amongst Australia's earliest entertainers. After selling their hotel, the family of WG 'Bill' Perry started with their own circus from Northampton Downs, between Tambo and Blackall in 1889. Later, they assumed the promotional name of Eroni Bros.⁶⁴ They engaged the Sole family and a 'really good brass band'; and announced their presence in country towns by playing musical selections while driving the band around the streets in the afternoon.⁶⁵ By 1900, Eroni Bros Monster Circus, Menagerie & Wild Beast Show comprised 150 horses – 'three times more horses than any other circus in Australia' – 35 wagons and 12 cages of wild beasts.⁶⁶ The following year, Eroni Bros played Melbourne to big business but then left a lot of money behind when old Bill Perry suddenly decided to close the season: 'Too much noise here', he complained. The Perrys preferred to show 'where a high collar did not matter'.⁶⁷ As early as 1914, the Perry family began to fragment when James Perry, one of the younger sons of WG Perry, left Eroni Bros to form his own circus. Reverting to the original family name, his Perry Bros Circus was, by the late 1920s, Australia's largest after Wirth Bros, and a frequent visitor to Queensland.⁶⁸ Perry Bros Circus was one of the first Australian circuses to forsake horses and wagons for motor transport. Perry Bros moved on AEC and Vulcan solid-tyre trucks from about 1924 and used primitive, steel-rimmed tractors for haulage purposes.



Tent shows on Quay Street, Bundaberg, at the edge of the Burnett River, during show week, June 1935. The three circular tents belong to two circuses, possibly, Sole Bros (left) and Perry Bros (the menagerie tent in front and main circus tent behind). The Sole and Perry families were cousins, the progeny of WG Perry who commenced travelling Queensland with his circus in 1889. The rectangular tents (designed to hold a theatre stage at one end) belong to the vaudeville shows. The larger one in the centre of the picture is probably that of the popular George Sorlie.

(Picture Queensland Collection, State Library of Queensland)

Early in 1942, as US General Douglas MacArthur set up his headquarters in Lennon's Hotel, the once-mighty Perry Bros Circus showed in a one-pole tent around Brisbane. Circus man Mervyn King remembered:

We got no money around Brisbane. The blackouts came and you had to make sure there was [*sic*] no lights showing on your tent. People didn't fancy coming out in the blackouts anyhow. You had to put brown paper over the headlights of your vehicles. It was getting a bit more serious than what it really was. A lot of American soldiers used to come to see the show however, twenty or thirty Americans sometimes. There were certain areas of Brisbane where it was out of bounds to whites or out of bounds to blacks. In the city, the white soldiers would walk one side of the street and the Negroes would walk the other side. South Brisbane was always a pretty wild part of the city. The ladies of the night worked over that side. It was a bad place to be after dark ... The army commandeered three of Perry's semi-trailers. They just came and said, "We're taking those trucks", and that was it. They paid something for them but only a second-hand truck value. So we had to battle around without them and eventually finish up. When the army came and took a few of the young men from Perry's there weren't enough left to run the circus. What was left of Perry's Circus went out to Texas and camped.⁶⁹

On 22 August 1876, the first Queensland Intercolonial Exhibition, now the Royal Queensland Show, was held on its present site at Bowen Park.⁷⁰ Co-incidentally or not, two circus companies were present for at least a part of the season. These were Wilson's San Francisco Palace Circus, an

American company, and Hiscock & Watkins' Great Asiatic Circus & Royal Tycoon Troupe of Japanese.⁷¹ The 'exhibition' became an annual event and provided a rationale for all manner of itinerant shows to converge on the capital. Typically thereafter, at least one large circus, and in some years, two or three, converged on Brisbane each August, whether at the beginning or the conclusion of their respective tours of the colony [state]. The capital was therefore a key positioning point for circus and other itinerant shows intending to undertake a tour of Queensland's coastal ports and interior regions.

For the smaller provincial circuses relying on horse-drawn wagons that typically covered no more than 30 to 40 kilometres a day, routes and favoured playing areas were well-travelled by the late 1800s. One of the most extraordinary and financially rewarding – a so-called 'goldmine' of Australian show business – ran almost the entire length of Australia's eastern seaboard, from Bega on the south coast of New South Wales, through the prosperous districts of the Northern Rivers and the Darling Downs, to finish as far north as Cairns. Shows of all descriptions – circus, variety, buckjumping and so on – positioned in Bega in the summer and then rolled northwards for the winter before turning inland to make the return journey southwards through central Queensland.⁷²

May Wirth

In 1894, Abell & Klaer's Great European Circus – recently arrived from India – worked down the coast of Queensland from Townsville to Brisbane and then to Sydney and Melbourne. Dezeppo Marie, the wife of Abell & Klaer's 'lightning' Mauritian gymnast, Johnny Zinga, gave birth to a daughter, May, in Bundaberg in June 1894. Some years later, when her parent's marriage collapsed, May Zinga was adopted by the Wirth family and trained in the circus arts. She took the name of 'Wirth' and by 1911, the 17-year-old was the principal equestrienne in Wirth's Circus. Appearing in Sydney with Wirth's that year, she was 'a remarkably pretty girl who rode and drove eight ponies and turned somersaults on a cantering grey'.⁷³ A year later, the Bundaberg girl made her debut in Barnum & Bailey's Circus in Madison Square Garden, New York. May Wirth's international career as 'the world's greatest lady bareback rider' was thus launched:

May Wirth was by far the biggest and best attraction the circus ever had ... [She] did more tricks atop a galloping circus horse than all of Genghis Khan's cavalry.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Circus was a major element of a larger itinerant entertainment industry that supplied regional Australia with professional amusement before the



The 'world's greatest lady bareback rider', Bundaberg-born May Wirth (1894-1978) executes her famous 'back across', throwing a back somersault from the first horse to another running in tandem behind, at practise outside Barnum & Bailey's Circus, USA, 1913.

(Photograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin, USA, BBK-np-WthM-30)

emergence and unrelenting evolution of electronic media. Despite its remoteness from the major areas of colonial settlement of southeastern Australia, its limited population and paucity of infrastructure, Queensland held its own attractions as a destination for circus touring with a warm climate, welcoming people and economic prosperity sparked by pastoral and mining expansion. Circus and other itinerant entertainments increasingly negotiated the challenges of distance and logistics to take their entertainments 'up north' and Queensland was increasingly integrated into the wider touring circuits that supplied Australasia with entertainment well into the twentieth century.

Endnotes

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