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THE CIRCUSIANA MAGAZINE

Hall of Fame Report

BY JOSEPH T. BRADBURY

From the Circus Hall of Fame in Sarasota Dr. H. C. Hoyt, the genial curator, who is affectionately called by his friends, "Doc," sends the following report on the current situation at the Hall of Fame.

The Hall of Fame has been kept open continuously this winter. A special evening affair was held in December with city officials, motel, and hotel officials, and stockholders in attendance in which the new acts performed. A good crowd was on hand and the new acts were well received.

Currently there are four tours and four performances a day. Acts performing include The Montons and Carmen Rosita, doing single and double trapeze, wire walking and novelty balancing act. Paul and Anna Fritz work three chimps (owned by the Hall of Fame) and a dog in an act that is always good. Ivanhov works in a comedy horizontal bar act. Weldy's bear act with four bears worked by a young lady complete the show. Clowns include Coco, Victor, and Bobo, from the Mills Bros. Circus, and George Weedon, also of the Mills show, is at the Hammond organ.

Several changes in layout have taken place recently. The first bay in the Bradna building has been rearranged for the "Awardees" as elected by the special committee. All awardees will be shown in 11 x 14 photos and a biographical sketch is included in satin lined cases. The exhibit cases will be roped off with plush rope and brass standards to give distinction to the room.

The wood carving exhibit has been changed to include about 20 of the redecorated sunburst wheels and the parade bay has been changed to include the Wally Smith miniature circus layout which includes a "cut away" big top with performers inside.

The West building where the wagons are located has been arranged with a picture gallery of wagons and old parade pictures. All photos are 11 x 14 and include many rare pictures of the old time parade vehicles.

The connection between the East building and arena has been set up with a set of pictures named Circus Vignette of Yesteryear. A new work shop has also been established here.

Many new photos have been added to the picture exhibit. All are now standardized in 11 x 14 and have been greatly improved by the addition of gold lettered captions which are easily read, brief, and to the point.

Restored carvings now include Columbia, An Indian Girl, and Dancing Girl, from the old Ringling Bros. United States Bandwagon, and soon to be added is an Indian Boy with bow and arrow. Two half busts of Ubangis, bust of Alfredo Codona and others are now complete and soon to be completed is a model of Ringling's first wagon which will be placed along side a model of the seat wagons in the glass case.

Major restorations of old circus vehicles recently completed include the following as depicted by the numbered illustrations.

Photo No. 1 shows the display of some 30 sunburst wheels recently restored by Doc Hoyt. The wheels have been moved indoors of course. The display is said to be the largest collection of authentic circus wagon wheels anywhere, and came from such collectors as Col. B. J. Palmer, who also donated the Two Hemispheres Bandwagon to the Hall of Fame, from Dr. H. C. Hoyt, an old time "Wheelrite striker" in his early days, and from others. Some wheels were rebuilt from parts obtained at Ringling-Barnum quarters in Sarasota. Several wheels were without tires and this constituted a problem since no

(Continued on Page 4)

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Photo No. 3—Dr. H. C. Hoyt, Curator, Circus Hall of Fame standing beside old circus chariot he recently restored

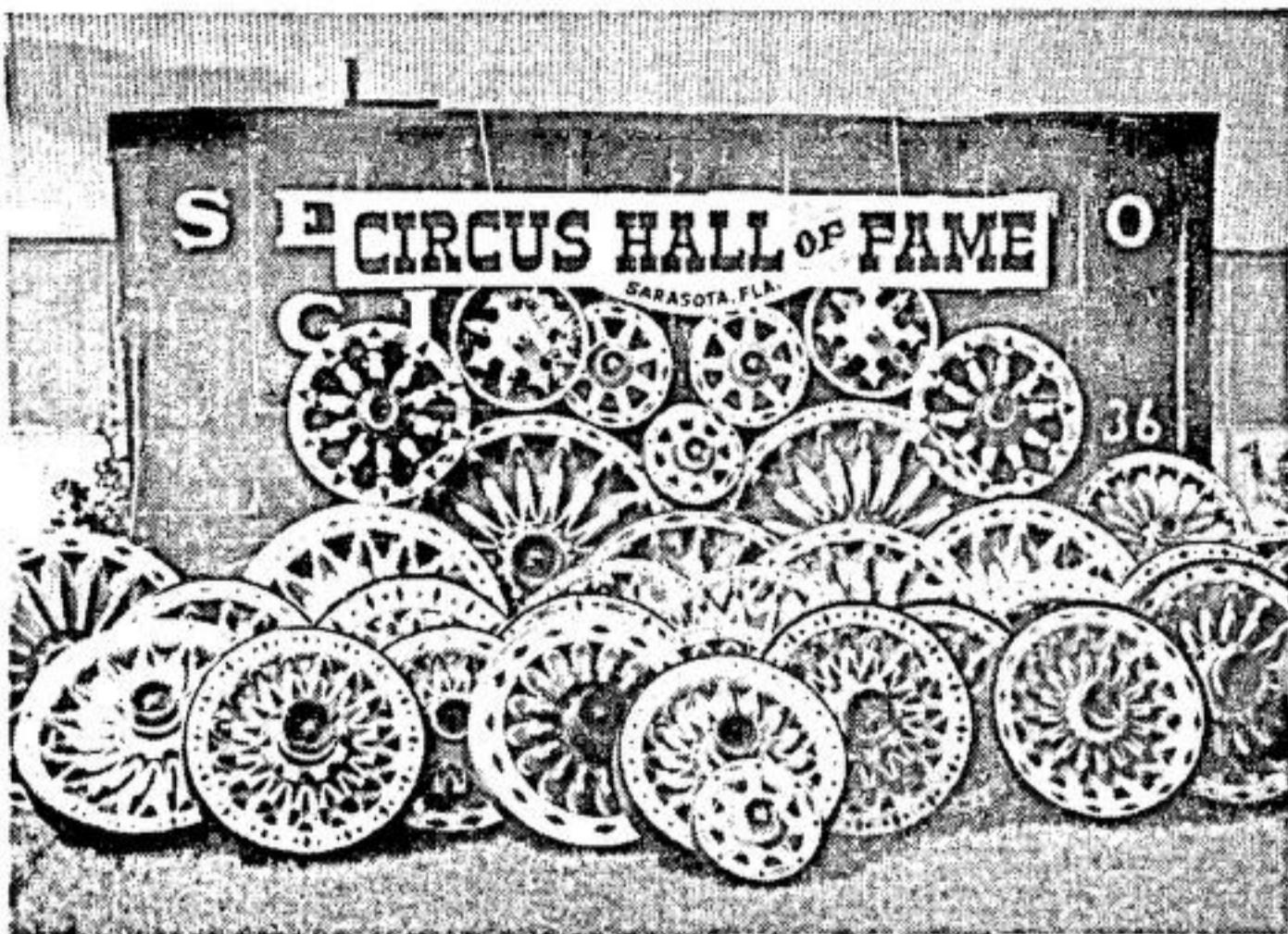


Photo No. 1—Group of old Sunburst Wheels restored by Dr. H. C. Hoyt at Circus Hall of Fame.

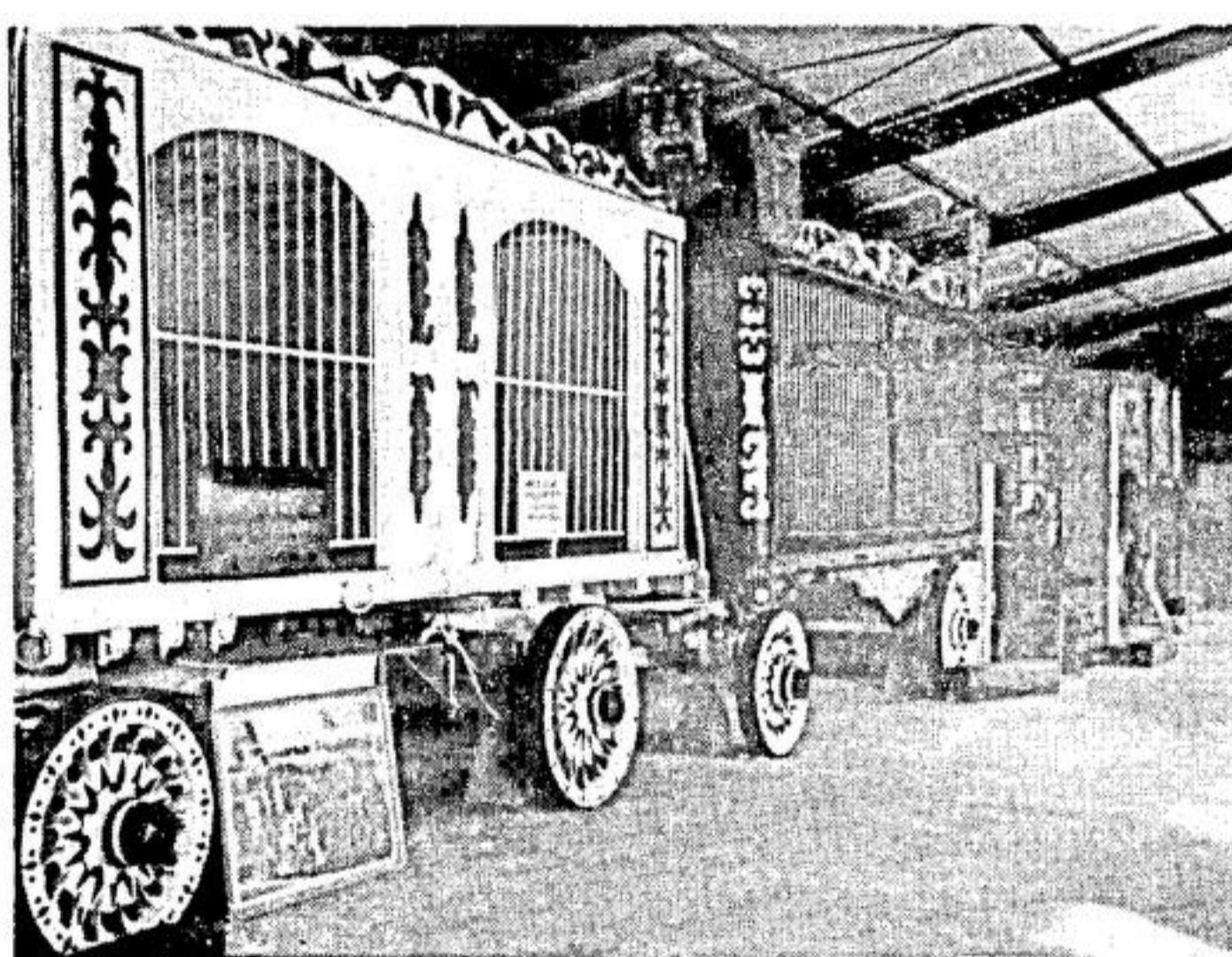


Photo No. 2—Cage Wagon built from old Ringling-Barnum No. 110 light plant. No. 74 cage on right.



Collection of Dr. H. C. Hoyt



Photo by Dr. H. C. Hoyt

Photo No. 4—"Italian Caravan," recently restored European circus van.

HALL OF FAME REPORT (Cont.)

adequate forge facilities were available. However, steel tires have now been placed on all and to all appearances the wheels are perfect for museum purposes. Here a great deal of preparatory work was involved. Old paint was removed to the wood and rotted places eliminated by excavation, after which prolonged treatment with Vitrol wood preservative was given to insure long life for the remaining elements of the wheel. Epoxy Barrier, a marine plastic product has been used in abundance. This hardens like iron and will not shrink and takes paint well also. Fiberglass and iron wood putty have played an important part in the restoration. As to the decorative design a simple diamond and circle was used largely as this design gives a good appearance on rough surfaces but where the surface rim was reasonably smooth a chain link design was used. Four colors predominate using conventional paints, such as Ringling Red No. 42, and marine blue and white. The yellow used is a latex industrial which gives a fine durable sheen that stands up well. No gold leaf was used on the wheels as it was in limited supply. The true sunburst design is employed always on a panel filled wheel. This means that the effect is a wheel within a wheel effect obtained by the series of concentric circles created by the different color design emanating from the central hub and expanding in larger areas as the outer perimeter is reached. This is the true sunburst.

A mere longitudinal decoration on the between spoke panel is not a correct sunburst. It is this arrangement of circles that gives the completed wheel its pleasing beauty as it turns. The colors seem to radiate as a moving kaleidoscope until they are cut off by the rim of the wheel. This seemingly radiation movement is an optical illusion spoken of in the Bible, Ezekiel 1:16. Zeke saw the WHEEL as it appeared as a "wheel within a wheel." He saw movement in the wheel that he couldn't understand so he said the wheel ran by the power of God. What Ezekial

saw you have seen in old time movies where the wheels seem to be running backward on a wagon going the opposite direction. It is this optical illusion that makes the sunburst wheel so noticeably beautiful in movement. Try it with a wheel sometime. The effect is uncanny. Many of the early wheels in the circus were decorated with the so called Rosette decoration. This device had its beauty points but not like the sunburst. Then the rosette was always getting broken as the wheel went into ruts and mud. Doc Hoyt

concludes his above essay on wheels, "I may be crazy, but Ezekiel saw what we are talking about and because he couldn't understand the meaning of the optical phenomenon he attributed it to a higher Being. Wheels are an obsession to me. I love them and have carted several around for years. To me they are man's greatest invention. It is basic in all industry." Those of us who have seen a color print of the Hall of Fame sunburst wheel collection can vouch for the tremendous beauty of them.

Photo No. 2 depicts a cage wagon built by the Hall of Fame from the old Ringling-Barnum No. 110 light plant wagon. It is not an authentic restoration as Doc Hoyt readily admits and no one is deceived into thinking it is, but use has been made of an old wagon which was in such a rotten condition its value would have been nil unless some design changes were made. The old light plant wagon was converted into a cage wagon of similar design of many typical railroad show cages. It is painted white with gold leaf designs on the skyboard and splash board, a color scheme used by Sells-Floto The Circus Beautiful in the period of 1918-20. Equipped with sunburst wheels and wagon banners it has a real "circusey" look. It is true that some fans do not approve of making such modifications, but most fans fully understand the situation. What has happened is this. An old time circus wagon has not been "modernized" by replacing old steel tired wheels with pneumatics and modern gears, but actually just the re-

verse has occurred. A modern box type wagon already equipped with pneumatic tires, modern gears etc., which was in such foul condition that its worth was practically nothing, has been "aged" by replacing it with sunburst wheels and making it into a cage wagon of a design used by many circuses of the past. Herin lies a vast difference and as Doc says, "We exhibit it without any apology, for together with old Cage No. 74 we have captured in some measure the cavalcade of open dens that used to be such an important feature of the old time parade."

Photo No. 3 shows a restored chariot, representing the finest in wood carving. It is regretted that a color print can not be used here as the coloring, the jewels etc. are a sight to behold. All of the restorations mentioned here were completed by Doc Hoyt, who spent so many hours of work on them they cannot be counted. Details on the original construction of the chariot and its early history is lacking. It was acquired along with the Jenny Lind cutter, the Tom Thumb coach, and the several Spanish-American War ship models, that were carried as a patriotic exhibit on the Barnum & Bailey Show in 1903. This collection was owned by the late Sam Gumpertz who was manager of the Ringling-Barnum Circus from 1933 thru 1937. All of the items in the collection had a connection with P. T. Barnum, and Barnum & Bailey, and we can assume this chariot also had a like connection.

It was typical of many built for hippodrome races, specs, etc., once a feature with most circuses. The chariot itself needs only to be studied to see and appreciate its beauty and the degree of craftsmanship that designed and executed it. It was obviously built for speed and was well constructed. When received it was minus a pole and was carrying a heavy load of white lead from many paintings. So heavy was the lead that the depth of the carvings was completely lost. The lion's head on the front and the two half heads on the skirt were just blobs with carved features completely lost. Large jewels adorned the

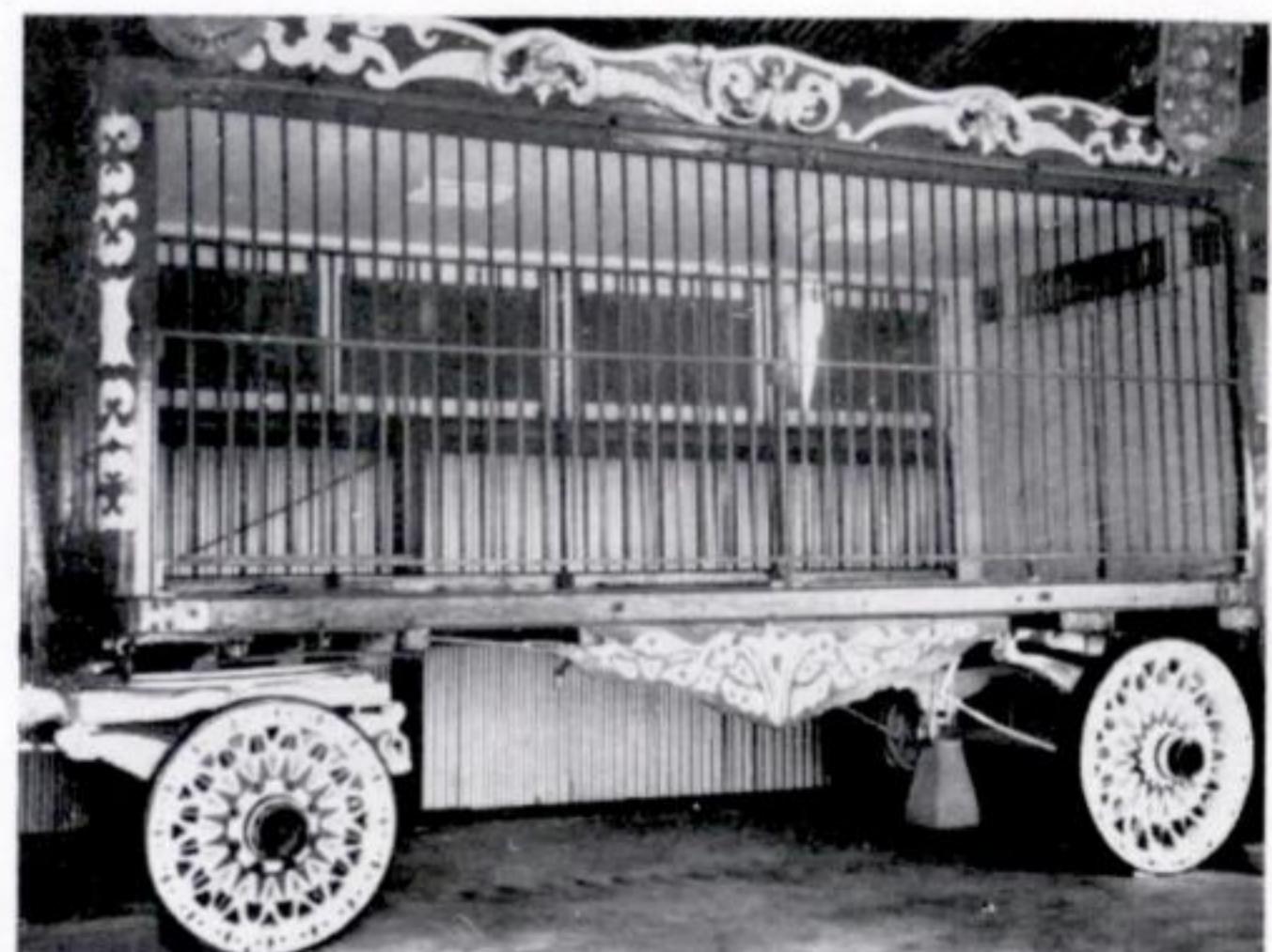


Photo by Dr. H. C. Hoyt
Photo No. 5—Ringling-Barnum No. 74 rhino cage.

belt and a series of multi-jewels were embeaded around the dash board. The whole was a decrepid looking affair when it arrived, in fact it was almost slated for the junk pile. Doc Hoyt tried every method he knew in an attempt to remove the hardened lead. Paint removers were of little help. Burning with torches worked too well, in order to get the heat into the deep spots he would risk burning the high spots and dull the carvings attempted to be saved. Chipping was excellent but dented the wood too easily. Finally the only way to do it was found, and that was to carve out the old paint. It was a painstaking task but was accomplished. Finally when it was completed and the new paint of red, white, blue, and gold was added the old chariot took on the appearance of a freshly constructed vehicle just out of the winter-quarters shops and ready for the road.

Photo No. 4 shows a recently restored European circus van, called a "Caravan." This caravan was built in Italy in 1911 for a Gypsy Family by the name of Negric, travelling as performers with a well known Italian Circus known as The Gerardi Circus. The caravan was lavishly fitted out as living quarters and for that day was a great attraction in itself. It travelled all over Italy for many years. During World War II Oscar Konyot, working with the show with a lion act, sold his act to the circus and took the caravan as part of the deal.

He rebuilt the inside to accomodate some of the animal actors and two bunks for trainers. The outside was repainted and the name of Oscar Konyot appearing in large letters and a picture of a lion's head decorated the sides. In 1949 Oscar Konyot came to the U. S. to be with the Ringling show and brought the caravan with him. Since it didn't fit into the loading scheme of the Ringling show it was never used here, but found a parking space at winter quarters where it remained in a state of progressive deterioration until the winter quarters were abandoned in 1959. During the period mentioned a grass fire singed the caravan blistering its paint and weakening the floor and creating a situation that left it open to almost complete destruction by rust and weather. Marked for the scrap pile with its sides and roof hanging in shreds it was a woe begone piece of forgotten equipment. The Hall of Fame took it over on the recommendation of Doc Hoyt, its curator, who alone undertook the task of reconstruction. The outside has been completely restored, and handsomely painted in red, green, white, and gold. The inside is being carefully restored from details of pictures of similar deluxe caravans and from first hand descriptions of those familiar with old country caravans. The wagon is typical of those used in many European circuses at the present time.

Photo No. 5 shows an authentic restor-

ation of Ringling-Barnum Cage No. 74. It is now complete with exception of a new floor which will soon be installed. The wagon is painted red with carvings and painted designs done in silver. It has been equipped with cage banners and sunburst wheels. The date the wagon was originally constructed is somewhat obscure. Probably it was built at Bridgeport quarters in the early or mid 20's for Ringling-Barnum. In a 1932 equipment list, No. 74 was used to carry a rhino. That year the show had two, Bill and Lilly, both African rhinos. By 1935 both had died and the show did not acquire another rhino until Bobby was purchased from the Brookfield Zoo about 1945. After the death of the rhinos the cage was used to carry polar bears and in a 1939 menagerie list it shows polar bears as the contents for cage No. 74. Also by 1939 the wagon had been equipped with pneumatic tires and modern gears. The cage no doubt was used to house polar bears until it was retired following the 1947 season. When acquired it still had a Florida 1947 license plate attached to it.

Other exhibits as mentioned in earlier reports such as the Two Hemispheres Bandwagon, the Sig Sautelle chariot bandwagon, the dozen old baggage wagons obtained from Ringling-Barnum etc., are still prominent features of the Circus Hall of Fame.

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