

Circus Songsters

by admin

By A. Morton Smith, Hobbies, January, 1947, p. 26.. Information should be checked with additional sources.

The motion picture short subject of today which appeals for audience participation in the singing of popular songs, and the street salesman who offers booklets containing the words of current song hits, had their counterparts in the circus of four score years ago.

In Civil War days, the circus in America was strictly a one-ring affair and seats were arranged to circle the hastily thrown up dirt ring.

Because of the intimacy of the arena, the singing clown was a popular circus figure and the musically inclined joey was much better paid for his services than the ordinary fun-maker who depended upon cracking jokes with the ringmaster and pantomime to provoke hilarity.

Many of these singing clowns composed their own songs, mostly of the comic variety, and they were advertised as outstanding features of the shows with which they traveled.

Some of these clowns made an important part of their routine, the leading of the audience in the singing of songs. And such a procedure provided an opportunity to sell little pamphlets known as songsters through the crowds, thus providing spectators with the words to be sung.

The songster contained the words of popular numbers of the day, just as the songsters sold on street corners by peddlers today contain the words of current song hits.

The songster concession in the circus in the early days was as valuable as the popcorn or lemonade sales, and often a clown received a commission on his sales as the only recompense for his services to the show.

By far the best known and most famous of the singing clowns was Dan Rice, who is said to have received \$25,000 for a single season. He made his songs particularly popular wherever he made an appearance because of his knack of localizing the numbers, using the names of persons in the community for his comic verse and composing lyrics which had to do with national affairs of the day.

Most collectors of circusiana have a place for songsters, but they are among the scarcer items, despite the fact they were sold in quantities of many thousands annually over a long period of years. It is possible that the uniformly poor grade of paper on which they were printed, which deteriorated rapidly, caused them to drop out of souvenir collections and is the explanation of why more are not in circulation today.

These little booklets were in a variety of sizes, content and makeup.

One of the smallest we have seen was the W. W. Cole Circus Songster of the 80's, which measured 4x6 inches in size and contained 32 pages with approximately the same number of songs.

Its title was "W. W. Cole's Equestrian Songster," and it was said to contain "a choice selection from the best songs ever published, sentimental and humorous, also including a large number of new and original songs written and sung by Ernest, the famous English clown," whose picture appeared on the cover. Al Richards was proprietor of privileges, and had charge of the songster sales.

Most of the songs in the little volume were credited to W. T. Sears, while uncredited numbers were probably the work of Ernest. Others were listed as songs sung by Clowns Billy Andrews and Charley Adams, and the

“original” Georgia Minstrels.

Contrasting with this booklet in size and date of issuance, is the Hagenbeck-Wallace Songster, published in 1915, measuring 10×13 inches in size and containing 16 pages. Typical of the sheet music of that day, the cover bore a bareback rider on a horse as the central figure of the design, and so arranged that titles of other shows could have been and probably were imprinted so that the booklet could be distributed generally in circus arenas. In this pamphlet were words and music of eight songs, the words of a number of others and jokes and conundrums, the booklet having been published by a popular music publishing company in New York.

Songsters continued in vogue through the middle 20's, and in the later years, some of the circuses had their programs printed in them, making them more valuable to the circusiana collector.

Some of the songsters, like the Forepaugh booklet of the late 70's contained the show owner's photograph on the cover and a biographical sketch of him in the introductory pages. In addition to the words of numerous songs, this booklet contained the advertisements of a patent medicine company, which probably financed the printing of the book.

Another songster, entitled “A Collection of Favorite Songs as Sung by Ben Maginley, the clown and jester of the Great Consolidation,” also contained advertisements of a score of patent medicine companies, and was 64 pages in size, with words of 40 to 60 songs included.

Some of the circuses which sold songsters, did not employ singing clowns, but offered the booklets merely as another concession and to keep pace with their competitors in offering souvenirs.

So far as this writer knows, no attempt has been made to list all of the published circus songsters, which were particularly numerous in the “golden age of circuses,” from 1880 to 1900, but among the shows, together with their singing clowns, are the following: Great London, Johnny Patterson; Adam Forepaugh, Sam Long; Walter L. Main, Fred Runnels; John Robinson, John Lowlow; Bamum & Bailey and Howes Great London. There was also a songster, published by a New York firm, known as “The Great Circus Royal Songster,” which several circuses that did not issue booklets under their own title, sold to their patrons.