

## "BARNEY CARROLL"

by Stuart Thayer

William B. Carroll, known as "Barney" for most of his days, died in Westchester County, New York on July 14, 1889. He was seventy-three years old and had retired eleven years earlier. His last season was 1878, in which he acted as a ringmaster for Adam Forepaugh. <sup>THE</sup> Two years before that he was still in the ring, doing a riding act for the Van Ambourgh Menagerie and Circus at the age of sixty. And had a lip cancer not disfigured him he might have ridden for several more years. Carroll felt that he couldn't appear in public with his ailment, so he turned to training others in the art of riding.

He was born in 1816 and left his father's farm in Tennessee at the age of twelve to join a circus. If this account is accurate Carroll had a career of fifty years, more than the life expectancy of a nineteenth century man. His only rival in that category would appear to be Samuel P. Stickney. Because the early years of any performer's life <sup>are</sup> is difficult to document, we can't be sure just when these men were first on the scene. Stickney, for instance, initially appears in advertising in 1824, but must have had a year or two as an unheralded apprentice before then. Generally speaking, the smaller the circus the earlier a performer would appear in ads, as a small show wanted many names in their program, so as to appear as grand as possible.

Barney Carroll signed on as a groom with a small company, the title of which is unknown to us. In his obituary in the *New York Clipper* this was in 1826; the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* has it in 1828. He was apprenticed to the rider George Sweet in either 1830 or 1831. Since Sweet and Carroll were the same age, this seems to be misinformation. Perhaps Sweet's accepted birthdate, from several sources, of 1816 was actually earlier. Sweet was a pupil of John Rogers, father of the famous Charles J. Rogers, and had been riding since 1823.

In any event, Carroll appeared on the roster of the Yeaman Circus, owned by Asa T. Smith, in 1831. He was fifteen years-old and performed a bareback act. "Master Carroll, will turn a back somersault from his horse," said the ads. This was done from the horse to the ground; it was not a somersault on the horse, which was fifteen years in the future.

Neither Carroll nor Sweet are on any roster we have for 1832. Sweet rode for Nathan Howes in 1833, but Carroll was not mentioned by that show. That doesn't mean he wasn't present, of course. The next evidence of him is his name in the notices for French, Hobby & Co.'s Menagerie and Circus. Since this troupe was on the road in the southeastern states in the winter of 1834-35, as well as the summer tour on either side Carroll was probably with them in both seasons. Here he did a scenic act, "Soldier's Leave of Absence," a dumb-show on horseback illustrating the arrival home of a soldier on furlough. George Sweet was not with the company nor did the two men ever appear together again. This, combined with the fact that Carroll was not listed as "Master Carroll" leads us to believe that his apprenticeship had ended.

He was then successively employed by Joseph Palmer, Noel E. Waring, and Ludlow & Smith. Sometime in 1840 he married fifteen year-old Mary Ann Spragg, a native of New York State. Her father, John Spragg, may have been a circus man. We find a clown named John Sprague on the 1838 H.H. Fuller circus and the 1839 J.W. Stocking show. Since Mary Ann did not appear in advertising until 1843, we assume Barney taught her to ride.

D.R. Lines & Co.'s Philadelphia Circus and Menagerie promoted Carroll to the position of equestrian director in 1842, a sign of his competence. He switched to the Welch & Delavan circus in mid-season when Raymond (who owned the Lines troupe) disbanded the circus portion, replacing it with Herr Driesbach's lion act. It was Welch & Delavan that presented the largest winter show seen in America to that time. Twenty-one riders, all the best-known names in the business, were on the bill at the Park Theatre in New York in January and February, 1843.

That summer tour was with Rockwell & Stone. Carroll was doing a two-horse act by then, what we call Roman riding today. That winter, 1843-44, Mary Ann Carroll made her debut in show business as an entry rider for James Raymond's Olympic Circus. She did the same sort of thing for Spalding over the three subsequent years.

Barney next mastered the double somersault. Spalding billed him as "Mr. B. Carroll, the undaunted equestrian and great acrobatic wonder, who will throw a double somersault, turning twice in the

air before alighting, a feat never before accomplished by any person, and will be admitted to be the most daring feat ever witnessed in the world!"

This is an interesting claim, since Hiram Franklin is generally credited with performing the first double somersault from a standing position - as opposed to one from a springboard. Furthermore, Franklin first did it when he was with Raymond's Olympic Circus the same winter show of 1843-44 that the Carrolls were with. Did they learn it together? It is not unusual for athletes to extend themselves in competition one with another.

Just one season after Carroll was advertised by Spalding as above, Spalding was announcing that Henry Gardner of his troupe was the only man in the world turning a double from the ground. This may mean that Carroll was no longer doing the turn.

The 1840's saw a great flowering of new specialties in both riding and ground acrobatics. This may have come about because of heightened competition. The Panic of 1837 so decimated the business - all types of businesses - that the number of shows declined and therefore the number of jobs for performers. Only those who could compete with new skills were able to find work.

It was in 1845 that John J. Nathans introduced the act in which a small boy stood on his (Nathans') head while the horse raced around the circle. Prior to that, such "Flying Mercury" scenes had the boy standing on the rider's shoulders.

Barney Carroll copied Nathans' act in the same season, 1845, having Master Henry Jennings as his top mounter. Later, Master William Gardner was Carroll's partner. On July 4 in Detroit a firecracker frightened their horse which threw the riders. Young Gardner was considerably injured.

In 1846 Spalding advertised "W.B. Carroll the best single horse rider (without saddle or bridle) in the United States. He will leap banners, scarfs, etc., and conclude by carrying LaPetite Miss Madigan erect on his head, without the use of his hands, balancing the beautiful little creature in perfect safety, with his fleet steed Hamlet at swift pace..."

As for Mary Ann Carroll, she had progressed to a scenic act by this season and Spalding's writer described her as "the charming female equestrian in a fancy act of equitation, the Nymph of the Floating Scarf."

The contract between the Carrolls and G.F.Bailey & Co. is in the collection of the Ringling Museum in Sarasota. It is one of the few mid-century documents we have, and it makes interesting reading.

Their salary was \$140. per week. Sixty dollars was for Carroll, twenty dollars for Mrs.Carroll, fifty dollars for Marie, and ten dollars for the use of the leopard. Eighty dollars of this was to be paid to Mrs.Carroll, and "not otherwise," indicating that she and Barney separated their money.

Bailey agreed to furnish a groom, who was to be paid eighteen dollars a month; to pay the expenses of carrying the family - three adults, three children - from New York to Hillsboro, Ohio, the opening date. He was to furnish a span of horses for the family's transportation during the season, and, of course, feed and lodge them, their horses and the leopard.

Mrs.Carroll was not to be required to appear in more than two performances in any one day, nor more than twice in any performance, nor at night except in the grand entry.

The show would furnish a cage for the leopard and one of the two horses necessary to haul it. In addition, a separate carriage was to be provided for the use of W.B.Carroll.

The usual injury clause was included, which said that an injured performer would receive a week's salary while unable to work.

We draw the conclusion that the Carrolls were not getting along very well, given the separated salaries and transportation. We also venture to say that Mrs.Carroll was a woman who knew what she wanted.

The three children mentioned were Marie, of course, and two boys named William and Charles who, in the practise of the time, took their master's name during apprenticeship. William Carroll kept the name after he was his own man, and was in the business for many years.

In 1857 W.B.Carroll became a proprietor. He was then forty-one years old and had been performing for twenty-five years. The Antonio Brothers, the famous acrobatic troupe, had decided to start a circus, and they became Barney's partners. They called their new venture Antonio,Carroll & Co. Essentially the troupe was the five Carrolls and three Antonios. There were six other people and a band.

Scarf acts had been introduced from Europe only a short while by 1846; Marie Macarte was the best-known of practitioners of the art. Standing on the back of a running horse the equestrienne, using only a scarf or shawl for a prop, would present a variety of characters. In one review it was reported that Macarte imitated an Arabian maid, a pious nun, a French peasant girl, a Circassian slave, a Spanish senora and a fortune-telling gypsy. Each change was accompanied by different musical pieces, giving us a view of the versatility of the circus bands of the day.

The Carrolls went to other shows, beginning in 1847. They were with Seth B. Howes, June, Titus & Co., and Colonel Mann in the next three seasons. Mary Ann's younger brother, Levi Spragg, apprenticed himself to Barney for the 1849 tour with Mann, but does not seem to have persevered beyond then. We do not find his name again in a circus roster.

A second youngster joined the troupe for the 1849 tour by Col. Mann's Grand Canal Circus. This was another Mary Ann Spragg, a niece of Mrs. Carroll. Her father is listed in the family records as being either George or Daniel Spragg, it is not certain which. She was born in New York on November 12, 1844, so she was five years-old at her debut in the ring. She took Levi Spragg's place as the infant who stood on Barney's head in the riding act. A Kingston, Ontario newspaper described them in this way:

Mr. Carroll, as a two-horse rider, is unsurpassed; his wife is as graceful as she is bold and fearless; and their little girl is a perfect prodigy of talent and intrepidity. Standing on the head of her father, wholly unsupported, while he is riding his act, is a sight once seen never to be obliterated from memory. It is the most astonishing feat of the circle yet attempted. Mr. Carroll himself is second only to Levi J. North or Juan Hernandez.

Another unusual thing about little Marie Carroll was that she also entered the cage of a leopard. "Playing with and teasing that furious

animal," the ads said. This is almost unbelievable. The possibility exists that someone accompanied her into the cage. And the leopard, "Amenia," was a family pet, yet a six-year child is still pretty tender meat for a wild animal act. Marie performed with the cat for six years.

In 1850 Carroll leased his horses to Dan Rice, and the family toiled for the famous clown's show. Rice apparently couldn't keep up the payments for the horses so Carroll sold the lease to Spalding & Rogers and took his crew to that circus. Rice without the Carrolls, without the horses, proceeded to present what has since become famous as his "One-Horse Show." Spalding then advertised that his company included "most of the so-called Dan Rice Circus."

Spalding & Rogers had two circuses in 1851, one under C.J.Rogers' management, the other under Den Stone. The Carrolls were with the latter, and it appears that this was the first year in which Marie Carroll, at six, was presenting a riding act. If true, she was most likely riding a pony. The show described her as an eight year-old in her leopard act, "with her faithful dog Fidele entering a leopard's den, in fulfillment of the words of the Prophet Isaiah, "The Leopard shall lie down with the Kid, and a little child shall lead them." This bit of sanctimony had first been used in connection with Master Hayman, who was part of Van Amburgh's act in the early 1830's.

Family tradition has it that Marie's uncles wanted her brought up as a proper lady, not a circus performer, and that Barney and Mary Ann adopted her in order to forestall losing her. They had no children of their own. The only proof of this we have found is that when she married, in 1864, Marie used the name Mary Ann Carroll.

Eighteen-fifty-two was spent with Spalding & Rogers, 1853 with Mann, Moore & Co. We haven't located them in 1854. The next two seasons the family toured with George F. Bailey & Co. Barney was the equestrian director and rode a four-horse and a six-horse act. Mrs. Carroll was still presenting her scarf act. Marie was now advertised as entering a den of wild animals and displaying her indomitable courage, equal to the celebrated Van Amburgh. It sounds as if the leopard act had been supplemented, but we doubt that it was. In 1855 she was ten, still advertised as being eight. In 1856 they used her correct age.

Their route lay west from St.Louis into Missouri, Nebraska and Iowa. They were the first circus to appear in Omaha. They couldn't have chosen a worse time to start a business. The Panic of 1857 combined with inclement weather made sour music the entire season. The cost of horses and of feed rose, especially in the West, and it is possible no one made much money that year. However, only three shows appear to have been bankrupted. In any event, Antonio & Carroll did not go out in 1858. The Antonios became partners of J.W. Wilder, and the Carrolls signed on as employees.

Davis & Crosby's French and American Circus took to the road in 1859, and the five Carrolls were with it. We do not find them in 1860, and there is a good chance they were not performing. We know that in 1861 Carroll was operating a hotel in Westchester, New York, so he might have been at that task in 1860 as well. If his intention was to retire from the ring he failed, as in 1861 he was once again a partner in a field show, this time with Henry P.Madigan in Madigan & Carroll's Union Circus. The company was out only the one season.

We don't find the Carrolls in 1863 until late in the season. An October roster for Maginley & Van Vleck has Barney as equestrian director. The troupe worked its way from St.Louis to New Orleans where the Carrolls left it.

By March 1864 they were with Carey's Great World's Circus, one of the first shows to play New Orleans after its capture by Union forces. G.F.Bailey & Co. appear to have been the first to reach the city.

Marie Carroll was not with the family in 1863, riding instead for J.M.Nixon. On January 4 1864 she married Benjamin R.Maginley in Memphis using the name Marie E.Carroll. This must be proof that she had been adopted by her aunt. She was nineteen, Maginley was twenty-nine. He had been an actor and was to be one again after he left the circus business. Our earliest reference to him is when he was stage manager for the People's Dramatic Company of Cincinnati and Louisville in 1856. His 1863 circus, in which the rider Oliver Bell was a partner, seems to have been his initial circus connection. From the time of her marriage until her death in 1874 Marie rode for whatever show Maginley was with. Beginning in 1866 he was a clown, and he continued with comedy roles when he turned to the theatre. During the 1870's he acted in the winter and went under

canvas in the summer.

The Carrolls were with Marie and Ben Maginley in July 1864 on Maginley & Bell's Monitor Circus, which was then in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. This company was a continuation of the Maginley & Van Vleck operation of 1863. We haven't found any mention of the family in 1865, so we assume they were still together in that season.

The family were with Haight and Chambers in 1866. Barney was equestrian manager (i.e., in charge of the horse acts) and a two, four and six-horse rider. This was quite a schedule for a fifty year-old man. Mrs. Carroll and Marie were riders and Maginley clowned.

Marie was the star of the show, "whose grace, style, elegance and trepidity are beyond any rivalry." The New Orleans newspapers lauded her with:

There is but one Marie, and we never can expect  
to look upon her like again (Picayune)

Our city has gone Marie-mad, nor is it to be  
wondered at. Such grace, such skill, such  
witching horsemanship...is seen but once in  
a lifetime and then never forgotten (Southern Star).

From her pictures, we judge Marie to be a very pretty woman, and this was doubtless part of her attraction as a performer, yet there is no denying that she was very accomplished at dressage.

Carroll and his son-in-law framed Maginley & Carroll's Great Consolidated Circus in 1867. Maginley was general manager, Carroll the equestrian manager, and J.H.Owen the director. Owen was probably an investor. This seems to have been a "gilly" show. That the owners advertised it well cannot be doubted. The McGregor, Iowa paper said that the circus had built "a town of boards" to display their bills and that it alone was worth fifty-cents to see. In this season Marie was using the name Marie Elize, which she used for the remainder of her career. As an aside to this show in this season we must repeat what the *Clipper* claimed, which was that Maginley was afraid of the Indians so he wouldn't travel beyond Omaha.



Annie Carroll made her debut on Maginley & Carroll in 1868. She was a "bound" girl, according to the family genealogy, and served an apprenticeship until she was eighteen. We don't know her birth date. In 1869, on DeHaven's Circus, the family was advertised as W.B., Mrs., Naomi and Master Willie. Since Annie wasn't listed we don't know if Naomi was she or some other child plucked from an orphanage. In any event, it was Annie who rode standing on W.B.'s head just as Marie Elize had done so many years before.

Eighteen-seventy found the family on the John W. Robinson Circus, not to be confused with the original John Robinson. Willie and Annie were both present, Willie as a bareback rider.

The family was with the Empire City Circus in 1871 and the Great Eastern in 1872, 1873 and 1874. On the 1873 show they were all together again, as Ben Maginley was the manager, and, of course, Marie Elize was a rider. The children were Annie, Willie, Cornelia and Laura. In 1874 a new lad, Dolly Varden, joined the troupe.

Dolly Varden Carroll (1871-1955), named for the Dickens character in *Barnaby Rudge*, was not a girl as was the fictional character. Dolly (sometimes Dollie) was apparently a dwarf. He took on the task of standing on Carroll's head in the two-horse riding.

Ben Maginley was manager of and partner in Maginley & Co. Circus, Museum and Menagerie in 1874, accompanied, of course, by Marie Elize. He was manager of Melville, Maginley & Cook in 1875, then spent two seasons as a clown and, apparently, devoted himself exclusively to the theatre after that.

According to Dingess, Barney opened a riding school in Van Ness, New York in 1874. Van Ness was a stop on the Harlem River branch of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad. Other than Carroll's establishment it contained a reformatory. We find ads for the practise building in the *Clipper* in 1883.

Barney Carroll was equestrian director and a rider for Cameron's Grand Oriental Circus in 1875. Willie, Annie and Dolly Varden were with him. This outfit was framed in Boston by J.V. Cameron, who had been boss hostler on Maginley's 1874 show. The assumption has to be made that Cameron leased horses to Maginley; a boss hostler's wages were not of the magnitude to provide the capital for show business.

It was not unusual for a horse dealer to provide a circus with animals and then hire on to keep an eye on them. This was the method by which John V.O'Brien became interested in the circus.

Eighteen seventy-six found the Carrolls with Van Amburgh's Great Golden Menagerie, and 1877 with John H.Murray's Circus. On the latter, Carroll, still a viable athlete at sixty-one, did a two-horse and four-horse act. It was his last hurrah as a rider.

He served one more year, becoming equestrian director for Adam Forepaugh in 1878. As we said, he developed a disfiguring lip cancer and withdrew from public appearances. If not for that, he might have gone on for several years more. He was a consummate professional. The *New York Clipper* once said of him that he was always on time for work, and that he went straight home after the performance. That this was unusual must be assumed merely by its mention. After he retired he taught riding, mostly to amateurs.

Dingess' assessment of him reads, "Not only was he an artist of superior ability as an equestrian, but he taught and gave to the world many superior performers, among them two of his own daughters, Marie and Annie Carroll...as an equestrian manager he had few equals, and his two-horse carrying act with the little waif, Dolly Varden, was one of the most beautiful feats performed in the arena."

The only statement we have found from Carroll appears in the *Clipper* of 20 July 1889 in his obituary. "With (the Great Eastern Circus), as the deceased used to say sadly, began the demoralization of the business, so far as artistic work is concerned. The putting of two rings in the circus was the root of all evil. It made a big resplendant affair, but one in which the actors had no incentive to do fine work."

Annie, Willie and Dolly Varden all persevered in the business. Annie, who died in 1928, apparently used the name Sylvester later in her career.

Longevity as a performer, dedication to his work, and most importantly, honor from his contemporaries, would seem to signalize William B.Carroll's career. Today he is forgotten, which is why we wrote this piece. Our hope is that it will bring back to his name a bit of its former lustre.

Our thanks go to Rhoda-Glenn Halm of Westlake Village, California, great-granddaughter of Mary Ann Spragg Carroll, for the genealogical information she supplied to us.

NOTES:

Chicago Inter-Ocean, 21 July 1889 (obit)  
Baltimore Sun, 16 March 1846 (Macarte)  
(Kingston) *DAILY BRITISH WHIG*, 9 AUGUST 1849  
Cincinnati Daily Commercial, 16 May, 23 May, 6 June  
John S. Dingess, unpublished manuscript, Hertzberg Circus  
Collection, p 158-159.