

## VICTOR H. ROBBINS — AMERICAN CIRCUS BANDMASTER

Written by Richard E. Prince (Reprinted from Circus Fanfare Vol.18 No.5 OCT 1988)

Victor "Vic" H. Robbins, noted cornetist and circus bandmaster was born in 1896 at Hodgton, Maine, up near the New Brunswick-Canadian border. He was the son of William "Bill" Robbins, Sr., a newspaper man who at various times was also a professional musician. The elder Mr. Robbins had played trombone in the Barnum & Bailey Circus Band about 1890 under the well-known Bandmaster James S. Robinson. Vic Robbins reported that his father also was a musician in the old Gilmore Band under the great Patrick Gilmore. *(Photo below, 1942 Bandleader Vic Robbins- Buster Bailey Collection)*

When asked about his musical training, Victor Robbins, in a letter written in 1960 to Sverre O.

Braathen, had the following to say:

"At the age of about ten, my father "Bill" Robbins, started me on an upright alto. His long-time friend, Elmer Towne, was a cornet player and formerly a bandleader in Boston, but at that time Bandleader of the Madison and Lakewood Bands in Maine. When they needed cornet player, it was then I made the change over and became solo cornet in these bands with Mr. Towne's instruction and encouragement. Later I became a soloist- studied with W. Paris Chambers for a time. Then I attended Manlius Military School in NY on a music scholarship and graduated from Manlius. Following graduation, I attended the University of Maine; then to the Navy Band (Boston Navy Yard Band) with headquarters at Boston, Mass. During the time at the University of Maine, I was a member of the Bangor Symphony and the Bangor City Band, both under the direction of Adelbert W. Sprague who later became the President of the Northeastern Conservatory of Music as well



as the head of the Music Department at the University of Maine. Mr. Sprague was a graduate of Harvard University and of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston.

"Following my navy band experience which was at the close of World War I, I began with an entirely new field. I became an engineer in the Merchant Marines and still hold a valid set of papers for any waters in the world as such. Soon I returned to music and was with Chautauqua, dance bands, augmented orchestras with movies, and many other phases of music.

"In 1922, I chanced to meet Al J. Massey in Boston. He had heard of me and was recruiting musicians for his John Robinson Circus Band, so I signed and opened in Chicago in April in the Coliseum.

"1923, the next season, Mr. Massey was the Bandleader of the **Sells-Floto Circus** and again I opened in the Coliseum in Chicago. Following that regular season the same band with Al J. Massey went on a winter circus, opened in St. Louis. At that time Mr. Massey told me of his intention of retiring and insisted that I was just the person and musician to carry on as bandleader, and I agreed."

Victor H. Robbins career beginning in 1922 was reported as follows:

- 1922 Played cornet- John Robinson Circus under Al J. Massey
- 1923 Played cornet- Sells-Floto Circus under Al J. Massey
- 1924-1932 Bandmaster for the Sells-Floto Circus  
*(Photo next page, 1924 Sells-Floto Circus Band, Bandleader Vic Robbins- Buster Bailey Collection)*
- 1933-1934 Played cornet- Kay Brothers Circus
- 1935-1936 Bandmaster for the Cole Bros.-Clyde Beatty Circus
- 1937-1942 Bandmaster for the Cole Bros. Circus
- 1943-1944 Merchant Marine as marine engineer
- 1945 Bandmaster for the Clyde Beatty Circus
- 1946 Bandmaster for the Sparks Circus
- 1947-1956 Bandmaster for the Clyde Beatty Circus

During the winter months from 1924 to 1929, Vic Robbins played solo cornet in concert bands in Florida. Towns where he was engaged were listed as Arcadia, Daytona Beach, Hollywood, Lakeland, and Orlando; in bands under the direction of such conductors as E.A. Ball, Ira Haynes, Bohumir Kryl, and J.J. Richards. Later, his winters were spent playing in bands of winter circuses. After the closing of the Clyde Beatty Circus in 1956 as one of the last of the large railroad tent shows, Vic Robbins made the following comment four years later: "At the time they went to truck shows- I decided that trucks were not for me. Since that time until the present, my only music contact has been the local Elks Band here in Porterville, Calif."

Victor Robbins' brother, William "Bill" Robbins, Jr., was completing his 20th year in 1960 as head of the Music Department at the Porterville Union High School and College. Until 1930, when he began his public school teaching in California, Vic and Bill were together in the same musical organizations a greater part of the time. In 1923, Bill left the First National Bank of Boston to join the Sells-Floto Circus, playing French horn. Bill started on the violin and was primarily a violinist with horn as a double. It was the custom in those days for string players to double on a band instrument for band work. Bill had several orchestras over the years and was serving his 30th year as conductor of the City Band of Porterville, CA in 1960.

When asked to tell who wrote the best Circus Marches and Galops, Vic Robbins listed five composers in his opinion as follows:

1. Karl L. King
2. J. J. Richards
3. Russell Alexander
4. George Wiegand (music listed in Carl Fischer catalogs)
5. Henry Fillmore

Finally, Vic Robbins admitted he had several interesting experiences with the various circuses that he trouped with, especially when the elephants stampeded during the tournament, and there were several times when the lions or tigers got loose, who seemed more interested in the band or the music than returning to their cages.

The Elks Lodge in Porterville, Calif., advises that Victor H. Robbins died on October 29, 1970, at which time he was about 74 years old. During the last eight years after he had retired from the circus, Vic was employed as a night clerk at the Porterville Hotel.

In 1976, Victor H. Robbins was installed into the Windjammers Hall of Fame as one of the great Bandleaders of American circuses.

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