

# WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

## Albert "Al" C. Sweet (1876-1945) by Charles Conrad, WJU #1525



Photo courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo

Al Sweet was a significant cornet soloist and bandmaster whose primary circus fame is from his tenure as the Music Director for the Ringling Brothers Circus from 1906 through the 1911 season. He was born in Dansville, NY to a musical family three days after the centennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. His first instrument was the violin, but he began to play cornet by age eight. His first known professional engagement was at the age of 14 with the 1890 Stowe Brothers Circus Band under the director of F. Mont Long. In 1893 and 1894 he played cornet with the band of the Scribner & Smith Circus. He made an important acquaintance with the great cornet soloist W. Paris Chambers, who saw the potential in the young man and became his teacher.

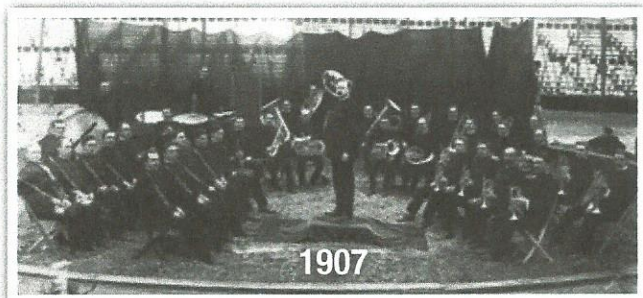
Sweet returned as the bandmaster of the Scribner & Smith show for the 1895 season and was in that position in 1896 when the show folded in September. He was the solo cornetist with the Great Wallace Circus in 1897. From 1899 until about 1905 he was employed by the Edison Phonograph Company, starting as solo cornet and becoming Music Director. In this position he was credited with being the first to play a triple tongued cornet solo on a recording. He formed Sweet's Band and Orchestra from the recording studio players to play live performances. He was also the principal tester of cornets for the C. G. Conn Instrument Company.

In 1906 Sweet was hired to replace the ailing George Ganweiler as the Music Director of the Ringling Brothers Circus. He was tall and strikingly handsome, with long blond hair, and the term "matinee idol" was sometimes used to reference Sweet. He was very comfortable in a position at the center of attention and had even done some Shakespearian acting. His band got outstanding reviews during its April opening in Chicago. The spectacle of that show was one of the most famous in circus history – The Field of the Cloth of Gold. It was a historical spectacle based on the meeting of England's King Henry VIII and Francis I of France. The show also featured one of the earliest automobile daredevil acts, the "Auto-bolide" or "Dip of Death," with Amie Radford as the driver. His center ring concert repertoire list included the expected classical opera overture transcriptions, but also featured more Broadway fare than was usually seen:

1. Overture - William Tell (Rossini)
2. Overture - Fra Diavolo (Auber)
3. Overture - Barber of Seville (Rossini)
4. Overture - Tambour der Garde (Titl)
5. Selection - Lucia di Lammermoor (Donizetti)
6. Selection - Faust (Gounod)
7. Selection - Martha (Flotow)
8. Selection - Rogers Bros. in Ireland (Hoffman)
9. Selection - Little Johnny Jones (Cohan)
10. Selection - Pearl & Pumpkin (Bratton)
11. Selection - Miss Dolly Dollars (Herbert)
12. Selection - The Rollicking Girl (Francis)
13. Descriptive - Hunt in the Black Forest (Voelker)
14. Polish Dance #1 (Schwarenka)
15. Cornet Solo - Le Secret Polka (Hazel)
16. Cornet Solo - Tramp, Tramp, Tramp (Rollinson)
17. Intermezzo - Moonlight (Moret)
18. Intermezzo - Aroly (Johns)



19. Medley - The Chief (O'Hare)
20. March - On Jersey Shore (Pryor)
21. March - The Victor (Pryor)
22. March - Turque (Eilenberg)
23. March - The Happy Heine (Lampe)
24. March - The Midnight Flyer (Hager)
25. March - Souvenir de Suisse (Vereecken)
26. March - Yankiana (Lotis)



Sweet returned for his second season in 1907. His assistant conductor that year was Fred Jewell, who already had established a reputation as a composer of circus music and would become the Music Director of the Barnum & Bailey Circus a year later.

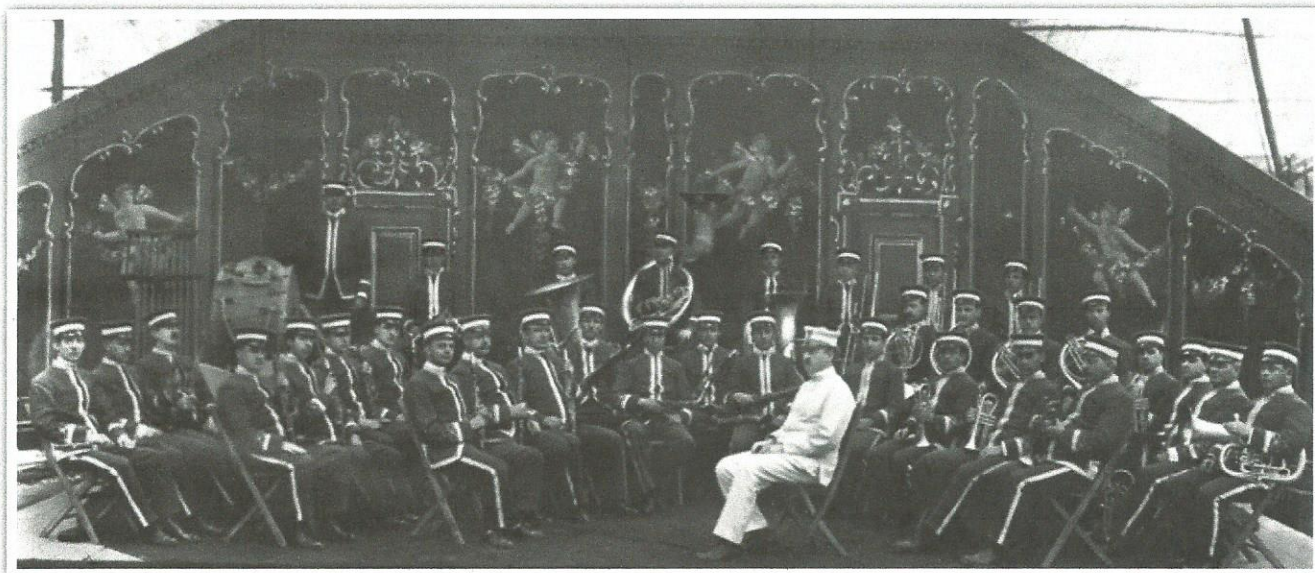
Another famous performer in that band was Tom Brown. Most circuses of that era presented an "after-show" concert. However, during the 1906 Season, the Ringling after-show failed to attract the audiences Al Ringling expected. This was Sweet's first season and he was asked to resolve it. Sweet thought about it and talked it over with Tom, who at the time was first chair clarinetist. Tom suggested using a saxophone unit as the core of a new after-show routine. The routine turned out to be clever and utilized a saxophone quartet. It had audience appeal and business continued to improve for the rest of the season.

Brown would later establish the Six Brown Brothers saxophone ensemble. He wrote a large descriptive piece for the 1908 show entitled *The Battle of San Juan Hill*. This work ended with a full performance of *Star Spangled Banner* that served as a transition into the beginning of the show.

Sweet wrote several marches for the Ringling Brothers, the most famous of which was the *Ringling Brothers Grand Entree*. Following the 1911 season, Sweet became conductor of the *Midland Band of Colorado Springs*.

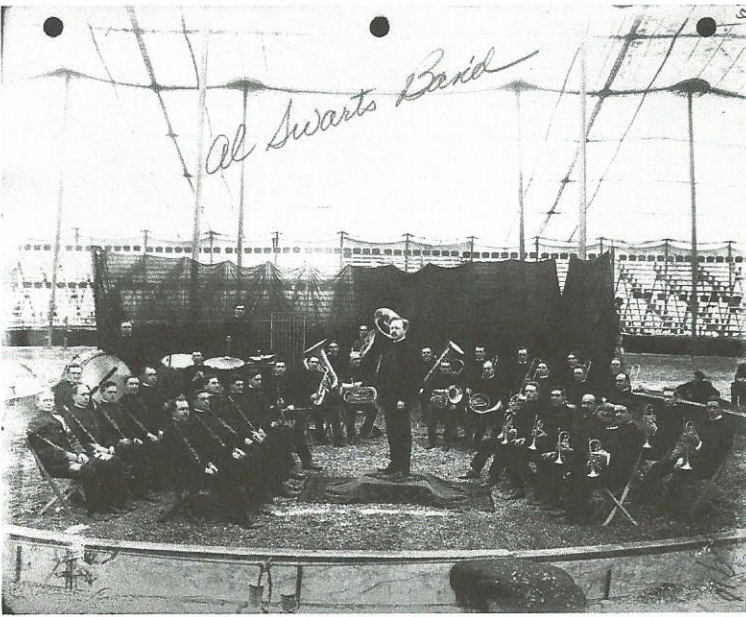
In 1914 Sweet began an important new facet of his career by forming the *White Hussars Band* that became one of the top Chautauqua acts throughout the country. The Chautauqua movement was an effort to introduce more culture and bring educational opportunity to more remote areas of the country. It was especially important in the Mid-West and the South, and the event would span several days and include lectures by politicians and historians, solo instrumentalists and ensembles, presentations by visual artists and actors, and usually a concluding performance by a concert band. Sweet's *White Hussar Band* was one of the top attractions in this regard. Each member of the ensemble was also a singer, and the group would often perform a capella choral works during their concerts. This ensemble was active through 1935, and one of its biggest performances was at the *Chicago Century of Progress World's Fair of 1933*. The *White Hussars* served as a circus band in 1931 for the *Great Olympia Circus*. Sweet taught private lessons in Chicago at stores owned by the *Conn Company* and the *Lyons Company* through the 1930s.

Al Sweet died in Chicago on May 10, 1945. He was inducted into the *Windjammer Hall of Fame* in 1982.



Ringling Bros. Circus Band inside Big Top, 1911, Al Sweet, Director. *Photos courtesy of The Ringling Museum, Frederick W. Glasier Collection.*

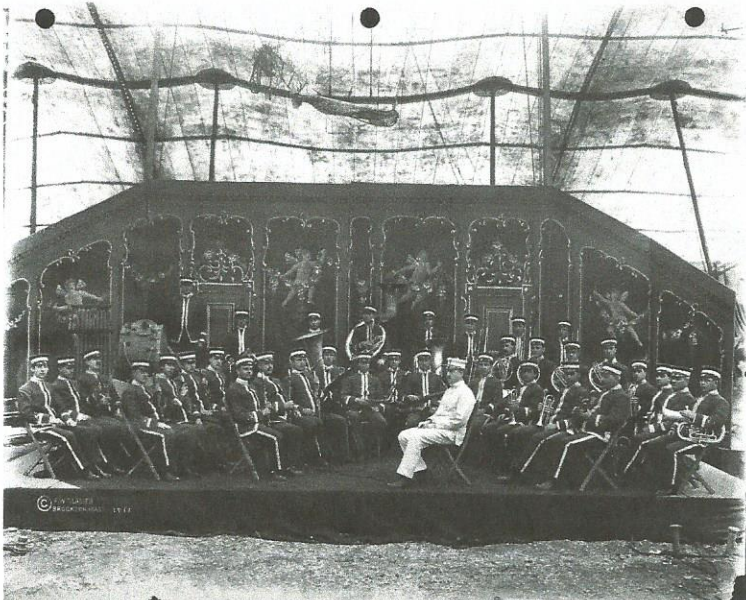




1907



1909



1911