

RED FLOYD

by Bill Armstrong, WJU #3610

William Ray "Red" Floyd was born in Esterville, Iowa in 1899. Drumming from an early age he was playing professionally by his early teens. He played in every facet of the music business including dance bands, carnivals, movie sound stages, Vaudeville, and radio.

In 1929, Red auditioned and was hired by Merle Evans to play snare drum, bells and xylophone solos with The Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus Band. He held that job for 30 plus years. Red soon married Thelma Clydia "Babe" Feaster, who was a bareback rider at Ringling in the 1930's and later worked for them in wardrobe & costume design.

Early in his career, while crossing a street, Ray was hit by a car and he suffered a severe broken arm. It was set badly and was never straight again, but somehow he could still play.

Red was with famed bandmaster Merle Evans for twenty years under the big top and then an additional ten years in buildings. During all that time, he was Merle Evans' right hand man and was considered to be the most gifted of all snare drummers. Many musicians have credited Floyd with adding greatly to their knowledge of and facility with the snare drum. There are many stories of Red's friendship with New York Philharmonic snare drum wizard Elden "Buster" Bailey and how the percussion section would go and watch Red Floyd work.

His style of "Kicking" the acts was legendary. "Kicking" means how he would play rolls and cymbal crashes along with 3 different acts at the same time. There is a quote by Buster Bailey that Red would even "Kick an elephant turd hitting the ground". I saw a story that he could play a great one-handed roll where he played with two sticks parallel like two extended fingers.

In 1939, George Way, CEO for Leedy Drum Company of Elkhart, IN, custom designed and built a bass drum and a snare drum for Merle Evans & Ringling

Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus. The snare was made specifically for Red Floyd, "The World's Greatest Drummer" by the makers of "The World's Finest Drummers' Instruments", according to the CEO's statement. The snare has a floating head and the shell is Marine Pearl, decorated with circus animals, clowns, etc. It was a large 15" X 12" size, with 16 gauge gut snares. It was and still is a LOUD drum, made to fill the Big Top without amplification.

During WWII, Red and his wife took a couple years off to help raise their grandchildren while their father was in the military. While away from the circus, Red worked in New Orleans for Higgins Industries, maker of amphibious landing craft. Higgins formed their own band for entertaining the troops. By 1946, Red and Thelma were back with the Ringling Show.

In the 1950's, when Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey stopped carrying a full band, the only musicians retained were Merle Evans & Red Floyd. They added organist Roy Blomster to the staff and the trio would then hire union musicians from whatever city they happened to be in. This made for great bands in New York City ... and, perhaps, not so good in some other cities!

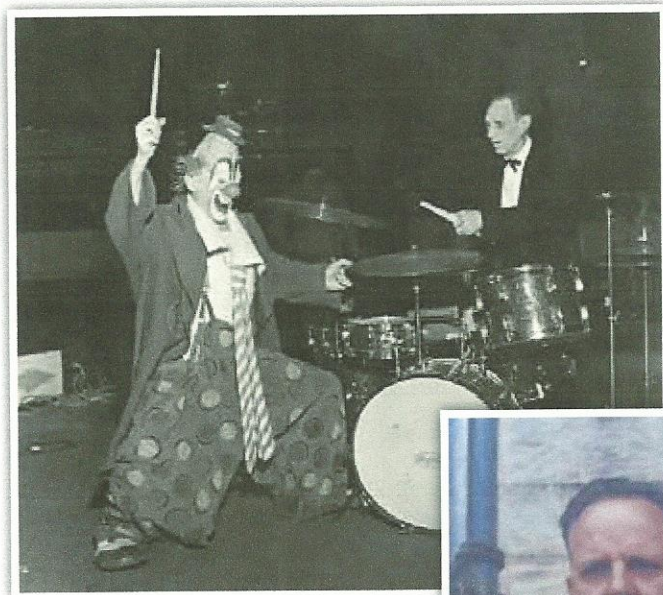
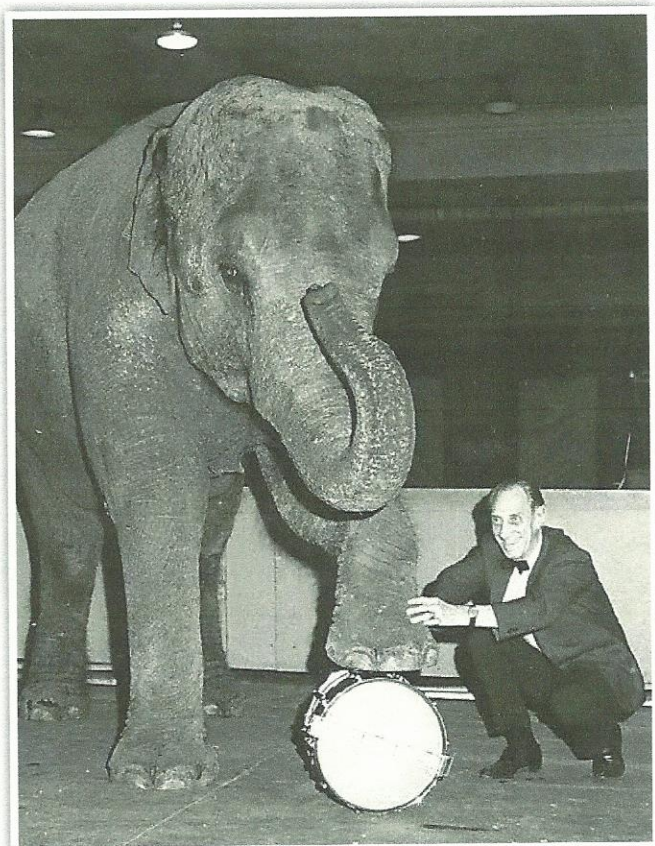




purchase it from the family. It is now my prized possession. It's a fascinating piece of both circus and percussion history.

Red died in 1966, leaving a resume that will never be matched. As simply put by Merle Evans "Red was the best circus drummer I ever heard". Windjammers Unlimited added Red Floyd to its Windjammers Hall of Fame in 1993.

The drum was used by Red Floyd for over 20 years. When Red retired in 1964, Rudy Bundy, who was then Treasurer and Director of Operations of Ringling, bought it from Merle, put legs on it and then used it as a cocktail table in his private train car. There, it traveled with the circus for another 10 years. Many years ago, Rudy converted a barn on his family's farm near Quaker City, Ohio into a vacation cabin where the drum has been for the last 40 years. I am blessed to have found it in that barn and was able to



Roy Blomster, Merle Evans, Red Floyd