

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

Ringling's Bill Pruyn (1997 Inductee)

by Rod Everhart, WJU #1351

A native of New Orleans, William Goodwin "Bill" Pruyn started playing the trumpet when he was nine. When he was 15, he worked his way out to California playing with a carnival. There, he studied for seven weeks with Herbert Clarke, who had been Sousa's premier cornet soloist for many years. Then, Bill went on the road with dance bands and ice shows, catching trumpet lessons in the bigger towns he played. In the mid-1940's, he worked some fairs with Izzy Cervone ((Ringling bandmaster 1956-60), was on the Cole Bros. show in 1946, and also the Dailey circus with Joe Rossi and Hank Werner. Then, his music career was altered by a tour of duty with the Army Band during the Korean War.

After the war, Pruyn went back to school under the GI Bill. He majored in trumpet performance at Louisiana State University, where he minored in composition and arranging, and was a member of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia. He wound up with a Master's Degree in Music. Now a "Brass" man of note, Bill was proficient on the cornet and tuba. After graduation, he performed with several top-rated bands, including Jimmy Dorsey, Woody Herman, and Claude Thornhill. Over the years, he also studied with Howard Voorhies and Bill Bell.

But the circus and its music became his love. He played a Conn 22B with a fairly small mouthpiece that was a modified V cup. He had amazing endurance and range. He said his first conducting job with a circus was an "accident." He was playing trumpet for a Shrine show in Long Beach, CA in 1950 under the leadership of Jack Bell, who Bill thought was a marvelous cornet player and one of the greatest old-time bandleaders ever, as well as being a "gentleman and scholar", too. Jack became ill on the bandstand during the matinee, and Bill had to take over. From there, Bill's next conducting job was with the

Tom Packs show, a gig that ran somewhat sporadically over the next 14 years. In between, he did a lot of other Shrine shows, and a couple years with Merle Evans and the Ringling band, playing tuba and doing some arranging.

In 1969, Pruyn joined the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus as trumpet player and bandleader of the Ringling Blue Band, when Ringling split the circus into two separate traveling circuses. When Merle retired as bandmaster of Ringling Red at the end of the 1969 Season, Bill became it's leader for three years, and then back to Ringling Blue until his retirement in 1975. During this time, he had also acted as a musical director for other Feld productions, such as "Ice Capades."



During his time with Ringling, Bill selected the show music for both the Red and Blue Units,

as well as for TV promos and NBC Specials. He said the process was to first pick out something that fits the act and then make an arrangement of it. During rehearsals, if Irvin and Kenneth Feld liked it, it stayed in. If they didn't, Bill would change it, as the Feld's were the final arbiters. He felt the Feld's were great judges of public taste and had great "ears" in that respect. But because so much repertory is involved, Pruyn had to be familiar with thousands of pieces of music, and have them right at his finger tips.

"I was lucky to have grown up in an era of great Broadway shows and films," he once said. "But I listen to all the new music. Just as the acts must appeal to children of all ages, we have music for kids, their parents, and grandparents. We use music from all media ... opera to Dixieland. Gunther Gebel-Williams likes contemporary music (for his animal acts), and waltzes usually go well with the flying acts."

As to the Spec or Production music at the start of the show, Richard Barstow played a big role in that, often composing significant portions himself. Bill noted that their collaboration depended on the type of music being used. For example, if it was a lot of Broadway tunes, Barstow would just pick the music off the top of his head. But when it came to things like traditional circus music, such as marches and galops, then he would consult with Pruyn. "We did our best to avoid repeating the same things year after year. There are thousands of good marches and galops around that people have forgotten about or don't know." For example, Bill pointed out that in the 1976 Bicentennial show, they included fourteen Sousa marches that had rarely been heard, and said at the time, "They're going over great. They're just a sensation. The musicians love them, and so does the audience. You can see them up there stomping their feet and clapping their hands."

Once the music has been selected for the entirety of both the Red and Blue shows, Bill then personally did the orchestrations. As he said, "It's a big time-killer. It takes much time to put all those notes on paper for 17 or 18 instruments." Another concern for Bill was the quality of musicianship with the locals hired to flesh out the bands. "You have to keep in mind that it's going to be played by good, bad, and indifferent bands. You've got to write in a style they can play it in. You've got to keep in mind that every band is not New Yorkers, and some of them are terrible."

In writing about his scoring techniques in a 1967 letter to Eric Beheim (reprinted in *Circus Fanfare* Vol. 38. No. 6; Dec 2008), Pruyn noted: "As to tricks for writing for acts, there are, of course, no hard and fast rules to follow, except for certain basic formulae for producing the most sound with the least men. I score everything for a group consisting of 2 trumpets, 1 trombone, 2 saxes (alto & tenor), and bass. I do not rely on organ too much, primarily because of the deficiencies of most organists, who in general have little or no experience in ensemble work, play wrong chords, skip beats, etc." Then, after the basic group is taken care of, he adds the other parts with lots of cross-cueing, noting "The sensible arranger always writes with Podunk, Iowa in mind."

Pruyn also wrote: "Many old-time leaders disguise their lack of knowledge by employing euphemisms, mainly, 'it's traditional.' There is nothing wrong with tradition as such,

but there is no excuse for bad music. If Fred Jewell played a certain waltz in 1910 and it was a bad waltz then, it is still a bad waltz, and there is no more reason to play it now than there was in 1910. All in all, the arranger's lot, like the policeman, is not a happy one, but it does have certain advantages. It is always challenging, and a career minus challenge is just a living. My reward is to have sidemen say that they enjoyed playing the book, and actually mean it."

Pruyn closed his letter to Beheim with: "In 27 years as a professional musician, I have never been out of a job, if that means anything. Now I hasten to add that my steady employment is not due to any specific genius on my part; it's just that I happen to like a branch of music which is not overcrowded and never will be. Unlike dance bands, we don't need public acceptance or booking agents; unlike symphony men, we don't have to wait for an opening when somebody dies; unlike teachers, we don't have to go to school most of our adult lives, and spend the rest of our active years sweating out tenure, publishing to establish ourselves, or battling school boards, parents, and football coaches, while we subsist on coolie wages. Personally speaking, I am sort of a gypsy, so travel appeals to me, as well as the constant struggle to elevate circus music."

Even after leaving Ringling, Bill Pruyn continued with arranging circus music and was a significant supporter of Windjammers Unlimited, playing and conducting at our Meets as well as sharing his Ringling experiences. He was member #914.

Pruyn was a member of the American performing rights organization, BMI, and he composed or arranged music for a number of documentary films and television specials. The United States Marine Band, where he was a historical music consultant, has played several of his arrangements. In 1989, Pruyn became associate conductor, under Tony Swain, of the Florida Symphonic Band. The name changed to Sarasota Concert Band and Bill was the conductor until he retired in 1997.

Bill Pruyn was inducted into the Windjammers Hall of Fame at the January, 1997 Annual Windjammers Convention in Sarasota, FL. Bill died of heart failure at age 76 on March 23, 2003 in Tampa, FL.