

JACK BELL - WINDJAMMERS' 2001 HALL OF FAME AWARD

This noted circus bandleader was named to the Windjammer Hall of Fame at the 2001 Annual Convention. The following is a brief biography of John "Jack" Bell. Windjammer Bill Pruyn provided the information used in preparing this sketch.

Jack Bell (1898-ca.1978)

John (Jack) Bell was born in Colgate, Oklahoma in 1898. His family moved to Lexington, Missouri where he attended school through the fifth grade when he quit school and at the age of 12, went to work with his grandfather in a coal mine. Tiring of coal mining, he quit and delivered meat for a market in Lexington before returning to the mines, this time with his quit his 18th birthday, he decided to enlist in the U.S. Army, but due to a mistake he was enlisted in the Missouri National Guard. Because he was not yet 18 he was discharged from the Guard, and again attempted to enlist in the Army, this time successfully.

Stationed in Arizona and Arkansas, at the outbreak of World War I, he was sent to France where he served as a Sergeant Bugler, acting as messenger or runner in delivering messages to the front line. At the conclusion of World War I, Jack re-enlisted in the Army and was accepted as a member of General Pershing's band, the forerunner of the U.S. Army Band, with the duty of providing ceremonial music for General Pershing's headquarters. While a member of the Pershing Band, Jack was afforded the opportunity of studying with the trumpet professor at the Brussels, Belgium Conservatory. He was extremely proud of having this opportunity and always attributed his ability as a "no-pressure" playing to this period of instruction.

Returning to the U.S. and after being discharged he spent a brief stay in Lexington, Missouri, and then began a long association with circus bands, initially as a trumpet player and later as a distinguished circus band leader. In the next few years, he was with the Mighty Haag Show, Robbins Brothers Circus and Lee Brothers. On several of these shows he worked under a bandmaster whose son played drums, but was always asking Jack to help him on the trumpet. The young drummer, who subsequently made a name for himself as a trumpet player, was Harry James, the son of Everette James the band leader on the shows.

During the 1929 season on Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Wild West Circus, Jack became bandmaster at Greencastle, Pennsylvania when Homer Lee left the show. The 1929 route book of the circus had the following to say about Jack's prowess as band leader:

Jack Bell (now altogether--three cheers) picked up the director's baton and proceeded to distinguish himself. His sudden rise to fame would make good material for a Horatio Alger novel that could be entitled "From Trumpet Player to Director, or Tooting His Way to Fame." In that band Jack had four trumpets, three clarinets, two trombones, a baritone, two basses, snare drum, a bass drum and a calliope.

Bell stayed on the 101 Ranch Show until it closed in 1931. Other shows that he toured with during the 1930s included Gorman Brothers in 1934.

Jack Bell was with Polack Brothers Circus from 1938 to 1941. While on the Polack Show he met Lillian, an equestrienne on the show. They were married in 1940 and their first daughter, Sarah Ann (Sally), was the following year.

Jack left show business in 1942, first working for the Graver Tank Company in Chicago and then for the M & M Tank Company as a plant foreman, subsequently being transferred by the company to California.

In 1944, it was decided to have a Golden Jubilee of the Original Miller Brothers 101 Ranch and Wild West show. It was held in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum on July 21 & 22, 1944. Among those featured were Colonel Zack T. Miller, the last of the famous Miller brothers and the 101 Ranch Cowboy Band under the direction of Jack Bell which performed a concert.

John "Jack" Bell - continued

Lillian Bell reminisces about sitting in the Coliseum before show day, helping Jack sort out music scores from his trunk-full collection. The "cowboys" were all Hollywood musicians. Opening night saw many of filmdom's famous stars in the audience; Lii and Grandma (Jack's mother) sat behind Robert Taylor and Barbara Stanwyck. Sawdust fever hit Jack again. He toured as bandleader of the C. R. Montgomery Circus for two seasons until the show closed.

Jack was the bandmaster on King Brothers Circus in 1948. One Sunday afternoon, he decided to ride a recently purchased stallion liberty horse that had never been ridden. He was thrown, injuring his ankle which had to be taped. On the following day, as he limped with the aid of a cane to the bandstand the musicians broke into *Horses, Horses, Crazy Over Horses!*

1949 found Jack on Arthur Stahlman's Biller Brothers Circus as bandleader. The next year he was with Ward Brothers Circus, the George Pugh and Archie Gayer show that played indoors and in parks under Shrine auspices.

On July 4th, 1950, the Ward show played the Los Angeles Coliseum under the auspices of the American Legion, before an audience of 110,000. As in the 1944 Coliseum Show, the band was augmented by 35 of Hollywood's finest studio musicians. The show's "Road Band" included Bill Pruyn on solo trumpet who says the augmented band really "knocked 'em dead." Bill also praises Jack as a brilliant cornetist, conductor and a real gentleman to work for. He attributes his subsequent success as a show trumpet player to Bell's tutelage.

The following excerpts are from: *High Grass and Miller Magic, The Hugo, Oklahoma Circus Story* (Donald R. Carson. *Bandwagon*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Jan-Feb), 1969, pp. 22-34.)

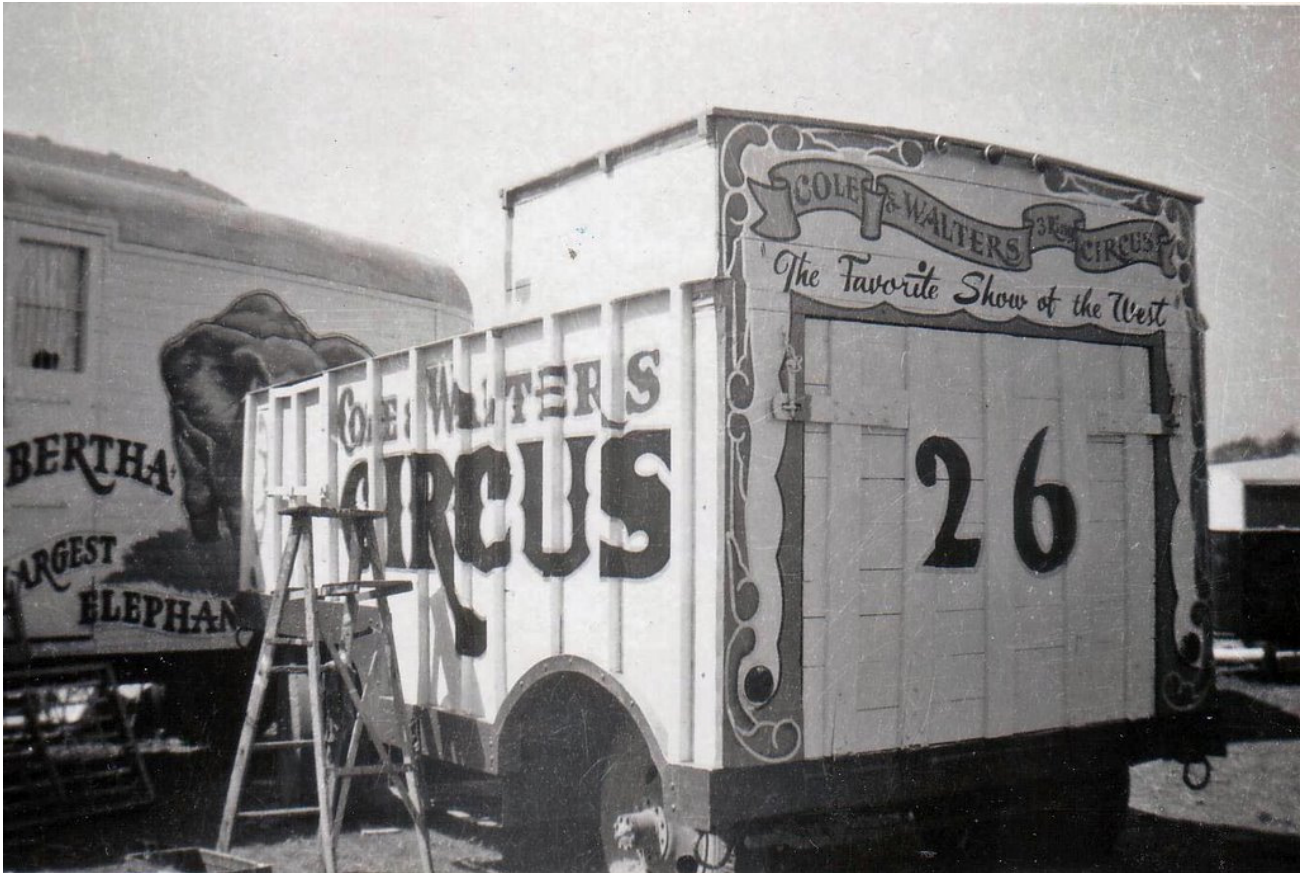
Cole & Walters opened March 23, 1951 at Colgate, Oklahoma with new canvas which consisted of a Big Top and Side Show. Wally Ross was animal superintendent and elephant boss. On the midway were chimp and snake pit shows. The performance was presented in 22 displays on two rings and a stage. Shortly after opening, Victor- the pigmy hippo, died and a chimp killed one of the performing dogs. The show swung west north of the Red River in Oklahoma and hit rain and mud in Kansas during May as they had in the previous year. The show circled across Nebraska and South Dakota, played a couple of towns in Wyoming, spent a month in North Dakota, and headed down through east South Dakota and toured Iowa. By then it was August and there had been 53 days of rain, but only two days had been lost. With a few dates in the corner of Nebraska and Kansas the show worked its way home through Missouri and Arkansas closing on November 1 at Haskell, Oklahoma, four days ahead of its billing and went into quarters at the Choctaw County Fairgrounds at Hugo.

That winter new bible back seats six-high were built in quarters. Another hippo was delivered and died in quarters. In March 1952, the one-fifth share held by Obert Miller was transferred to Lydia Miller. The other shares remained the same being held by Herb Walters (manager), Tom McLaughlin (general agent), D.R. Miller, and Kelly Miller.

The new season opened March 27, 1952 at Bogata, Texas. They moved on 13 show-owned trucks and 2 advance trucks. Last year's tents were in use once again. George and Jack Bell had the concessions with Jack fronting a 5-piece band. Little Joe Wright had the Side Show and Chief Clarence Keys the concert.

Jack continued as bandleader of the Cole and Walters show from 1951 to 1953, but in May 1954, he suffered a blow when he was forced to undergo major surgery that left him unable to continue in show business. In August 1954 he moved to Seattle where he lived and operated a doughnut franchise until his death in the late 1970s.

John "Jack" Bell - continued



*This trailer was partially backed into the tent beside the back door. Then the tail gate folded down and became the bandstand. The banner painted over the "26" on the tailgate would be visible during the show above the band members heads. Permanently installed inside was a Hammond Organ. All ring curbs and props were loaded in the front section.
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