

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

Joseph Stefan (1902-1983), 2007 Inductee

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351



Mills Bros. Circus Bandmaster Joe Stefan in 1963. Photo by Sverre Braathen, Courtesy Milner Library, Illinois State University.

Joseph Stefan was born in Edenborn, Fayette County, Pennsylvania on May 21, 1902. His parents were George and Mary (Sabol) Stefan, both of whom had been born in Czechoslovakia. Edenborn was located in the southwest corner of Pennsylvania, 50 miles south of Pittsburgh and 10 miles west of Uniontown, PA. During the 1800s until the mid-1900s, coal mining and the making of coke for the Pittsburgh steel mills was the largest industry in southwestern Pennsylvania. Joe's father worked in that industry and, unfortunately, died at age 37 when Joseph was just two years old.

Now a widow, Mary with Joseph and his three sisters (Anna, Mary, Elizabeth) moved to Uniontown, PA in 1905. Joseph attended Gallatin Elementary School there through 7th

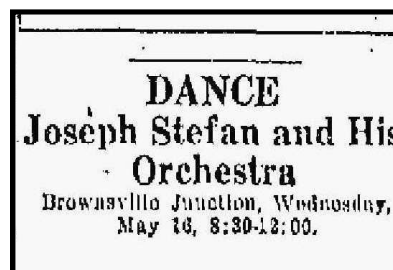
grade. The 1930 Federal Census reflected that was the extent of his public-school education. However, in 1917, as a 15-year-old, Joe headed off to New York City and enrolled at The Institute of Musical Art. That Institute had been founded in 1905 and in 1926 it merged with the Juilliard Graduate School to become the world-famous Juilliard School of Music.

Joe Stefan returned to Uniontown in 1919, now an excellent cornet/trumpet player, and played at the State and Penn Theaters in that town. He also met Bertha Dolores Peters of Masontown, another of the small towns in the Uniontown area. They were married in 1920 and settled in Nemacolin, PA, west of Edenborn and the Monongahela River. On May 29, 1921 their son, Melvin Joseph Stefan, was born. They soon moved to Uniontown and Gerald Cornelius Stefan was born there on May 15, 1923.



Bertha Peters

During this time, Joe continued with the theater gigs and formed his own orchestra, playing frequently in Uniontown and the surrounding villages. His group was initially known as **Joseph Stefan and His Orchestra**, and then later as **Joseph Stefan and His New Yorkers** or **Joseph Stefan and His Esquires**, depending on the venues.



We do not know what actually happened, but a May 15, 1923 newspaper ad appearing the day Gerald was born indicated **Joseph Stefan and His Orchestra** would

be playing a gig at Brownsville Junction the next day. Brownsville, PA, is just 14 miles northeast of Uniontown along the National Pike (U.S. 40). It is just a guess, but Joe and his orchestra probably played that gig on schedule.

In May 1926, Uniontown's *Morning Herald* newspaper reported: "A Uniontown city band, consisting of 30 veteran musicians has been organized. It combines the nucleus of three former bands of the city, and a serious attempt will be made during the coming months to give Uniontown the band music which this city deserves. Joseph Stefan has been named musical director."

It did not take long for Joe to become a success. Just two weeks after the new band's formation, the newspaper's headline was "**New Local Band Makes Big Hit in Parade**", with the article reading "Making its initial bow at the head of the Memorial Day parade Monday afternoon, the new Uniontown City Band won the plaudits of hundreds of onlookers by their snappy music and martial step. The band is under the leadership of Joseph Stefan, trumpeter."

Always on the lookout for playing opportunities, in 1928 Stefan was the lead trumpet player in the orchestra at the Metropolitan Theater in Morgantown, West Virginia.

Then in 1929, the circus called.

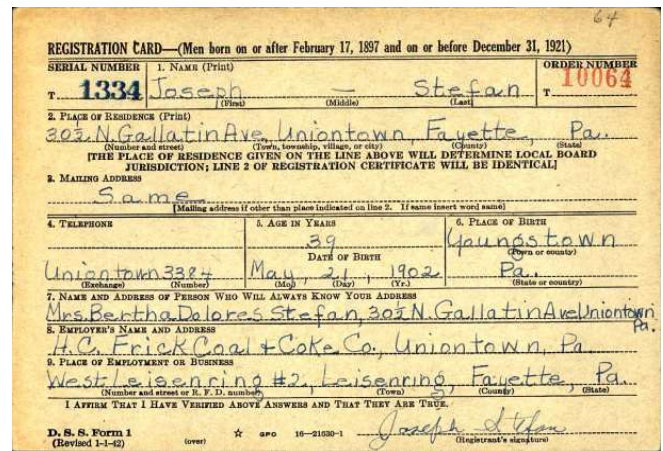
Joe joined the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus band under the leadership of Merle Evans and spent seven seasons with the show. The family maintained their home in Uniontown and Joe would be back home during the off season and for special occasions. On March 2, 1934, Uniontown's *Daily News Standard* reported on the Fourth Annual Minstrel Show, stating: "The old boys at the country store in Rubesville came through fine with their typical old band music, which brought memories of circus days. Particularly fine were the cornet solos. 'Rubesville' was put on by a group including Joseph Stefan."

Home for the winter each year, Stefan remained musically active in Uniontown. A December 24, 1930 newspaper ad proclaimed the Christmas Round Dance would be held December 25th from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m., featuring **Joseph Stefan and His New Yorkers. Gents \$1 Ladies 50¢**

Temporarily leaving the sawdust world at a time when his boys were about to wrap up high school, Stefan was back in Uniontown in the late 1930s and early 1940s managing the Uniontown Municipal Band, the Uniontown Fireman's Band, the VFW Drum & Bugle Corps, judging the musical units in the Halloween Parade, leading his orchestras, and playing lead cornet with other dance bands. As an example, in August 1939 Stefan and his Uniontown Municipal Band of 24 musicians played the kickoff concert in a Wednesday evening series on the lawn of the County Home with over 500 in attendance. The newspaper reported "**Band Concert a Big Treat**" and added "Also keenly enjoyed was the little German band" comprised of Joseph Stefan on lead cornet, his son Gerald on first trumpet, and others. A week or so later, the Fireman's Band, under the direction of Stefan, gave a special concert each evening. That next month, his oldest son, Melvin, was off to Penn State University, having tied for

first place in the high school's scholarship exams. Both boys were talented musicians, too. A June 1937 news feature had a photo of 14-year-old Gerald with his cornet and 16-year-old Melvin with his trombone, and the text reading: "Boys don't have to wait until they grow up to begin doing things. Sons of Joseph Stefan, Uniontown orchestra leader and music teacher, already showing promise of real musical talent."

At the 17th Annual Musicians Mardi Gras in 1941, nine orchestras were included, the most prominent being the 35-piece dance band directed by George Silver and "featuring Joseph Stefan, popular trumpeter." He was also featured that year with Ernie Fiorito and his 8-piece band playing "modern jazzy-style concerts."



In 1942, Joseph Stefan's "serial number" with the Local Draft Registration Board No. 6 was 1334. But at age 40, he was not drafted. However, both of his sons did enlist in the war effort. Melvin, with one year of college, enlisted on April 3, 1941 and reflected his occupation as "Musician and Teacher of Music." Gerald, with two years of college, enlisted on February 15, 1943, showing his occupation as "Office Machine Operator." In fact, at the time Gerald was in Washington, D.C., employed by the F.B.I., Department of Justice.

Meanwhile, Joe helped the war effort by working for the H. C. Frick Coal & Coke Company in nearby Leisenring, PA, producing materials for the Pittsburgh steel mills. When Gerald, or Jerry as he was now known, joined the Army in 1943, he was made a member of the Air Transport Command (ATC) band that took Glenn Miller's place after his death on December 15, 1944. When the war was over, Jerry returned home with a musical career, playing in notable theater orchestras in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Likewise, Melvin's return to civilian life landed him in Cleveland, OH.

Following the war, at some point Joe was back in the Ringling-Barnum circus band. He was still with Ringling for the final under-canvas performance at Heidelberg Raceway near Pittsburgh, PA on July 16, 1956. Stefan left Ringling at that point, later commenting: "**Canvas ... that's the real circus.**"



Joe Stefan, Bandmaster of the 1961 Mills Bros. Band. Windjammer Lloyd Fengel (WJU #42) is on trumpet, just to the left of Joe. The young announcer standing behind the microphone is Johnny Herriott.

After Merle Evans had retired from Ringling at the end of the 1969 Season, he was asked, "Merle, who were the best solo cornet players you ever had on the band?" His immediate answer was "Joe Stefan and Bill Kirkhise. They never missed a cue." Indeed, Merle and many others held Joe Stefan in highest regard as an outstanding circus musician.

Stefan played the solo cornet book on the Cristiani Bros. show in 1959 and the Mills Bros. Circus in 1960. For the seasons 1961 through 1965, Stefan was the bandmaster for the Mills Bros. Circus, having replaced Joe Rossi. The September 22, 1961 *Daily Courier* newspaper in Connellsville, PA had the headline, "**With Circus Band.**" The text reads: "Joseph Stefan, formerly of Uniontown and Point Marion is the Mills Bros. Circus bandmaster and will perform at Uniontown Speedway on October 12." While Joe was the Mills Bros. bandmaster, his wife, Bertha, was with him as the show's wardrobe mistress.

Charles Bennett, Jr. (WJU #1) and Bill Roosa (WJU # 679) both have commented in previous *Circus Fanfare* articles about their playing under Joe Stefan.

Bennett's father had suggested to Joe following a circus performance that his "kid loves circus music and plays cornet." Joe turned to young Charlie and said "Tomorrow, bring out your cornet". And so it happened that the next day

Joe sat Charlie Bennett, Jr. down between Bobby Danks and Ozzie Kristen on the solo book. Charlie noted that Joe could pick up the horn "cold" during the show ... and with Danks and Kristen on the part that didn't have to happen too often ... and "blow the quarter poles off their foundation." Charlie was amazed, for example, when Joe would start the intro to "Copa Cabana" an octave higher, going from an opening high C "on up from there."

Bill Roosa met Joe when he sat in with the Mills Bros. Circus band when it was in Hazelton, PA in 1960. A few pieces were played and then came "*The Storming of El Caney Galop*" at a tempo well beyond anything Bill had ever encountered. Bill was totally lost and when he had his trumpet up to his lips, taking a deep breath ready to play, Joe grabbed his arm and said, "We're done," and burst out laughing. Later, when the band had a break during the Clown Act, Joe pulled up the part again and asked Bill where he had planned to come in. Bill pointed to the middle of the page and that cracked Joe up once again. They became friends and Bill had other opportunities in the early 1960s to play next to Joe. In all of those shows, the band played Brahms' "*Hungarian Dance No. 5*". In it was a quite difficult trumpet solo. All the trumpets would always focus on Joe playing that passage. Bill reported Joe never missed a note and it was perfect every time.

Joe Stefan retired permanently from the sawdust world at the end of the 1965 season. As it turned out, the 1966 season was the last one for the Mills Bros. Circus. It closed operations and its assets were sold to Sid Kellner who started the James Bros. Circus.

No doubt, Stefan was looking forward to a more relaxing time, and perhaps being with his five grandchildren: Jill, John, Mark, Gerald B, and Melanie. At this point both his sons and their families had moved to California, with Melvin in San Mateo and Gerald in Walnut Creek. Joe and Bertha settled in nearby Benicia, Solano County, California. All three locations are in the San Francisco area.

Joseph Stefan died November 7, 1983 at age 81. His widow then moved to be with Melvin and family, and she died October 13, 1986 at age 85.

Want to hear what Joe's trumpet playing sounded like? An excellent recording of the entire 1962 Mills Bros. Circus show is accessible to members via MYWJU.ORG. There is a separate audio file for each of the 17 Acts referenced in Eric Beheim's article in this *Circus Fanfare*. Listen to the 1962 Mills Bros. Circus Band with Joe Stefan at the helm and you will be impressed!

MAY ALL YOUR DAYS BE CIRCUS MUSIC DAYS !!



Mills Bros. Bandmaster Joe Stefan in 1964
Photo credit: Sverre O. Braathen Circus Slide Collection; Special Collections at Milner Library, Illinois State University

MILL BROS. CIRCUS

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351

Unlike some circuses that just incorporated "Brothers" into their title to give credibility, the Mills Bros. Circus was actually owned by three brothers ... Jake, Jack, and Harry Mills. They all had experience in the circus industry.

The brothers acquired the Richard Bros. Circus and opened it as the Mills Bros. Circus on April 20, 1940 in Tallulah, LA. The show ran continuously until 1966. Jake Mills served as the first bandmaster, followed by L. Claude Myers (1941), C.H. Woolrich (1942-43), Chuck Foster (1943), Fred Mascoe (1944), R.V. Woodward (1944), Ellis "Skinny" Goe (1945), Jake again in 1946, George R. Bell (1947), Robert Mills (1948-51), Joe Rossi (1952-55), Ovila "Frenchy" Leboeuf (1956-58), Joe Rossi (1959-60), Joe Stefan (1961-65), and Ramon Escorcia (1966.)

The Mills Bros. Circus was a mid-sized truck show that toured the U.S., primarily in the Eastern and Midwestern states. During the first half of the 20th century, many of the smaller shows had a bad reputation ... "grift shows" in circus lingo ... and that often caused patrons to be skeptical of all circuses. The Mills Bros. Circus prided itself on running a clean show and it gained an excellent reputation with the public and its crew.

The Mills brothers appealed to local sponsors to sell tickets and promote the show well in advance of its arrival. Typically these were civic and fraternal organizations. The sponsoring groups then received a percentage of the ticket sales. Much like Shrine Circuses, these sponsors often became dependent on the circus as their annual fund-raiser. Certainly, a benefit of this approach to the Mills Bros. Circus was that using local, well-known and trusted sponsors boosted their credibility and favorable reputation.

In 1953 after Paul Mason Lewis died, the Mills brothers purchased the assets of the Lewis Bros. Circus from Paul's widow, Mae. Paul and Mae had purchased a small one-ring circus in 1929. They based their circus in Jackson, MI and it grew rapidly until closing in 1942 as a result of WWII impacts. It reopened briefly in 1945, but was not successful.

Mills Bros. Circus brought many acts to this country that went on to perform successfully with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. In 1962, a teenaged Jon "before-Tarzan" Zerbini was the lion trainer, with his father on alert outside the cage. That year, John Herriott (1931-2015) had a 12-horse liberty act plus the camels and llamas. He was also the announcer as seen in the photo on Page 10.