

# WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

## Carl E. "Pop" Neel 1858 - 1945 (2010 Inductee)

by Charles Conrad, WJU #1525

Carl E. Neel (sometimes seen misspelled as "Neal") was born in 1858, and claims to have entered show business on October 13, 1868. In the 1870's and 1880's, he performed with traveling shows in the gold fields. He spent the performing seasons of 1879 and 1880 with Nick Roberts' Humpty Dumpty Show, playing in the Gibler Family Band that served as the accompaniment to the show. He roomed with the legendary clown Alfred Miaco, and noted that the advance man always tried to assign the pair hotel room number 13. He spent the next two seasons in the Dan Rice Circus Band under bandmaster William Weldon. Neel, who was quite short of stature, reminisced decades later about the time he and his friend Gabe Boone, a tuba player and later the Reynolds Circus bandmaster, had to swim across the Ohio River at Maysville, KY, after beating some locals out of their money in a card game. The May 30, 1891, New York Clipper lists a "Prof. Neal" as the bandleader of a seven piece ensemble for Hunter & Dunlap's Medicine Company. It is possible this was Carl Neel.

By 1892, Neel was with the Ringling Brothers Circus, again playing under Weldon's direction. He was the leader of both the side show band and the second of three parade bands. The bandwagon was described in the route book: "Conveyed in a canopied chariot of richly beautiful pattern, with a blazing design on either side of two golden lions wreathed with silver serpents; grand lion for a tailpiece and topped with Grecian lyres."

Neel moved to the Adam Forepaugh Circus, but seems not to have stayed the entire season, as he became bandmaster for the Barlow Bros. Minstrels, returning to that show in 1895, then moving to the W. C. Clark Crescent Show Circus. He played solo alto with the 1896 La Pearl's Shows under bandmaster H. A. Vandercook, and his whereabouts for the next three years have not been determined. It seems quite likely he was the bandmaster of a small circus, a minstrel show, or a theatrical company, because in 1900, he became the Director of Music for the Sells & Gray United Shows.

The show's route book and newspaper personnel listings indicate that Neel's band was a 19-piece ensemble consisting of piccolo, 3 clarinets, alto saxophone, 3 cornets, 3 alto horns, 2 trombones, double-bell euphonium, tuba, 2 drummers, and two members whose instruments did not show in a photograph. The leader of the 9-piece Annex Band was James Wolfscale, an African-American and one of the most important of the side show bandmasters. There was also a concert orchestra directed by S. K. Jones. The circus opened in Elwood, IN, and some of the tunes of the show were remembered in a 1922 Billboard article by Charles E. Duble: *Cocoanut Dance*, *De Witt's Reels*, *Hornpipe Polka*, and many galops. Following the season, he led the band at the Royal Music Hall in Savannah, GA.

In 1902, Neel directed the band for the Walter L. Main Fashion Plate Circus, and one of the noteworthy players in that ensemble

was Walter P. English, who dedicated the march *Neel's Fashion Plate* to him. Neel spent parts of the next four seasons with the Sells & Downs Circus and the Miles Orton Circus, but the dates are uncertain. He took over as bandmaster for the 1904 John Robinson Circus a couple of weeks into the season, and the route book mentions that ten musicians quit the day before he arrived to reorganize the ensemble. The same publication gave proof some things never change when it ran the following question in the paragraph describing the July 12 day in Rochester, IN: "How do you catch a musician? Make a noise like a skirt!"

**MARCH - "NEEL'S FASHION PLATE" W.P. ENGLISH.**  
Solo Dedicated to CARL NEEL Bandmaster Walter L. Main's Big Fashion Plate Shows.  
B♭ Cornet. Basses. *mf*  
275 *Allegro*

Copyright MCMVII, by C. L. Barnhouse, Oklaheese, Iowa. Prior, Fall Band, 60c

Clarence Prouty, a vocal soloist, joined the show in June and was featured with the band in the tune *Navajo*. The February 20, 1905, Billboard noted that the Carl Neel Comedy Co. closed its season in Savannah — this would have been a run during the winter off-season for the circus. In 1906, he led the Big Cowboy Band on the Brown & Roberts Jesse James Co., which opened their season at Montgomery, AL on March 12. George Strather was the orchestra director on the show. He then spent a short time as the bandmaster of the Chicago Amusement Enterprise, a carnival show. A brief mention in the December 19, 1908, Billboard tells that he was the bandmaster for the James Shelby Shows, and that he broke both legs in a band wagon accident. Sverre Braathen's archives list Neel as leading the eight-piece band for the 1910 James Adams Vaudeville Show — he would later spend many seasons with the Adams' Floating Theater production.

The Holton Harmony Hints July 1914 edition reported that Neel was serving as bandmaster for the Ideal Concert Company that was touring in the South. Another mention in the trade papers is a 1916 reminiscence about the time he was the bandmaster for the Haw Fat Minstrels. It seems that he fined the bass player for borrowing a chew of tobacco from an audience member. He was performing at the Columbia Theater in Mobile, AL in 1915.

Touring routes gleaned from Billboard indicate that he led a touring concert band for much of this time. In 1905, he directed Carl Neel's Band with the Chicago Museum Enterprise. In 1906 and 1909, it was the Greater Southern Band touring in Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama. In 1911, his band played an extended summer engagement at Elton Park in LaGrange, GA, so it is likely that he was not employed that season with a circus – the June 11, 1911 New York Clipper listed his engagements. In February 1912, he led the orchestra for CF Haradon's Big Vaudeville Show and at other times in 1912, his concert band toured in Florida and North Carolina. They spent part of the winter in Bagdad, Florida in 1913, and in 1914 they were involved in touring in West Virginia and Georgia.

In 1916, Neel moved to the show with which he would spend the rest of his life, and for which he would receive the most publicity

for the Adams Show, Neel toured with his concert band, playing week-long concert stands in cities such as Smithfield and Hampton, VA.

The barge sank on Thanksgiving Day, 1927. Neel and another cast member spent the night in a small skiff and were rescued by a tug the next morning. In 1928, he had to have his teeth pulled and could not play the cornet with his false teeth, so he took up the string bass to stay with the show. Neel was aboard for the next sinking in November, 1929, as well. Then 71, he had spent 60 years as a trouper. The show was sold in the mid-1930s and most of the cast left, but Neel and the two most well-known actors stayed. From the 1936 to the 1937 season, the entire personnel of the show changed except for Pop Neel. He survived a third sinking in 1938, but soon after that, around the age of 80, his health started to decline and he left the show.

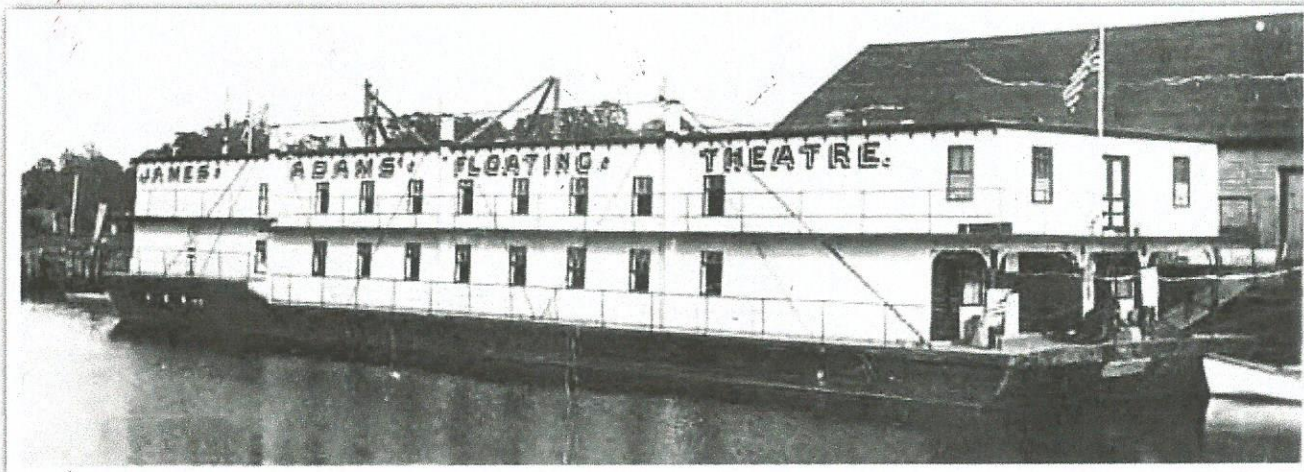
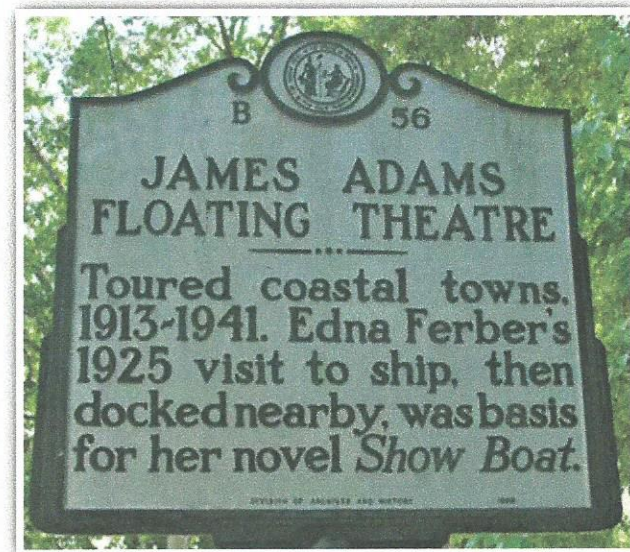


Photo courtesy of Marguerite Young

of his career: The James Adams Floating Theatre. This venue was a repertory company that performed for 28 seasons on a barge towed by tugboats.

Maisie Waldorf Comardo, writing in her forward to the book *James Adams Floating Theatre*, by C. Richard Gillespie, says "There was . . . Carl "Pop" Neel, who stayed forever and was as much a part of the boat as its timbers." Neel's 1916 Adams Theatre band had 11 players, and Neel played cornet solos. The 1917 band was smaller at 8 pieces. Neel was mail agent and Billboard correspondent, and many of the musicians were paid commissions for selling candy. A letter to Billboard published in the *Musical Musings* column March 2, 1918, gives information on his winter season activity, serving as manager for a production of the Hatch Film Company called *The Whip* and then performing in Philadelphia at the Rivoli Theater.

By 1918, Neel lived aboard the barge full time and Jim Adams built him a cabin on the top. Edna Ferber wrote her famous novel *Show Boat* based on the James Adams Floating Theater. She visited the show and stayed with the cast to do her research in the early 1920s. The 1929 film *Showboat* featured a re-creation of Neel's cabin on its ship, the *Cotton Blossom* (which really was the name of one of the leading showboats), and wrongly assumed it was a steering pilot house. The barge was not self propelled, and therefore a steering wheel would not have been functional. Jerome Kern's musical and the first two movies were reasonably accurate, but the 1951 movie version completely changed the setting and lost the feel of the Adams Show. In the off-season



Neel moved into the Elks Home in Bedford, VA, where he died August 20, 1945, at the age of 86. He was buried in the Old Hollywood Cemetery in Elizabeth City, NC, where the James Adams Floating Theater wintered and where the shows were rehearsed. "Pop" Neel was inducted into the Windjammers Unlimited Hall of Fame, January, 2010.