

**WINDJAMMERS 2011 HALL OF FAME: CHARLES LOUIS GEBEST (1848-1915)
CIRCUS COMPOSER and BANDLEADER OF JOHN ROBINSON CIRCUS 1880-1896**

Submitted by Charles Conrad

Charles Louis Gebest was born February 1, 1848 in the Ohio River town of Madison, Indiana, the eldest of three brothers. His father was a grocer who had emigrated from Germany in 1843, but many members of his family were musicians. His uncle played in a circus band for several years and one of his brothers was a music teacher in Zanesville, Ohio. The youngest Gebest brother studied piano in Leipzig, Germany, and founded a musical institute in Washington, D.C.

As a young boy, Charles learned to play both the cornet and the clarinet. At the age of 17, he enlisted in Company A of the Fourth Ohio Cavalry as a bandsman. At the end of the Civil War, he played in the band for the grand review of the Union troops in the nation's capitol.

Gebest married Annie Louise Mullen in 1872, and their son Gus was born the following year. He would father three more sons, Willie-who died in infancy, George-who died at the age of 10, and Edward-born in 1878 and who survived longer than any other member of the family. His death at the age of 32 was a tremendous blow to his family. No information has surfaced concerning Gebest's early playing career during these years, but it is very likely that he had played in circus bands for several years before he assumed the music director's position with the John Robinson Circus in 1880. He would hold this position for 16 years, and it would be his only circus bandmaster post. His band presented him a silver mounted baton in Norfolk, VA in 1884, the fourth anniversary of his being named Robinson bandmaster.



Elks Concert Band #524, Madison, Ind. - Charles L. Gebest, band master

This is the only known photo of Charles L. Gebest. Here he is the bandleader of the Elks Concert Band #524 in Madison, Indiana (Charles Conrad archives).

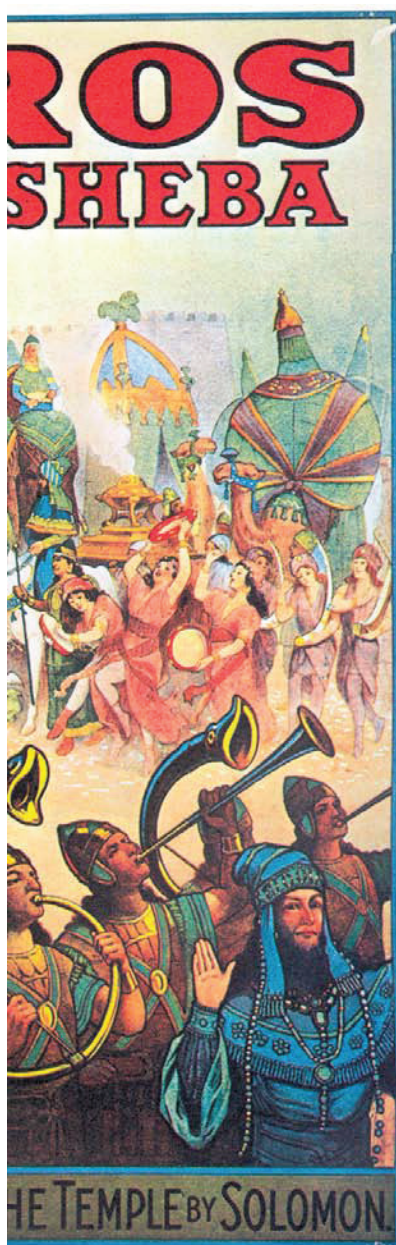
During his entire career as circus bandleader, he only missed one performance. His pleasant demeanor and competent leadership brought many players back to the band year after year. It is noted that he traveled to every state except one. He spent the off season at home in Madison, where he purchased a hotel in 1893. He and his wife operated the Gebest Hotel until 1913. He also conducted the 17-piece Elks Club #524 Band, the Gebest Band, and an orchestra of 12 players, providing music for various functions during the winter season. Gebest's Elks Lodge Band was named the official band for a Knights Templar National Convention in Cincinnati.

Gebest's eldest son Gus became a musician, playing trombone and calliope for various touring theatrical shows including Price's Floating Theater, until his untimely death in 1905. One of Charles Gebest's nephews, Charles J. Gebest, was a successful composer who served as the music director for George M. Cohan.

The 1890s were the highpoint of the great circus spectacles. In 1894, Gebest wrote the music for the spectacle "Solomon and the Queen of Sheba." These were lavish historical entertainments that took place immediately before the circus. They involved the entire cast, and often included an



elaborate program with numerous pages describing the historical event. In many cases, a guest director was hired to stage the spectacle, and a composer was commissioned to write the music. In most cases, the bandmaster did not write the spectacle music, but the bandmaster often arranged the dance sequences, sometimes using original music and sometimes using a medley of circus and popular music. Gebest's score includes more than 20 original selections, and would last more than 30 minutes if played in its entirety. It includes several



stylized dances as part of a ballet that ended the spectacle. It is one of only a handful of extant spectacle scores. The score was sold to the Ringling Brothers Circus, and it was used nearly 20 years later by that show, with only a few additions and changes by Ringling's band leader at the time, J.J. Richards.

Gebest continued to write and arrange music after his retirement from the circus in 1896. An article in *The Billboard* (1897) mentions that he is employed by music publisher George L. Spaulding as manager of the company's professional department. Gebest supplied the band for a local Chautauqua in Madison for many years, and in 1907 began using the Elks Club Band in that capacity. He died September 27, 1915 at home following a stroke. He was a Mason, and was buried in Madison with a Masonic funeral. His music continued to appear on the programs of other circus bandmasters for several years.

PHOTOS- THIS PAGE: Here is the circus band from 1899 for the John Robinson show. Our windjammer, Charles Gebest, has long retired and returned to Madison by this time. The bandleader here is M.C. Rogers (Buster Bailey Collection). **CIRCUS POSTER:** Used by the Ringling Bros. Circus in 1914, the size of this circus bill in the archives of the Museum of the City of New York measured 40 x 30 inches. A little background on the size of circus posters—the basic unit or size of a circus poster is a one-sheet measuring 28 x 42 inches. Our poster would also have been called a one-sheet, fitting within inches of the standard measurements. Any "townner" fence or wall where the show name and circus date and lithograph posters would be glued or tacked up to advertise the circus, would be used each year called a bill stand or a hit by the billing crew. The average stand was a 28-sheet (4 high x 7 across). In this poster, we see the artists of the Strobridge Lithograph Company left nothing out. Meticulous detail was taken to place and arrange the procession using skill for the costumes, crowd, and colors. How magnificent it must have been to behold the coming of Solomon, Sheba, and the circus as displayed in a 28-sheet on a neighbor's barn!

[Reprinted with permission: *100 Years of Circus Posters*-Jack Rennert; *Two Hundred Years of the American Circus*- Tom Ogden]



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GOLDEN AGE OF THE CIRCUS!

Posters like this were used by the John Robinson Circus to attract as much attention as possible in each town. If you saw this spectacle in person, you would have witnessed every human on the lot in some sort of costume-- animal grooms, children of the performers-- some twice!?! Windjammer new Hall of Fame inductee, Charles Gebest was likely the bandleader at this time. [Tibbals Online Digital Collection, undated].

