

**WINDJAMMERS SELECT 2014 HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES:
CHARLIE STEVENSON, CIRCUS BANDLEADER ON BARITONE HORN**

WJU Hall of Fame Committee: Charles Schlarbaum, Andrew Glover, Charles Conrad
Presented at the 2014 Windjammers Annual Convention Banquet by Andrew Glover

For more than twenty years, Charlie Stevenson was a circus bandleader and a baritone player with circus and other bands. Charlie hailed from Corpus Christi, Texas and spent at least one season playing baritone with Merle Evans in Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Band. Perhaps his first position as a circus bandmaster was in 1970 with the King Bros. Circus, where he stayed through at least the 1974 season. 1977 saw Charlie leading the band of the Great American Chautauqua, and in 1978 he took leadership of the Carson & Barnes band. In 1979 and 1980 he was bandmaster with Circus Genoa, then returned to Carson & Barnes in 1982, where he remained until that show phased out live music after the 1987 season.

Charlie was a fine baritone player who was proud of his Texas heritage, and often fronted the band wearing a white Stetson and playing his bell-front baritone. His "book" was very traditional – many marches, galops, waltzes, and other works by King, Alexander, Jewell, and other great writers from the golden age of the American circus band. Additionally, Charlie served with the 143rd Infantry Regiment of the Texas Army National Guard. He was often addressed as "Col. Stevenson" although I am unsure if that was an official or "honorary" designation of some kind.

*PHOTOS: Right, Charlie Stevenson, Bandleader - 1973 King Bros. Circus;
Below 1970 King Bros. Circus on a blue-sky date.*





Photo above- Cowboy Stevenson; At right- Enjoying Sarasota is Charlie Moyer, Chuck Schlarbaum, Paul Yoder, Charlie Stevenson, Merle Evans; Below – Mr. & Mrs. Stevenson.

Charlie visited several WJU Sarasota conventions in the early 1980s and was a very friendly and popular musician.



I had the pleasure of "sitting in" with Charlie's Carson & Barnes band around 1983. The book was quite thick, and it was a joy to read through so much great music (and in such a short time, although the show ran a full two hours!) After the matinee, Charlie invited me to the pie car for a few beverages, after which I played the second show (with considerably less success.)

In my mind, following the passing of Merle Evans, the last two remaining great traditional circus band leaders were Chuck Schlarbaum and Charlie Stevenson.

♪ ♪ ♪

WINDJAMMERS SELECT 2014 HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES: CHARLIE STEVENSON, CIRCUS BANDLEADER ON BARITONE HORN

The following article was originally published in Circus Report by Don Marcks.

It was then reprinted in our Circus Fanfare Vol.24 No.4 (August 20, 1994)

MEMORIES from Tony Greiner

The news was printed in the March 14, 1994 issue of Circus Report that bandleader Charlie Stevenson had passed away. I knew Charlie for two years, while playing in the #2 band on the 1978 Carson & Barnes circus and on Circus Genoa 1979. He also led the band on King Bros. circus for many years. As I remember, Charlie's pay was what he earned running the pony ride and if I remember correctly, he said it was one of the best-paying jobs he ever had.

Charlie was not someone you forgot once you got to know him. In my mind's eye, he is standing in front of the bandstand, cradling his baritone in his arms, his cowboy hat perched at a jaunty angle on top of his balding head.

"Listen up," he would say with his Waco, Texas buzz. "Next up is 'In Storm and Sunshine'. You be the storm and I'll be the sunshine," wiggling his fingers over the valves as he delivered his punchline, then turn and go on with the show. Strange thing is, I never remember playing "In Storm and Sunshine" in one of his bands.

Charlie was a pretty decent baritone player. He had started playing in Texas after hearing a good player at a band concert. He didn't have the opportunity to do a lot of playing as a kid, but had the dream of playing with Merle Evans on Ringling. In World War II, he served in Italy, and I got the impression that he saw combat, although he would not talk about it. I have wondered if that played any part in his drinking.

In 1945, he got his chance to play for Merle Evans and won a spot in the Ringling Band playing baritone. He only played with them a year, but he held a lot of memories of that year. He then returned to the army, playing in bands for several years before returning to show business.

When we played "The Walking Frog" for the rola-bola act one year, Charlie at the trio, would inevitably make his hand into a fist, thrust it against his waist and begin a little dance in front of the band. He was a circus music traditionalist using "Wedding of the Winds" for the swinging trapeze and "March of the Wooden Soldiers" for high stepping horses. Wayne Regan, the cat man, was particularly fond of the march "Joyce's 71st New York Regiment." It wasn't part of the show music, but we sometimes played it during warm up. Wayne would say before the show, "Play Joyce's." When we closed the tour of 1978, Charlie feigned anger at Wayne when he put in a last request for the march. Never fear though, for as Wayne's act drew to a close, down came the tumbling scales of "Joyce's" added to the cat act for that one occasion.

Charlie was a kind man, always polite, always looking out for his bandsmen. He saw his duties as bandmaster as including looking out for his musicians, and he was full of stories.

There was the visit in Ft. Dodge, Iowa with march composer Karl King. "He was a real prince," said Charlie. That was the only time I've heard anyone use that phrase without sarcasm.

He also told the story of Boom Boom Browning suffering a foot injury and being excused from some Chinese [extra work for extra pay]. Browning had an extra long recovery staying on crutches much longer than anyone would have expected. He had a miraculous recovery (and a return to China) after Merle Evans saw him running across the backyard to a performance carrying his crutches in one hand and a hot dog in the other. (Browning may not have remembered it that way, but that's the way Charlie told it).



Charlie was a gentleman, speaking highly of other bandleaders such as Ramon Escorcia and especially Chuck Schlarbaum. Once a performer tried to give the Circus Genoa band a compliment by saying something like, "That Chuck 'Scour-Bum' thinks he's got such a great band," but before he could finish, Charlie cut him off and let him know that no one spoke ill of Chuck Schlarbaum in his presence. Aside from Ringling, I think he regarded his partial season with Schlarbaum and the Clyde-Beatty Band as the best group he ever worked with. There they called him "Gramps."

PHOTOS from Charlie Bennett's collection, shows "Gramps" back row right on baritone, sans cowboy hat, in Schlarbaum's 1976 Clyde-Beatty Circus Band.

NEXT PAGE- 1972 King Bros. Circus Band.

Charlie gave me my steady professional work as a musician. One summer I toured with Circus Kirk, and got a taste for the life, so after I finished school and was looking around for something to do, I saw an ad for a trombonist in Circus Report. I called the number and left a message and a few days later got a long distance call from Canada, and the voice crackled with the static only long distance pay phones can give.

"Tony," he asked, "this is Charlie Stevenson with the Carson & Barnes Circus calling from Saskatchewan, Canada. I understand you want to play with the circus?" --"Yes, sir." Then came the toughest audition of my life. It was composed of three questions. "Do you know what circus life is like?" --"Yes." "Can you read music?" -- "Yes." "Can you be here on Tuesday?" Don't ask me how Charlie got good bands together. Maybe he just had an instinct.

I do not remember everyone's names that played in Charlie's bands, but I do recall Vince Seyfriedt on trumpet (Vince would always play the trumpet call in the backyard to signal 15 minutes before doors); Randy Fulton on drums; Gene "The Green Buddha" on trumpet; and Rex Martin on tuba. (Rex later worked with the Chicago Symphony).

Once on Circus Genoa, Johnny Frazier had the idea of having the band do free concerts in town in the morning to attract some attention. The booking agents would find a gazebo somewhere and we would put on a short program. After one of those mini-concerts, we retired to a local watering hole to refresh ourselves. Charlie and Vince started telling stories and the locals in the place were entranced. We had a couple of brews and were starting to leave, when the bartender put another round in front of us and said, "Boys, why don't you stay awhile? Tell some more stories." Well, the beer kept coming as long as the stories did, and the next thing you know it was nearly 6 p.m. and show time. We made it back to the lot on time, if not in the best of condition. This mousy fellow on third trumpet, who did not accompany us to the bar, got incensed. He ran to tattle to Johnny, by saying, "The band is drunk." Boy was he surprised when Johnny said, "I've been waiting all year for this," grabbed a lawn chair and sat by us for the entire show, listening more to our jokes and good humor than to our stellar playing.

Charlie didn't eat much, but did like biscuits and gravy. Thinking about that reminded me of his colorful phrases. He didn't care for chicken "except for the pulley-piece," and he had his first beer when he woke up and then not another until "the sun had, crossed the yard arm." When it sounded like rain, he said "It looks like Jupiter Pluvius is going to give us a call." On pay day, he always asked if the "Ghost Walked." You don't hear a lot of people talk like that anymore.

I'll miss you, Charlie. May there be no storms, may you always be in sunshine.

♪ ♪ ♪

