

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

JOHN STERLING PHILLIPS (1872-1943), Inductee 2022

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351

Our Windjammers Hall of Fame inductee for 2022 is Jack Phillips, whose notable circus musician career included 16 years as bandmaster for the Sparks Bros. Circus. Thanks to Charles Conrad (#1525), Andy Glover (#423), and Barbara Bailey (#18) for serving on the WJU Hall of Fame Committee.



Bandmaster & Solo Cornetist Jack Phillips

Photo (autographed on back) from Charles Conrad collection.

John Sterling Phillips was born March 17, 1872, in Romeo, Macomb County, Michigan. His parents were George Wilbur Phillips (1830-1902) and Lydia Elizabeth Sterling (1833-1900).

Better known throughout his life as Jack, he was the seventh of eight children. Musical talent was in his genes as both his parents were musicians, as were his three brothers (Frank, George & Charles) and four sisters (Caroline, Harriet, Fannie, & Minnie).

Jack Phillips was in show business virtually all his life. He was with a string of shows, including the Whitney Family Wagon Circus as bandmaster during 1898-1903, and cornet soloist with Primrose & Dockstader Minstrels, Downing & Goodrich Uncle Tom Show, William Kibble's Uncle Tom shows, Donnelly & Hatfield Minstrels, Al G. Field Minstrels, and LaPlace's Jesse James Company. In 1911 he was the cornet soloist with Barnum & Bailey Circus, under bandmaster Ned Brill. Later that year he joined Downie & Wheeler Circus as bandmaster for 1911-1912.

On Christmas Day 1900, Jack married Catherine Lanham. He was with the "Whitney's Family Big One Ring Circus" at the time, as was she. Married until his death at age 71, they had no children. Catherine was 87 when she died in 1965. Catherine was from Columbus, OH and that was their home base when not on the road. While in Columbus, Jack participated in the Masonic Lodge activities and did solo work at both the Hartman and Majestic Theaters.

His big break came when he was hired as bandmaster of the Sparks Bros. Circus in 1912, replacing Ben E. Taylor in leading the circus band of ten. The next year he had a band of 14 and the following year 20. He was with that circus through the 1927 season, following which the ownership changed hands. Over that time his show band averaged 17. He also generally had a side show band of about 10 and a clown band of 8 or so.

The 1927 Sparks Circus Route Book was produced by Jack Phillips as part of his duties with the circus. It reflected a 17-piece big top circus band plus a player for an air calliope

and one for the steam calliope. The band included Jack as bandmaster, two solo cornets, a first cornet, solo and first clarinets, a flute/piccolo/librarian, first and second horns, first and second trombones, first and second baritones, two tubas, a snare drum, and a bass drum.

The Annex/Vaudeville Band in 1927 was comprised of ten musicians, with Arthur Wright as leader and on cornet. In addition, there was a solo and first clarinet, a solo cornet, an alto, a trombone, a baritone, a tuba, a snare drum, and a bass drum. The clown band of 8 was led by Paul Wenzel, but instrumentation was not listed.

Weather can always be an interesting challenge for the circus, and also for the circus band. An example early in Jack's career as bandmaster for Sparks Bros. Circus happened on June 25, 1914, in Redwood Falls, MN. A crowd of about 600 filled one side of the Big Top tent. The performance was about mid-way through when a tornado struck. The tent was reportedly "being torn to shreds and the quarter poles and center poles beaten about in the air" before the patrons and performers could get to the exit. The big top was torn to ribbons and the performers' dressing tent was completely destroyed, taking with it most of their street clothes. The band's instruments were damaged, but worse, Jack Phillips lost the music to the big show program. Nevertheless, the remnants of the show were gathered and packed up through the night. Just before daylight the train pulled out for Springfield, MN where, somehow, the show went on, playing to crowded seats in a space with only side wall protection. We don't know what hoops Jack went through to have music for his band that night, but hopefully he had other circus music charts in a trunk in his railcar space.

In 1916, the trombone section included famous composer Charles Edward Duble. Duble composed a march titled **The Circus King**, and dedicated it "To my friend, Jack Phillips, Musical Director, John H. Sparks' Shows."



**Bandmasters
Jack Phillips and Merle Evans**
Photo Charles Conrad collection

While Merle Evans' 50-year run with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus clearly sets the longevity record, Jack Phillips' 16-year stint with Sparks Bros. Circus is more than admirable.

He was well respected in the industry as both a cornetist and bandleader and was a key part of the success of the Sparks Bros. Circus. Jack left Sparks when the 1927 season ended.



Jack Phillips' Letterhead for 1926, prior to his final Season with the Sparks Circus. *(Stationery in Charles Conrad collection)*

Late in the 1928 season, Sparks Circus was sold to Henry Gentry, owner of Gentry Bros. Circus, but who turned out to be representing the American Circus Corporation at the time. Jack Hoyt (1903-1934) was named bandmaster and the band size was enlarged to 30.

For 1929 and 1930 Jack Phillips was bandmaster with Honest Bill & Moon Bros. Circus, leaving it in 1930 to join the brand-new motorized circus, Al F. Wheeler's New Model Shows, with quarters in Albemarle, North Carolina. Reports were that Jack's band had "attracted favorable press comments at nearly every stand." For the 1931 season, the show's name was changed to Wheeler & Sautelle's Circus.

[Well-known showman Sig. Sautelle had died June 21, 1928 in Glens Falls, NY and so had no connection to this show, but his name had been licensed for promotional benefit.]



**AL. F. WHEELER, SIG. SAUTELLE, under the direction of
EASTERN CIRCUS CORPORATION**

Jack closed out his circus career as bandmaster and musical director with Wheeler & Sautelle Circus, leaving at the end of the 1932 season when that show was being offered for sale. The Great Depression was also having an impact. So, Jack retired as a 60-year-old to Columbus, OH to spend more time with his wife and be involved in community activities around Columbus, Ohio.

By 1940, however, Jack's health had deteriorated and the Federal Census that year reflected his residence as Columbus State Hospital. John Sterling "Jack" Phillips died there June 1, 1943 of heart disease. Jack and his wife are buried in Green Lawn Cemetery in Columbus.



Bandmaster John S. "Jack" Phillips with his 1923 Sparks Show Band. Photo by F. W. Glasier; courtesy The Ringling.



Bandmaster Jack Phillips in 1923



Sparks Circus Clown Band

The Circus King
MARCH

C. E. DUBLE

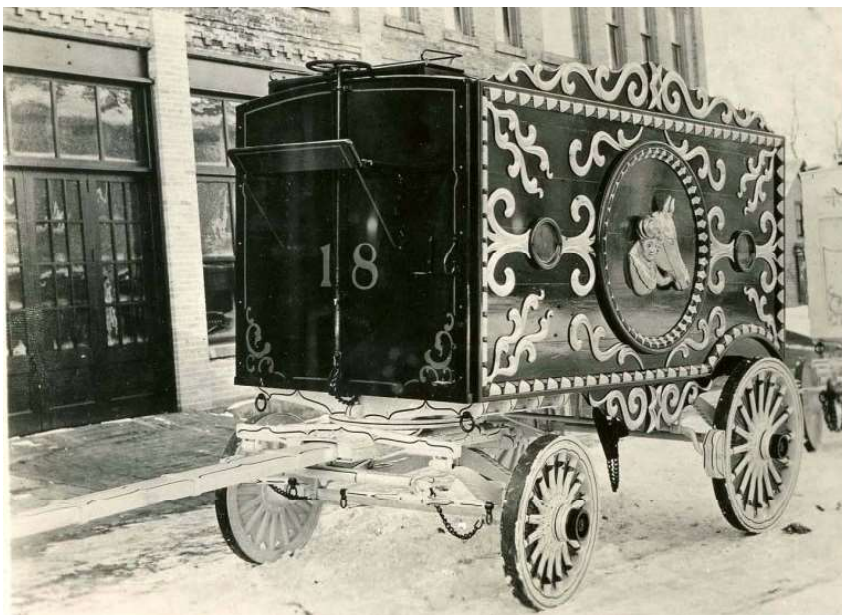
Solo B♭ Cornet
(Conductor)

To my friend Jack Phillips, Musical Director, John H. Sparks' Shows

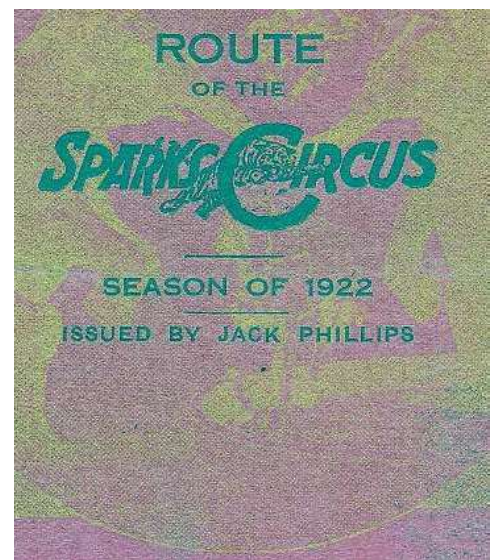
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While Jack Phillips may not have been the king of the circus, composer Charles Edward Duple thought highly enough of the Sparks Circus bandmaster in 1916 to dedicate this march to him. At the time, Duple was playing trombone in the Sparks band. This piece features a simple melody by the cornets with an extensive obbligato performed by woodwinds.



Sparks Circus "Horse & Jockey" clown bandwagon



Sparks 1922 Route Book by Jack Phillips
Don Covington collection



SPARKS BROS. CIRCUS in 1924. Jack Phillips, bandmaster (front, fourth from left.)

Photo from Charles Conrad collection.



SPARKS BROS. CIRCUS in 1925. Jack Phillips, bandmaster (back left.)

Photo from Charles Conrad collection.



SPARKS BROS. CIRCUS in 1927. Jack Phillips, bandmaster (seated front, right)

Photo from Charles Conrad collection.



SPARKS BROS. CIRCUS Street Parade with Dolphin Bandwagon in 1927