



WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME



CHARLES L. GEBEST (1848-1915), Inductee 2011

By Charles Conrad, WJU #1525 [Updated & Reprinted from February 2011 *Circus Fanfare*]

Charles Lewis Gebest was born February 2, 1848 in the Ohio River town of Madison, IN, the eldest of eight siblings, two of whom died as toddlers. His father, Karl Eduard "Edward" Gebest, was a grocer who had emigrated from Göttingen, Germany in 1843, but many members of his family were musicians.

The senior Gebest's obituary included, "Mr. Gebest was in many respects a remarkable man. He was beyond question the finest mathematician in the city, possessed of a philosophic spirit that investigated all the good of literature. He was scholarly in the very sense of the term."

One of Charles Lewis Gebest's uncles played in a circus band for several years. And B. Frank (1864-1937), his youngest brother, was a music teacher in Zanesville, OH, then studied piano in Leipzig, Germany for a couple of years before going to Washington, D.C. where he founded a musical institute and performed as a leading concert pianist for over 20 years.

As a young boy, Charles learned to play both the cornet and the clarinet. At the age of 16, on September 13, 1864 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 troops in the nation's capitol, mustering out of the Union military June 24, 1865.

Gebest married Anna Louise Mullen (1846-1924) on October 31, 1872, and his son Gustave "Gus" (1873-1905) was born the following year. He would father three more sons, William (1882-1883), who died in infancy, George W. (1876-1896), who died from typhoid fever, and Edward Henry (1878-1933), who survived longer than any other member of the family. Edward served in the military's 5th Infantry band 1899-1901, and continued with a career as a musician thereafter.

Charles Gebest taught music lessons, played cornet, and



led bands in the southern Indiana cities of Columbus and Madison. He was especially connected to the Männerchor (Men's Chorus) movement. His first known traveling position came in 1880 with the Uffner, Middleton & Toole Combination. He featured his son, Gus, a young musical prodigy at the age of 6, as a piano and violin soloist.

Late in 1880, Gebest was named Music Director of the John Robinson Circus. He would hold this position for 16 years, and it would be his only circus bandmaster post. During his second season, his band played several dirges during a service in Charlotte, NC at the grave of John King who was killed a year earlier by an elephant. (*NYClipper* 10/8/1881)

In Norfolk, VA in 1884, upon the fourth anniversary of his being named Robinson bandmaster, his band presented him a silver mounted baton. During his entire career, he only missed one performance. While traveling with the circus, he was in every state except one.

Gebest's pleasant demeanor and competent leadership brought many players back to the band year after year. 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. His death in 1905 at the age of 32 was a tremendous blow to his family. One of Charles Gebest's nephews, Charles J. Gebest, was a successful composer who served as the music director for George M. Cohan.



About 1891, Gebest wrote the music for the spectacle **"Solomon and the Queen of Sheba."** The 1890s were the high point of the great circus spectacles. 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

bandmaster J. J. Richards.

Gebest continued to write and arrange music after his retirement from the circus in 1896. An 1897 article in *The Billboard* mentions that he was 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. Meanwhile, he and Anna operated the Gebest Hotel in Madison, IN. He

dance sequences, sometimes using original music and sometimes using a medley of circus and popular music. So, this case was relatively unique and showcased Gebest's talents.

Gebest's **"Solomon and the Queen of Sheba"** 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 a few additions and changes by Ringling

died November 17, 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.

Charles Lewis Gebest was inducted into the Windjammers Hall of Fame at the January 2011 annual convention in Florida.



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

Photo from Charles Conrad Collection

