

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

William N. Merrick (1856-1938), Inductee 2005

By Charles Conrad, WJU #1525

William Norman Merrick was born on April Fool's Day 1856 in Zanesville, Ohio, the "Y-Bridge City." He tried several occupations as a boy before becoming a musician, working in Indianapolis, IN as a hotel solicitor, a foundry laborer in a Dayton, OH carriage factory, and finally as a house painter back in his hometown at age sixteen.

On July 1, 1874, Merrick married Sarah Harriet Atkinson. That same year, he joined the A. D. Atwood Band, playing the Eb cornet. Alonzo Atwood, who had resided in Zanesville since 1837, was a local music teacher who organized the bands for the two circuses that wintered in town -- Raymond & Co. and Van Amburg's Menagerie.

Merrick played with the Van Amburg show in 1875, then left to go with Billy McAlister and the Washburn Last Sensation troupe before returning to Van Amburg to play under bandmaster Prof. Kopp. From 1876 through 1882, Merrick played Eb cornet under Louis Heck with the Sells Brothers Shows. Heck lived in Zanesville and organized the Sells Brothers band, which featured many local players. Heck wrote *The Seven Elephants March* during this time and dedicated it to the Sells Brothers Circus and its patrons.

Merrick recalled an incident from 1882 in Grand Island, NE where a woman who had been blind for years suddenly regained her sight when she was startled by the sound of the circus band's attack during a parade.

The 1882 season also encountered a serious train wreck in which several circus workers were killed and many more injured. Heck retired in 1883, and Merrick was promoted to bandmaster. His 1883 band was a 19-piece ensemble, and there was also listed in the route book a 9-piece "Colored Brass Band" led by V. E. Wilbur. Charles Baker, identified as a "Dextrous Manipulator," played the calliope and the side show included "Nine Tennessee Jubilee Singers" led by banjoist J. R. Robinson.



Evidently the first "colored band" of the show was fired by "the Gov." (It was not uncommon to see the manager of the show referred to as the governor.) In August, in Greensburg, IN, a new band, probably the one led by Wilbur, was hired.

The 1884 Sells Brothers Circus listed "Professor W. N. Merrick and his Silver Cornet Band of 29 pieces. Clarinetist Chester Bronson was at the beginning of his career with the band, and the circus was followed by a minstrel show. This post-circus "concert" was common at the time, and a minstrel show was often the "concert." In 1885, when Merrick presided over a 16-piece band, the circus was called the Sells Brothers Enormous Railroad Shows. In 1886 it was then re-titled the Sells Brothers Great Railroad

Show. The instrumentation for that year's band included an Eb clarinet, a Bb clarinet, an Eb cornet (bandmaster Merrick likely played a second such instrument), a Bb cornet, 2 alto horns, a trombone, a euphonium, and two drummers. No tuba was pictured, but likely one was included. There was a 7-piece side show band.

The Sells Brothers Enormous Shows United was the title for the 1887 show and several years thereafter. By 1890, the band had increased by 2 trombones and a tuba, and the side show band grew to 9 players. In 1891, the Sells Brothers Circus became the only American Circus to take its entire band to Australia, sailing on the steamship Monowai at the conclusion of the season on October 14. The 14-piece band played concerts aboard the ship and provided funeral music for a canvas man killed in an accident during the voyage.

Merrick's son, Alfred Norman Merrick (1875-1958), joined the band as librarian, tuba player, and leader of the second parade band. A prominent musician on the tour (who would also participate in the European tour of Barnum & Bailey a few years later) was bass drummer Henry "Hank" Young. The 8-piece side show band led by S. P. White accompanied both the American and Australian tours. After a brief stop in Hawaii, where they enjoyed a concert by the Royal

Hawaiian Band, the ship set sail for Auckland, New Zealand. They passed the Mariposa, a ship owned by the same company as the Monowai, and both bands as well as the calliope serenaded each other's passengers.

Several of the show's horses were found to have some diseases in an inspection by the Australian government doctor and were sent back to California on the next ship, forcing the show to purchase replacement horses in Sydney. During the first performances, the wagons were towed by circus workers while the new horses were being trained.

One of the show's canvas men fell from the high tent rigging and was killed – the band performed music for his funeral. The entourage returned

to California on June 9 to start the domestic portion of the season. The band played in a Wahpeton, ND cemetery at the graves of two Ringling Brothers Circus show members killed by lightning a few years earlier. Two other important musicians were among the show personnel, as composer G. E. Holmes played third trombone and P. G. Lowery (WJU Hall of Fame 1996) led the "Colored Band" at the side show. The parade bands totaled 30 members, including a dressing room barker who played bass drum with the second band.

In 1893, Merrick served as Music Director for Beach & Bowers Minstrels in the off season from Sells Brothers. He moved to the Albert M. Wetter Circus for the 1894 and 1895 seasons. He served as bandmaster for the Streets of Cairo touring theatrical company in the winter following the 1895 season. In 1896, Merrick would move to the Great Wallace Circus, playing Eb cornet and directing the 19-piece big top band that included his son. There was an 8-piece orchestra, all of whose members played in the band. The spectacle was the "Humiliation of Cleopatra and the Triumph of Augustus." The band rode in the Chariot Euterpe in the parade, pulled by a team of ten coal blue and ten snow white horses. Merrick's whereabouts in 1897 have not been confirmed, although pioneer circus music researcher Sverre Braathen believed that he was with the Adam Forepaugh & Sells Brothers Circus. Due to the constant shifting of musicians between circuses, minstrel shows, vaudeville troupes, and theatrical companies, it is often difficult to account for every year of a performer's career.

An often-forgotten fact of life in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century music is the important role of concert bands and sometimes orchestras in such enterprises as touring under-canvas theatrical stock companies. A photo of the 1914 Terry's Uncle Tom's Cabin band shows a well-balanced 20-piece brass band with an Eb clarinet and a Bb



**William N. Merrick, Musical Director
Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Circus**

clarinet. One musician's instrument is hidden, and it well may be a flute. These companies would often feature advertising parades as did the circuses and minstrel shows of the day.

In 1898, Merrick was bandmaster for the Adam Forepaugh & Sells Brothers Combined Circus, conducting a 25-piece ensemble that included his son, who again was leading the second parade band and serving as librarian. The instrumentation consisted of piccolo, flute (it is unusual that two people were used in this section), Eb clarinet, 4 Bb clarinets, saxophone, 4 cornets, 4 altos, 3 trombones, 2 euphoniums, 2 tubas and 2 percussionists. The solo cornetist W. C. Pace was listed as the assistant

conductor. Charles Prokop, who played euphonium in the big top band, was the leader and first violinist of a 9-piece concert orchestra; there was a 7-piece drum corps and Solomon White led an 11-piece side show band. In Beloit, KS, the big top band played the *Star Spangled Banner* to a loud ovation following the reading of a telegram that announced the end of the Spanish-American War. The band played at the cemetery in Auburn, IN at the grave of a Barnum & Bailey Circus superintendent, rendering *Miserere* from Verdi's opera *Il Trovatore* and *Nearer My God to Thee*. Merrick stayed with this show for the next five years.

In 1900, baritone vocalist Bert Morphy, known as "the man who sings to beat the band," joined the Forepaugh-Sells show. His repertoire as accompanied by Merrick's Concert Band is listed in the program of the circus: *Every American Girl is a Queen, A Picture No Artist Can Paint, That's One Thing That Rag Time Will Do, My Honolulu Queen, I Can't Forget How Dearly I Have Loved Her, In the South Before the War, You Don't Want Me, She's a Princess Just the Same, My Sweetheart of Sweethearts, You Were the One I Loved the Best, Dora Dooley, The Grey and the Blue, Tim Toolan, Mandy Lee and Impecunious Davis*.

A highlight of the season was a warm reception from C. L. Barnhouse and his band in Oskaloosa, IA, home of Barnhouse's publishing company, the most prolific publisher of circus band music. The visit to Oskaloosa included a banquet for the circus band held by the local Iowa Brigade Band. The route book mentions high praise for the band from newspapers in Washington and Boston.

In 1901, Morphy sang vocal solos with Merrick's band - this year his repertoire included *My Lady Love, Mr. Dingy, Don't Be Stingy, I Am Waiting Here for Julia*, and *The Story the Violet Told*. As always, there were some problems that

year. In Blair, NE, a horse became unmanageable and destroyed Al Merrick's euphonium! In Marysville, MO the band gave a concert on the town square in place of a parade due to street repair.

Merrick wrote *The Equestrienne* two-step for his 1902 band. Another singer, "The Wonderful Boy Soprano Master Izzie Kaufman," joined the entourage and sang *Just Next Door* and *What If Christopher Columbus Hadn't Sailed*.

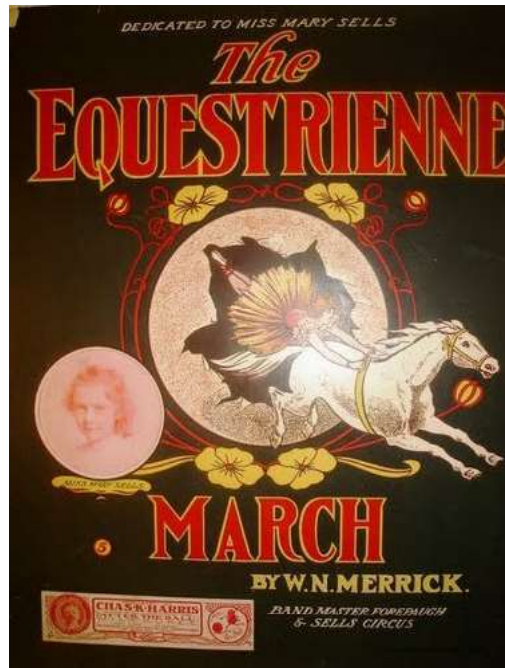
The 1902 program lists Merrick's *The Equestrienne* as one of Kaufmann's solos, but it is likely that it was performed solely as an instrumental work. Kaufmann was featured again in 1903, and was mentioned in a review of a sacred concert given by Merrick's band in the Menominee Opera House on June 21. No further mention of him in circuses has been found – perhaps it is simply because his voice changed. The 1902 program also carries an ad that notes: "Perfection found at last in the Lyon & Healy Own Make band instruments. Used by Sousa, Innes, Thomas' Orchestra and Merrick's Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Circus Band."

A long story in the May 26, 1902 **Brooklyn Daily Eagle** discusses the show's music in some depth:

"The big bandwagon at the head of the procession is a brand new conveyance, the old bandwagon, which had served so well in so many places, having been wrecked in a Texas smashup last season. In the wagon William Merrick and his famous circus band attracted favorable attention all along the line of march, which, of course, it goes without saying, was thronged with people, young and old. The early start of the parade gave school children in the uptown parts of Brooklyn plenty of time to see and enjoy before the significant stroke of 9 o'clock. The head bandmaster of the show, Bill Merrick, as everybody calls him, has been in the circus business for more than a generation and a parade without him and his musicians would be an exception.

Besides Merrick's Band in the procession this morning there was the band of colored musicians and the always funny Rag Time band, led in unprecedented style by Silvers, the clown. The latter band won all sorts of applause along the route for the novel and original manner in which it rendered airs which the public, until this morning, thought it knew.

Not the least part of a circus programme is the music. Without it the horses couldn't gallop around the ring, the elephants would fail to do their amusing and interesting tricks and all the life and action would be gone. A band is



as essential to the circus as the canvas covering called the tent. More than this, the band must play the right kind of music -- circus music -- whatever that mysterious kind of music is.

The Adam Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus has the right kind of music, and William Merrick is the leader of all the circus musicians, whether in the big show band or in the side show, or in the drum corps in the parade. Mr. Merrick was leader of the Sells Brothers Circus Band for fifteen years before the consolidation of the Forepaugh Circus and the Sells Brothers Circus, and he has been the leader of the combined shows' band since the consolidation.

Mr. Merrick has definite ideas about circus music, and he carries them out fully. The result is that the music that New Yorkers, both in Manhattan and Brooklyn, have been hearing for the past three weeks has been the best kind of circus music that has ever been brought to town.

'For one thing,' said Mr. Merrick last evening, 'I change the programme nearly every week. That is, I change all those numbers that can be changed. There are a few acts that require the same music each time they come into the ring. The music for the cake-walking horses, the high school act, is the same daily. The music for the elephants is the same daily, because the big brutes are trained to one tune and recognize it whenever it is heard. By the way, some ten years ago, there was an elephant that got on a rampage. He was getting madder and madder every minute and was almost if not completely beyond the control of his keeper. Finally as a last resort, I hustled out a few of my musicians and we began to play the one tune that he heard twice a day in the ring. The effect was magical. In a short time the elephant was quiet and then he began the first steps of his performance in the ring and there was no more trouble with him.

I believe in only the best kind of music for the circus and as I can't always find the music that is just suitable for certain kinds of performances, I write a large part of my music myself. It is apparent, for instance, that for a large part of the performances that we have in the ring certain things must be true of the music for them. The time must be well marked and plainly brought out. In general the movement must be lively. There are other considerations, but they appeal largely to the musician, but it will be apparent from what I have said that circus music requires as much time and attention as any other class of music and that but for it the performance would be slow indeed.'"

Merrick told a long and humorous story in the June 15, 1901 **Richmond VA Dispatch** about an extremely intelligent but mischievous elephant named Bolivar. He said that he had written *Bolivar March* in his honor. This elephant was known to pull up his stake and find local garden plots to raid for late night snacks, and Merrick claimed that the Forepaugh Circus sold him to the Philadelphia Zoo because they got tired of paying fees to the local farmers to keep them from complaining to the police.

The 1903 and 1904 seasons featured daredevils of the bicycle in addition to the expected acts. There is much less mention of the music in the 1904 program. In 1905, Merrick left Forepaugh and became bandmaster for the William P. Hall Shows for the circus season and a short stint with Shipp's Winter Circus and then J. T. McCaddon's Circus for a European tour. Merrick's replacement with Forepaugh & Sells was John H. Gill (1871-1951), who would stay for three seasons. For the first time, the program listed the center ring concert repertoire. Merrick then moved to the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus (first known as the Carl Hagenbeck and Great Wallace Shows Combined), where he would spend the remainder of his circus career. The 1907 program lists center ring concert repertoire as mostly popular music, and interestingly lists the publishers rather than the composers. A similar situation occurred with the 1909 program, and it also listed soloists Pierre Latour, cornet, and Lottie Rutherford, saxophone (sic.).

Included in the 1903 book "On the Road with the Circus" by W.C. Thompson was a chapter written by William N. Merrick and titled "The Circus Band." (See the April 20, 1995 *Circus Fanfare*, pages 10-12.)

Merrick also wrote an article for a 1911 issue of **The Billboard** entitled "*The Evolution of the Circus Band.*" (See the December 20, 1989 *Circus Fanfare*, pages 13-15.) The following is Merrick's description of the qualities and responsibilities of circus musicians:

"But to be thoroughly efficient and up-to-date, the latter-day circus leader must not rest content with a pleasing or popular concert program. There is the performance or incidental music to be looked after, and for this purpose the leader, to suit the varying tastes of the performers and public, must frequently draw on his own powers of composition. Every act, or series of acts, requires music exactly in keeping with its character. Nor will it do to keep one program on too long: the performer grows tired of it, the musicians become careless, and the music itself (so fast in the age in which we live) becomes mildewed and out of date."

"By this it will be seen that the circus leader's life, if he keeps abreast of the times, is a very busy one, nor is the improvement confined solely to the augmentation of the musical library. . . they must begin young in the circus business to acquire the proper embouchure for playing an almost unlimited amount double forte, over rough streets,

and still be able to render pianissimo in the concert program following the parade."

"No amount of practice in the conservatory or concert room can obtain this embouchure. It must be acquired by actual experience on the circus band wagon. A band composed of the better class of musicians that have 'come up' in the circus business will render almost double the volume of tone of the same number taken from the theater orchestra or concert stage, and if they have been properly handled by a painstaking and efficient leader, the quality will also be found superior."

"The life of the circus musician, filled as it is with plenty of hard work, is not without its sunny side. The constant change of scene incidental to travel alone is a great factor in depleting weariness."

Merrick had a feisty reputation, with more than one mention of altercations with both circus employees and "towners." In a December 7, 1929 *Billboard* article entitled *Circus Bands and Leaders of the Past*, author H. H. Whittier recalls, "*I have seen Bill Merrick make a pencil arrangement of some popular air during a performance. Bill was quite a character, ready to fight at the drop of a hat when he was in the right.*"

Bill Merrick played cornet in the Hagenbeck-Wallace band under Park Prentiss in 1912, also serving as the mail agent for that circus. He intended to return to the position of bandmaster for the 1913 season, but instead retired to his home at 805 Merrick Drive in Zanesville. He owned a farm as well as a cement business and seems to have been quite successful. He continued to play the cornet and lead a town band well into his old age.

In 1936, Merrick wrote a song for the presidential campaign entitled "*Vote for Landon,*" and the local Zanesville Band played one of his compositions, *The Trumpeter*, in a summer concert. He was a charter member of the Zanesville Musicians Union and belonged to the Elks and Eagles as well as being a Mason.

William N. Merrick died December 20, 1938 at the age of 83 in Zanesville and was buried there. He was survived by his wife and four children (Alfred, William, Eugene, Mary).

William Norman Merrick was inducted into the Windjammers Unlimited Hall of Fame at the January 2005 Convention in Sarasota, FL.

