



WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME



WILLIAM F. WELDON (1860-1923), Inductee 2012

By Charles Conrad, WJU #1525 [Updated & Reprinted from February 2012 *Circus Fanfare*]

The bandmaster for the Ringling Bros. Circus when Alessandro Liberati made his influential 1895 foray into circus music was **William F. Weldon**. (See Center Ring Concerts, p. 7, Sep/Oct 2023 *Circus Fanfare*.)



Weldon was born in San Francisco in February 1860 and there is scant information about his youth. His parents, Thomas and Alice, had emigrated from Ireland. His father was a U.S. soldier and by 1870 the family was stationed in Brownsville, TX. Young Weldon enlisted with the Tenth Infantry Regiment of the United States Army and played with the band, which was conducted by his father. Weldon's first professional experience was a short stint with the **Transatlantic Circus** in 1874, and the first mention of him as a bandmaster was in a reminiscence by an elderly Carl Neel (WJU Hall of Fame 2010), who replaced him leading the band for the 1881-1882 **Dan Rice Circus**.



Weldon was the bandmaster for the **Dr. Louis Turner Medicine Co.** in 1889 when he was hired by the **Ringling Brothers Circus** to be the bandmaster for their circus. This was, of course, a big step for Weldon, propelling him to the top of his profession. The 1891 Ringling Brothers concert band was a 24-piece ensemble. Somewhat surprisingly, about half of the side show band was staffed by players from the big top band with Clate Alexander, cornetist, as leader.

The size of the band was reduced to 21 pieces for the 1892 season and Carl Neel was now the leader of the side show band, which again included several players from the big top band.

The following description of the center ring concert was included in the program:

*"The most novel, new and artistic musical festival ever heard under canvas, introducing many beautiful solos and displays of individual excellence. Concluding with the grand descriptive overture **A Trip to Coney Island**, depicting in a realistic manner the following story of incident: Off to the boat, the farewell cannon shot, the steamboat whistle "all aboard," "Life on the Ocean Wave," the Italian boat orchestra and jubilee singer, landing whistle "all ashore," the carousel bell, passing a free and easy, ejecting an unpleasant*

customer, the little German street band, entering West Brighton Hotel and hearing the greatest living cornetist, Mr. James Hennessey; thunder in the distance, clouds break away, Seidl's famous orchestra at Brighton Beach, locomotive whistle, arrival at Manhattan Beach and hearing Gilmore's famous band and anvil chorus; signal for Paine's fireworks, cannon shots, sky rockets, etc., and "Home, Sweet Home."

James Hennessey was the solo cornetist of the big top band and it is assumed that the name of the soloist would be inserted into the center ring program to suit the performance. "Seidl's famous orchestra" refers to Anton Seidl, one of the leading symphony conductors of the 1890s who often conducted the New York Symphony Orchestra (later the New York Philharmonic).

The spectacle for the 1892 season was "Caesar's Triumphal Entry into Rome." Weldon changed the music for the show at midseason which was considered most unusual. A few days later, he took leave, staying at home in Baraboo, WI (the winter quarters of the Ringling Bros. Circus) for the duration of the season, while James Hennessey took over as bandmaster.

Weldon returned as bandmaster for the 1893 Ringling Bros. Circus season, directing a band with the following instrumentation: piccolo, E-flat clarinet, 3 B-flat clarinets, saxophone (sic), 4 cornets, 3 altos, 3 trombones, euphonium, 2 tubas, and 2 drummers. The side show band was a 9-piece ensemble, now separate from the big top band. [A note on the misspelling of saxophone - the instrument was just becoming familiar to American musicians in the 1890s and was starting to appear in ensembles. When the instrument was first introduced to the Elkhart, IN city band in the 1890s, it was referred to as a "Gobble pipe." Many publishers and engravers would misspell the word for a couple of decades.]

At the close of the 1893 season, Weldon became the bandmaster for the **Beach & Bowers Minstrels** for the winter. The 1894 Ringling Bros. Circus Band changed little in instrumentation from the previous year. There was now a minstrel orchestra of players doubling from the big top band, with the solo alto serving as first violinist and leader. Playing with the band were several noteworthy players - clarinetist G.F. Mitchell (famous as the composer of *Caesar's Triumphal*), cornetist Guy Repasz, and first trombone Frank Keeble.

Weldon was presented a surprise gift by his band, with alto hornist Oscar Puckett making this announcement:
"Professor Weldon, on behalf of the members of your band, allow me to present to you this medal as a souvenir of our respect and good feeling toward you. We present you this token with the hope that should the world in after years turn toward you its dark, gloomy side, therefore tempting you to forget that you are a man in man's high estate, look at this, and the memories that it will bring back to your mind will sustain you and buoy you up - aye! may incite you to greater and better things. We present to you this little proof of our regard, hoping that the faces of the band of 1894 will linger long in your memory, and if any of your reveries any of our shortcomings are remembered, think of them with all the charity you can, and remember that beneath all there was nothing but good feeling and friendship toward you."

The medal was of green and gold, the bar representing an open music book, and engraved diagonally across in black enamel is the name "W. F. Weldon." Suspended from this by two gold chains is a lyre-shaped pendant of two colors of gold. On it the following words are engraved: *"Presented to Wm. F. Weldon, Director of Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Circus Band, by Members of the Band, Niagara Falls, N. Y., Sept. 15, 1894."*

The 1895 season included the momentous center ring concerts with Alessandro Liberati's Band. Weldon's Ringling Bros. Circus Grand Concert Band had an instrumentation of E-flat clarinet, 6 B-flat clarinets, 5 cornets, 3 altos, 2 trombones, 2 euphoniums, 3 tubas, and 2 drummers.

Weldon was given the title of manager of Liberati's Grand Military Concert Band which included piccolo, flute, oboe, 2



1892 Ringling Bros. Circus Band depicting instrumentation to include cannon and anvil for "A Trip to Coney Island" - Bandleader William Weldon
Buster Bailey Collection, reprint Circus Fanfare vol. 40 no. 1 p. 10.



1894 Ringling Bros. Circus - Weldon's Big Show Band

Bernard

bassoons, 2 E-flat clarinets, 11 B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 alto saxophones, baritone saxophone, 6 cornets, 4 altos, 4 trombones, euphonium, 2 baritones, 6 tubas, and 3 drummers.

The personnel from Weldon's band who doubled in Liberati's band included 1 E-flat clarinet, 6 clarinets, 4 cornets, 2 altos, 1 baritone, 3 tubas, and 1 percussionist. Guy Repasz led a 10-piece side show band.

On December 14, 1895, Weldon married **Jennie St. George** (1875-1938) who was a concert harpist back in the vaudeville days and traveled the U.S. and Europe performing onstage with her golden harp. She traveled with many acts on the Orpheum Circuit and was also a soprano soloist in some acts. Weldon was her second marriage. Her first was to John Reynolds Reeves (1859-1947) of Barnum & Bailey Circus and subsequent to Weldon she was married to James Callahan, the other half of her duo, St. George & Callahan, then George Webster (1870-1926), and finally Joseph Hyland (1885-1966), also a vaudeville artist.



The 1895 season (and marriage?) must have taken its toll on Weldon, as he retired halfway through the 1896 season after a show in Decorah, IA, and he was replaced by George Ganweiler (WJU Hall of Fame 2008.) At that time, the show had used a Hawaiian Band for the center ring concerts. An article in the *New York Clipper* stated that "*Prof. W. F. Weldon, after eight seasons of faithful service as bandmaster of this show, closed Wednesday night. He went to Chicago, where he will make his headquarters afterward.*"

In 1909, this time with the **Dode Fisk Circus**, Weldon was back as a circus bandmaster. That show was also headquartered in Baraboo, WI. The 15-piece band marched in the parades and wore pith helmets. The band grew to 20 pieces for the 1910 season and reunited Weldon with Guy Repasz who played solo cornet with the ensemble. The Sousa march *Semper Fidelis* was used as the entourage's grand entry.

During the off-season in Baraboo, Weldon led a dance orchestra that included Repasz, Clate Alexander, composer and Baraboo native Guy Holmes, and circus owner Dode Fisk. Weldon spent the 1914 season as music director of a **Josh Spruceby Show** and returned to conduct the **Dode Fisk** band once again in 1915.

William Weldon died June 27, 1923 in Woodstock, IL., and is buried in Oakland Cemetery.

