cases and golden horseshoes

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magazine a life without technology — no mobile phones, no TV, no computers, not even a radio to listen to. Prior to the invention of these modern day technologies, travelling circus shows provided an inexpensive family night out, entertaining both the children and the adults. Residents of Wagga have been given opportunities to see live circus performances since at least 1875, when the well-known British and American Ashton’s Circus spent four nights in Wagga for one of the very first times. After a four-year absence, Ashton’s returned during the Wagga Cup race week in conjunction with St Leon’s circus. St Leon’s, whose tent was pitched at the corner of Gurwood and Treil streets, excelled in horsemanship, with the show closing with one of the St Leon brothers riding bare-backed around the ring, carrying a girl on his shoulders. Other acts included double-somersault throwers, Japanese wonders, plus the more traditional circus items such as juggling, trapeze, dogs and monkeys. Ashton’s Circus was set up at the rear of Nixon’s Mill in Johnston Street. Its asset was Tom Thurin, the smallest and cleverest show pony, who was only 32 inches tall. Ashton’s shows were made up of equestrian routines, acrobats, tightrope dancing, performing monkeys and balancing acts. If you fast forward to the 1900s, circus shows were heavily based around the involvement of larger performing animals, like elephants, lions and hippopotamuses. However, the animals — the elephants in particular — caused a great deal of chaos in the Wagga area. In December 1897, a cricket match at Rothon Park was rudely interrupted when elephants from Wirth’s Circus stampeded the cricket oval. In 1938, a Wagga sportsman went outside during the night to investigate a strange sound in his Morgan Street backyard. He understandably could not believe his eyes when he found himself face-to-face with an elephant. The elephant had escaped from a Bulleen Brothers circus while the men were dismantling the tent after a Wednesday night performance. The back gate, clothes lines and parts of the garden had to be replaced. The spirit of the circus was lost slightly from the 1970s onwards due to the introduction and popularity of videos and television. However, in 2000, Circus Royale drew big crowds to the Wagga Showground for their two-hour show. Even though elephants are no longer included in circus acts, the traditional favourites such as flying trapeze, jugglers and unicycles were more than enough to attract a large audience, even before adding brand new acts including contortion, horses, canes and fire acts.

Tinker Brown and those golden horseshoes

WILLIAM Charles (John) Brown, better known as “Tinker” Brown, was the owner of a circus that toured the Victorian goldfields. His circus mainly consisted of equestrian and dramatic acts, which included vocalists, comedians, a Shakespearean actor and a contortionist. Tinker came to NSW as a convict. A few years after marriage to Susannah, Tinker and family arrived in the newly proclaimed village of Wagga in the late 1860s and opened N... Wagga’s first store and hotel, “The Ferry Hotel”. Tinker and Susannah became involved in many different areas of business, among which was the purchase of a circus. In January 1865, Tinker Brown found that he couldn’t draw an audience to his circus in Wagga, so he decided to pack up and follow the crowds to Beechworth, which was attracting people from all parts of Australia. There were gambling dens, alcohol shops and dance halls set up for entertainment, but the arrival of a circus was received extremely well. There are a number of stories about Tinker Brown and his golden horseshoes. One of these states that in order to draw even more attention to his circus, he purchased nuggets of gold and had them beaten into the shape of golden horseshoes and fitted for Jorrocks, his spotted pony, which was his best show horse. Only two golden horseshoes were made and they were placed on the two front feet of the pony. The circus tents were set up and at night the show opened with Jorrocks, the star of the show, dancing around with delight, showing off his sparkling horseshoes. The huge success of Tinker Brown’s circus in Beechworth (probably mostly due to his golden horseshoes), it came as a big shock when he died on November 36, 1865, just three weeks after his arrival in Beechworth. His body was brought back to Wagga and he was buried in the old cemetery behind Church Hill. Later, when the new cemetery was opened, a tombstone in the Church of England section of the Wagga cemetery was laid in memory of “WC Brown.”

Four elephants tour Fitzmaurice Street in Wagga to advertise the circus is in town (from the Tom Lennon Collection [RW1574/43]).

Ungainly clowns and graceful horses are an established tradition at circuses (from the Tom Lennon Collection [RW1574/76]).

Compiled by Liz Dietrich


Wagga — A History by Sherry Moris.