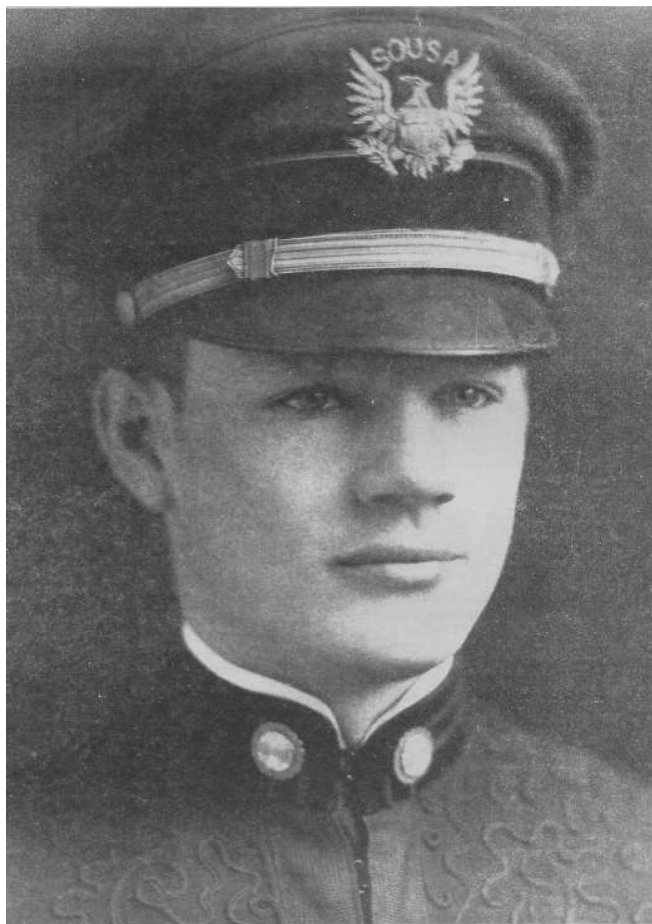


WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

Johnnie Evans (1905-1992), 1991 Inductee

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351

Reuben Clinton "Johnnie" Evans was born October 25, 1905 in the cotton mill town of Cooleemee, NC and ultimately became famous as a tuba player for both the Sousa and Ringling bands.



In 1991, *The Instrumentalist* published an interview of Johnnie by tubist **Harvey Phillips** (WJU Hall of Fame 2010). Harvey's starting quote was:

"When I joined the Ringling Bros. Circus Band in 1948, I was in awe of the first tuba player Reuben Clinton Evans, or Johnnie as everyone called him. His is a many-faceted career, the kind that is not open for young musicians anymore. I've never heard another tuba player play as cleanly as he did, and what's remarkable is that he never studied with anyone."

Evans grew up in North Carolina where his father, George Thomas Evans (1859-1919) was a country doctor who never made much money. George played a violin, and Johnnie's mother, Mamie Malinda (Crater) Evans (1880-1974) was the church organist. However, Johnnie didn't really consider the family as being a musical one. George died in 1919, leaving his much younger wife with five children: (Alton E. 15; Reuben C. 14; Blake I. 10, Gladys V. 8; and Maude H. 6.) The two older boys had to go to work to help support the family financially. As a teen, Johnnie worked at a local cotton mill for three years at ten cents an hour.

There were no school bands in those days, but Johnnie was invited to play in the town band. While the population was less than 2,500, funding was made available to provide the band with both uniforms and instruments. So, with an Eb helicon around his neck, Johnnie would ride to band rehearsals on his bicycle. Typically, the band only played marches and fox-trots.

The town-band director, Lou Goetery, happened to also be the assistant band leader with the John Robinson Circus. Knowing the Evan's family financial plight, the director sent a telegram just before Johnnie was to graduate from high school in 1923 offering him a job with the Robinson show. Thus, Reuben Clinton Evans joined the John Robinson Circus while it was on tour in Pennsylvania. At the time it was one of the three biggest shows other than the Ringling Bros combined show, and with a band size second only to Ringling. The circus bandleader, **Eddie Woeckner** (WJU Hall of Fame 1999), advanced Johnnie the money to buy a horn and was repaid on a monthly basis. Johnnie was paid \$25 a week plus all his expenses, so that was more than Ringling was paying at the time.

On his first day with the Circus, Woeckner told him "We play overtures". Johnnie replied, "What's that?" He quickly learned. On day two, he was part of the parade and while riding on the bandwagon, a low tree limb tore an important part off his new horn. Luckily, he was able to find someone who could fix it. Meanwhile, with Robinson, he had to play totally unfamiliar music. Johnnie worked hard, studied, practiced, and listened to every recording he could find. As a result, his capabilities on the tuba progressed quite rapidly and other Windjammers were impressed.

When the Robinson season ended in October 1923, Evans needed a continued paycheck. So, he checked the Billboard ads and saw one looking for musicians. He wired the bandmaster, O.A. Gilson, and was invited to join The Golden Brothers Circus, a show that had about 12 weeks left in their season. When they happened to play in Beaumont, TX, bandmaster **Everette James** (WJU Hall of Fame 1998) was in the audience and invited him to join the Christy Bros. Circus the next year for a 45-week season. For the next three months Johnnie stayed in Beaumont and then played the full 1924 Christy season. Christy had two shows operating out of Beaumont, the second being Lee Bros. Wild Animal Show.

When the Christy season ended, Johnnie returned to North Carolina and initially worked in the orchestras at silent movie and vaudeville houses. Meanwhile, a trombone player on the Lee Bros. show sent **Merle Evans** (WJU Hall of Fame 1974) at Ringling a telegram recommending Johnnie. Merle contacted Johnnie and said he wasn't yet experienced enough to play the kind of music they did at Ringling, but he would keep him in mind. And true to form Merle did indeed do that.

However, once again, Lou Goetery stepped in, calling from the Robert E. Lee Hotel in Winston-Salem, NC and offering Johnnie the tuba spot for his dance band, the Lou Goetery Orchestra. Johnnie was part of the touring orchestra until it disbanded in Waterloo, IA.

In 1926, Merle Evans contacted Johnnie, this time asking him to join the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus for the coming season. Johnnie Evans stayed on the Ringling Show for three seasons. Then one night, Merle took him aside and said a telegram for Johnnie had come in from the Sousa Band asking him to join. Johnnie shook his head, saying he didn't want to leave the Ringling band. However, Merle said, "Better go, Johnnie, this is your chance to get ahead."

So, in 1928 Johnnie joined the famous Sousa Band on tuba. However, when Sousa got sick in Rochester, NY late in 1930, the band closed for the season and the musicians were given transportation money to anywhere in the U.S. they wished to go. Johnnie ended up choosing Chicago.

A month later, Johnnie was saying he had "the best job in town" and "There were several tuba players who wanted to kill me." The job was not at a club, but rather in "radio." In those days, the larger radio stations had brass bands, concert bands and jazz bands. The Sousa connection got him the job, but first he had to work one-nighters for 30-days to "earn" a Chicago union card. When the 30 days were up, he went to work for NBC for two years before switching to CBS and their growing network.

While in Chicago, Johnnie was once offered the tuba job with the Kansas City and Saint Louis Symphonies without an

audition. Johnnie declined, saying he never "aspired to be a symphony musician." Indeed, he preferred Big Bands and Circus Bands. While in Chicago, he played for stage bands all over town, including sitting in with groups like Benny Goodman, Harry James, and Paul Whiteman. At one point he turned down an offer to tour Europe for two years with Stan Kenton. During this time, Johnnie also learned to play string bass. He thought the riffs were about the same as a tuba part. When he eventually left CBS, he went on the road for two years with the Glenn Lee Dance Band.

Johnnie was playing with Glenn Lee at the Claridge Hotel in Memphis when Merle Evans came to town and had dinner at the hotel. He saw Johnnie and invited him to come back with Ringling. At first Johnnie declined, saying "Merle, I got it too good" and he wanted to stay with the orchestra. However, a day later, Johnnie phoned Merle and agreed to rejoin Ringling. He remained with them until the outset of World War II.

SERIAL NUMBER 3543	1. NAME (Print) Reuben Clinton Evans	ORDER NUMBER 3440
2. ADDRESS (Print) 1510 Louatt St. Greensboro, N.C.		
3. TELEPHONE	4. AGE IN YEARS 34	5. PLACE OF BIRTH Winston-Salem, N.C.
DATE OF BIRTH Oct. 25, 1905		6. COUNTRY OF CITIZENSHIP U.S.A.
7. NAME OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS Mrs. George Thomas Evans		8. RELATIONSHIP OF THAT PERSON Mother
9. ADDRESS OF THAT PERSON 1510 Louatt St. Greensboro, N.C.		
10. EMPLOYER'S NAME Merle Evans		
11. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS Riviera Bros. Circus, Sarasota, Florida		
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.		
REGISTRATION CARD D. S. N. FORM 1		19-1708 R. Clinton Evans (Registrant's Signature)

With the war effort underway, Johnnie was soon in Washington, DC, playing in various military bands circulating around town. He was in those bands for the duration of the war, playing for the troops as they were either departing or returning from their overseas assignments.

After the war ended, Reuben Clinton "Johnnie" Evans was back with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus for a third, and longer, tour of duty. He was on tuba in 1948 when Harvey Phillips arrived for his first Ringling rehearsal. Harvey Phillips later reported he was plenty nervous to be sharing a stand with the now-famous Johnnie Evans. When Johnnie did his warm-up routine, Harvey couldn't believe what he was hearing, saying "The sounds, range, technique, scales, arpeggios, slurs, and articulation all blew me out of the water." But all went well, and Johnnie took Harvey under his wing as mentor, and also, perhaps, surrogate father or older brother. When Harvey asked Johnnie how they could be such good friends given his reputation for not getting along with other bass players, Johnnie replied, "Hell, Harvey, they never gave me anybody who could play!"



Johnnie Evans and Harvey Phillips on tuba with Ringling

When Johnnie couldn't play for the 1949 Season because of personal domestic issues, Harvey Phillips was in his spot on the bandstand. Johnnie was back for the 1950 Season. During August that year, Harvey was offered a scholarship to Julliard and left after not quite three years with Ringling. Meanwhile, Johnnie stayed on through Merle's retirement at the end of 1969 and for several years thereafter while **Bill Pruyn** (WJU Hall of Fame 1997) was bandmaster. Johnnie loved Merle as a bandleader and friend, of course, but he also respected and admired Bill, saying he was proud to have been "under his baton."

During these same years, Johnnie was often working with Guy Lombardo, playing several World's Fairs with him, the last being in New York in 1964. After leaving Ringling for the final time, Johnnie went on the road selling drums for Slingerland Drum Company, just as former Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. bandmaster, "Boom-Boom" Browning, did later-on.



Johnnie thought the hours and traveling as a salesman were a lot like the circus, except without the music. But indeed, music was Johnnie's life. So, it wasn't long before he traded in his order book and was back on tuba doing what he loved.

John Shideler, the "Cowboy Professor", offered Johnnie a job playing for rodeos and circuses. Then in 1978, when his wife's father -- who was only eight years older than Johnnie -- died, Johnnie and Reba decided it was time to settle down. Thus, he finished his career with the "Professor" and moved permanently to Page, AZ, where James and Mamie Crater, Reba's father and mother, lived.

On January 26, 1991, Windjammers Unlimited officially recognized R. Clinton "Johnnie" Evans for his lifetime of "outstanding achievement and grateful contribution in the creation, preservation and conservation of circus music." At 85 years old, it was but another milestone in Johnnie's phenomenal life on the road.

Eighteen months later, Johnnie Evans died on August 7, 1992.