

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

Sverre O. Braathen (1895-1974), 2009 Inductee

By Joseph Skotzke, Illinois State University (ISU) student

Photos courtesy Milner Library Collection at ISU

[Editor's Note: Joseph is completing his Bachelor's degree in Secondary English Education at Illinois State University in Bloomington-Normal, IL, anticipating a career as a high school English teacher. He has been working for the Special Collections section of Milner Library at ISU for the last couple years, and during this time has come to "know" Sverre quite well. Joseph's main project has been to index Sverre's letters to all involved with circuses from the late 1920s to his death in 1974.]



Just eleven years after his induction into the Windjammers Hall of Fame in 2009 and forty-six years after his death, Windjammers Unlimited members can once again celebrate the life of Sverre O. Braathen (pronounced as if rhymed with "gotten").

A prodigious collector of circus ephemera, Sverre attempted to capture the scene of the big top; the band blaring, the performers presenting, and the audience taking in every moment with anticipation. His joyous memories and lamented bygone circus days are cemented in the preservation of the Braathen "Passion for Circus" collection at Illinois State University's Milner Library, which highlights the thousands of beautiful snapshots he took of performers and the various lots they would frequent. His correspondence reads to us like a story, the acclaimed stars of circus recounting their histories and origins through the emotion of the written word. And though Sverre may not have ever played in the circus band or stood under its spotlights, he did what many could not. He ensured that the circus he loved would live on forever.

Born January 21, 1895, his circus days first began when visiting lots with his father, Sverre no more than a boy of three living in rural Mayville, ND. The sheer magnitude of his first visit to the Ringling show in Fargo was as nothing he had ever seen, leaving him fascinated and frightened by the glittering glare of the grand spectacle. By eight years old, he was a circus nut, rising before the sun to greet the Gollmar Bros. train as it pulled into the Mayville station, following their procession until they made it to their performing grounds. After crawling out from under the canvas, the youngster would have to just wait patiently for the next circus day to arrive. But to one as engrossed as Sverre, waiting just wasn't enough.

Though he could not match the nimbleness with which the performers moved, Sverre found a natural home among

the boldness exclaimed by the average circus band. The call of the brass instruments proclaiming their galops and marches became ingrained into Sverre's recollections of the circus, urging him to live out those happy bygone days when the show was long gone, and far away. This itch for pitch became insatiable when German-born former Barnum & Bailey cornet soloist, D. J. Cordes, came to Mayville in 1910 to jumpstart its community band. Cordes regaled the Mayville boys with the trials and tribulations of his time under the big top, bringing with him copies of the *Billboard* which Sverre squirreled away for further reading.

In a 1950 letter to Erik G. Ell, researcher for the "Voice of America" radio program, Sverre recalls:

"The closest I ever got to becoming a part of the circus was when I signed a contract to play with the Gollmar circus band with the thought of running away from home. My boy friend got cold feet, so we never became a part of the circus. My father had bought me a violin and I guess he thought I should have become a (Fritz) Kreisler. I guess I thought I should have become a Herbert Clarke so I had to set pins in a bowling alley to earn the money for my silver-plated, gold-bell Conn cornet."

Knocked from the naivety of his childhood, critical conditions overseas called Sverre to service in World War I. In 1917, Sverre boarded the U. S. S. Kearsarge in Norwalk, where he continued his brass obsession by playing in the Navy band as the ship worked convoy duty around the Great Lakes and Eastern Seaboard.





Following his discharge on September 5, 1919 as Musician 1st Class, Sverre returned home to Mayville, where he would meet his one and only love greater than circus, Faye O. Bentley. Married in 1921, the pair moved to Madison so that Sverre could complete his law degree at the University of Wisconsin and begin his practice of law. In doing so, the Braathens

unknowingly placed themselves in a destination hotspot for show insiders, troupers, and historians aplenty.

By 1930, the Braathens' presence was ubiquitous on lots all across the Midwest, and by 1933, Sverre's reputation preceded him as he worked full-force to be a good circus fan. Connected with performers, musicians, and management, he aided them in legal proceedings or immigration affairs. Around Madison, he became known as "Mr. Ringling," as his love for the "The Greatest Show on Earth" seemed to match the love of those who aided in its creation. Even their summer cottage, christened "The White Tops," would become their permanent home as their excitement for the big top grew. Here, they would gather the extensive Braathen circus collection.



The Braathens' "White Tops" circus cottage on Lake Waubesa in Madison, WI. Their faithful dog, Mitzi, is lower right.



The White Tops circus room, lined top to bottom with circus memorabilia, signed photos, and a Ringling writing desk.

In the summer of 1933, he would urge for the Ringling-Barnum Circus to return to Baraboo to play in a special celebration for the 50th anniversary of the Ringling Bros. Circus. This Homecoming, as it was frequently and rightly called, became the focus of all Sverre's attentions. Preceding the date, he hosted dozens of radio talks on the WIBA Madison station, guiding an imagined "little Jimmy" through the ins and the outs the big top. He called for Wisconsin to formally invite the show across its state lines, and he prepared Baraboo and its surrounding communities for the influx of people they were about to receive. It was the biggest day of the season, and Sverre's allegiance to the circus became unquestioned.

His growing proximity and pro bono legal work for the shows allowed him to fall amongst the good graces of many of the titans of circusdom, musicians, managers, and performers alike. Among these friendships were renowned bandmasters, such as Karl L. King, C. L. Brown, and most notably, Merle Evans. Between 1930 and 1974, Sverre and Evans would send over 800 letters between one another, sharing their opinions, their ailments, their thoughts on current events, and more. What's more important - Sverre kept copies of them all, both letters sent and received. Though what may have seemed like nothing more than pleasantries at the time, his preservation of these documents (now stored in the Circus and Allied Arts Collection of ISU) have allowed the voices of these esteemed musicians to carry well into the 21st century .

Sverre was careful, however, to ensure the many favors offered to him did not go unrequited. As payment for all the help he received, he made certain that frequent contributions to magazines such as *White Tops*, *Bandwagon*, or *The Instrumentalist* would illuminate his discoveries in the larger discourse community. Even his article for *The Instrumentalist*, "The Rise and Fall of Circus Bands," was met with such positive reception that it was later printed in a book form. In the 1960's, in preparation for the creation of a book of his own, Sverre began collecting the names of every circus musician he could find – living or dead.

This "master list" was to include every show with which they played, and a short biography of every performer that had available information to their name. Though an impossible task, it never stopped Sverre from trying. He became engrossed in the mysteries surrounding Russell Alexander, astounded by the amiability of Al Sweet, and fond of the works of art composed by J. J. Richards. There was no end to his research and even less end to his visions for publication. Through these efforts, Sverre did monumental work in advancing the world of circus scholarship, especially in an area that was generally lacking.

Sverre Braathen's magnum opus exists in his most notable unpublished work, a 456-page manuscript titled "It's All Out and Over". Collecting every fragmented memory of the circus he and Faye could find, the Braathens worked tirelessly to

put them together into a cohesive manuscript which paid homage to those who elevated the circus to its greatest heights.



Faye Oretta (Bentley) and Sverre Oliver Braathen in 1964

Completed in 1963, the Braathens spent years searching for its publisher, but after being held and tossed around with no result, Sverre lost hope, and the manuscript was shelved away. In his later correspondence, when others asked him for the status of his book, he would claim they must be mistaken, referring them instead to his publication with *The Instrumentalist* magazine. Importantly, this manuscript pledged to do the work that many other circus publications did not, stating:

“Lastly, and perhaps we should say firstly, we have tried to give to circus musicians and composers some of the credit that is so justly theirs, but which has never been recognized by any of the many writers of circus histories or stories.”

The manuscript contains three separate chapters regarding the musical artistry of the circus with dozens of direct ruminations from bandmasters with which he corresponded. Telling the tales of storied bandmasters, he attempts to preserve these musicians in the annals of his book, knowing that if he did not preserve them, they may otherwise be lost. At the conclusion of his chapter, “Lips of Steel and Tough as Leather,” he laments, *“The Golden Era of the American*

circus is dead, but one glorious segment of this great amusement enterprise lives on in the music composed for it by some of its more famous troupers. The ranks of old time circus bandmasters is fast thinning, and when the last one has passed from the scene, circus performers as are left will have to carry on as best they can.”

As years of tough conditions and management turnover changed the Ringling-Barnum show, the circus no longer represented what Sverre remembered as a Mayville youngster. The years had taken the big top that awed Braathen, and with it, many of its people. In the last years of his life, Sverre wrote to his good friend Merle Evans, *“The Ringling show had always meant so much to me. As I look back over the years to the big, happy and able family that it had. It was an institution. Now what is it? Just a shell with the name...”*

In a 1934 letter to Braathen, John P. Grace (former circus fan and collector) chides, “Probably when you are at it 40 years, you will be easing down too.” And he was right. By 1972, the Braathens were in poor health. After their battles with ailments that limited mobility, even a trip to Baraboo to visit their friends at the Circus World Museum became a difficult task.

On July 19th, 1974, Sverre's passing closed a lifetime of passion. However, thanks to his dedication, the memory of the circus he loved lives on through his perfect pictures, his monumental manuscripts, and his carefully crafted correspondence. And though Sverre claimed that the big show as he knew it was “All Out and Over,” his legacy has ensured that explorations into the memory of the circus have only just begun.



Sverre O. “Bex” Braathen, senior partner of Braathen & Sachtjen Law Firm at 110 E. Main in Madison, WI. He retired from the firm in 1960. William C. Sachtjen was his partner.

With his dog, Mitzi, Sverre is posing in his White Tops home's circus room sitting on a circus throne. Lined top to bottom with circus ephemera and memorabilia, this room drew performers and fans from all over the country.

