

# WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

## JOE BROWNING (1895-1979)

by Douglas MacLeod and Charles Conrad; Updated and reprinted from the June 2002 *Circus Fanfare*

Joseph Raymond "Joe" Browning, best known among aficionados of circus music for his many years with Merle Evans in the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey band, was one of the finest cornetists of the first half of the twentieth century.

Joe Browning was born July 21, 1895 in the coal-mining town of Falmouth, Kentucky, and was the son of the town barber, Franklin M. Browning (1871-1950), and Anna May (Parker) Browning (1869-1941). At the age of 18 or 19 he relocated to Des Moines, IA and played cornet in shows. His WWI Draft card (age 21 vs 22 actual) reflected he was with Cairns Bros., Decatur, IL at the time. The Seven Cairnes Bros. was a popular Midwest tent show that traveled by rail.



Seven Cairns Bros. and Their Company. Guaranteed Attraction. Their canvas theater would seat 2500.

Browning served in the United States Navy during World War I, likely playing under John Philip Sousa in the Great Lakes Naval Station Band. After the armistice in 1918, Browning toured with various vaudeville and chautauqua shows and small circuses. He joined Roy

Form 1		1917 REGISTRATION CARD		No. 174	
1	Name in full	Joseph R. Browning	Age in yrs	21	
2	Name and address of father, mother, wife, child under 18, or a sister or brother under 18, solely dependent on you for support (specify which?)	Franklin M. Browning, Decatur, Ky.			
3	Date of birth	July 21, 1896			
4	Are you (1) a natural born citizen, (2) a naturalized citizen, (3) an alien, (4) or have you declared your intention (specify which)?	Natural Born			
5	Where were you born?	Falmouth, Ky.			
6	If you are a citizen or subject of any other country, what country are you a citizen or subject of?	USA			
7	What is your present trade, occupation, or office?	Musician			
8	By whom employed?	Cairnes Bros.			
9	Where employed?	Decatur, Ill.			
10	Have you a father, mother, wife, child under 18, or a sister or brother under 18, solely dependent on you for support (specify which)?	None			
11	Married or single (which)?	Single	Rate (specify which)?	Reservist	
12	What military service have you had? Rank	None	Branch		
13	Do you claim exemption from draft (specify grounds)?	No			

I affirm that I have verified above answers and that they are true.

FIRST WARD  
NEWPORT

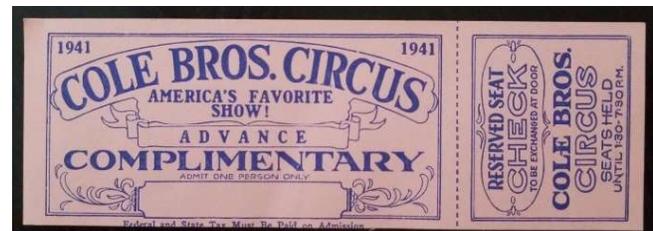
Joseph R. Browning  
(Signature or mark)

Smith's famous Kiltie Band for a time, and joined John Philip Sousa's touring concert band in 1927.

Following the stint with Sousa's Band, Browning moved to New York City to play in the pit orchestra of George White's "Scandals on Broadway". These were a long-running string of Broadway revues that ran from 1919 to 1939 and were modeled after the Ziegfeld Follies. The "Scandals" launched the careers of many entertainers, and in 1934 was made into a movie, starring Rudy Valee, Jimmy Durante and Alice Faye.

Browning was then employed by CBS for early live radio broadcasts, and he played in the CBS Symphony Orchestra. When he left this ensemble, he was replaced by the legendary trumpeter Harry Glantz. Browning toured with Bachman's Million Dollar Band and with Marshall's Band during the early 1930s, eventually settling in Kansas City, a hub of jazz and vaudeville activity.

Browning joined the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus band for the seasons of 1937 and 1938, the last year for that show. This was the second largest railroad show and had been touring since 1907.



He joined the Cole Brothers Show band under Vic Robbins (*WJU Hall of Fame*, 1976) in 1941, and was part of one of the legendary small circus bands for at least two seasons.

When Merle Evans had several players to replace because of the WWII draft, he hired Joe Browning in 1943 for the RBB&B band. His salary was \$27 per week with room and board included. He stayed on until 1954 (when he earned \$88 per week) until illness forced a temporary retirement from touring.

Stories from the early 1950s about Browning are legion, and the following are taken from interviews with two of the most famous circus windjammers of the era, Bill Pruyn (*WJU Hall of Fame*, 1997) and Harvey Phillips (*WJU Hall of Fame*, 2010).

When Merle Evans' first wife died in 1950, Browning conducted the RBB&B band while Evans attended the funeral. Many people commented on the terrific job that he did in his only conducting "gig." Jack Carroll, Browning, and his longtime standmate Al Hiltensmith led a rock solid cornet section in the RBB&B band. Hiltensmith was a rotund old German who had played with Browning in the Sousa Band and on Broadway. Harvey Phillips remembered the hundreds of games of gin rummy that he, Browning, and Pruyn played while seated on sousaphone trunks between shows, occasionally joined by Evans. At this time, Bill Pruyn was also playing tuba, and would later switch to trumpet before becoming an important circus bandleader in his own right. Browning wore a "grouch bag," recalls Phillips. This was a money belt or bag that tied around the wearer's neck, making it particularly difficult to steal.

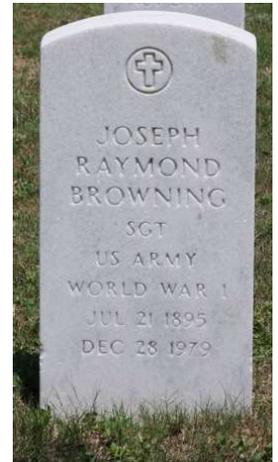
A most touching story shared by Pruyn illustrated the depth of Browning's musicianship and ability on the cornet, even at the end of his career. He liked to play Italian opera arias, and while seated in the long corridor that surrounded the Boston Gardens, played a moving rendition of Puccini's great "Che gelida manina" from "La Boheme." Circus

performers, especially the Italians, walked out into the corridor in rapt attention to the music, many with tears in their eyes. Browning retained his terrific endurance and range to a high F past his 60th birthday.

Browning returned to the circus for a last time in 1959 and 1960, playing in the band of the King Brothers Circus, a motorized show owned by the Cristiani Family.

He retired to St. Petersburg, Florida, where he played in the city band and at the dog tracks. He also rented lots in Sarasota. Suffering from diabetes, he had his legs amputated and became somewhat of a recluse in his later years.

Joseph Raymond Browning died on December 28, 1979 in and is buried in Barrancas National Cemetery in Pensacola, FL.



1945 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Band.

Photo courtesy Milner Library, Illinois State University