

REMEMBERING MERLE EVANS

By Ron Keller, WJU #492

MERLE EVANS
WJU 1974 Hall of Fame
Inductee #2



The first time I met **Merle Evans** (WJU #22) was when Paul Yoder (WJU #270) invited me to join the hand-picked band for the 1968 Midwest Band Clinic in Chicago. Merle later told me this band was the best band he had ever conducted! If you have not heard the recording, it was outstanding (and accessible under our WJU website's PRESERVATION tab!)

At that time, I only got to shake Merle's hand, but what a thrill! Then in 1976, our municipal band in Naperville wanted to do something special for the Bicentennial summer concert season. I suggested that just maybe we could get Merle Evans to come to Naperville and do a circus music concert. The board loved the possibility, so, I called Doug Macleod (WJU #407) to get Merle's phone number.

When I called and Merle answered, I said, "Mr. Evans, you probably don't remember me; I played in the band in 1968 in Chicago. My name is Ron Keller." Merle instantly responded, saying, "Yes, you played tuba with us!"

I explained what we wanted to do, and he said, "I think I could do that." I told him I was coming to Disney World over Christmas break and could stop by his house so we could work out the details. Thus, on December 27, 1975, I was

sitting in Merle's living room talking to the most famous living band director in the world! His first question to me was, "Does your bass drummer watch?" I replied yes. His next question was, "How many tubas do you have?" I said we have five, but I am going to play as well, and he said, "Fine, I'll come."

All the while we were talking there was this little dog running around his house and Merle was petting and talking to him. He called him Trampus. I asked Merle how long he had the dog and he said, "It's not my dog, it's the neighbors. I just take care of him every day!"

Well, Merle came to Naperville in July of 1976 and we put on quite a show! When the concert was over, Merle said to the band, "If I knew you people were this good, I would have brought my midget cornet and played along with you!"

We were fortunate to have Merle in Naperville five more times. On three of those occasions I would drive him to Milwaukee for the famous Circus parade there. We got to be quite good friends.



**Merle Evans and his Holton
"Might Midget" Cornet**

Every time Merle came to Naperville, he would stay at our home. My dog Sandy, a golden retriever, adopted him! Everywhere Merle went in our home, Sandy was with him. The first night when he was getting ready for bed, I checked on Merle and asked what time he wanted to get up. He answered, "About 7:30." I said, "Okay", and with that Sandy jumped up on the bed! She had never done that before. She always slept on the floor next to me. I sternly said, "SANDY!" but Merle said, "That's okay; if she wants to sleep with me that's fine!" So, Sandy slept in his bed every time he came to Naperville. In fact, that first year after he got back to Sarasota, he sent me a letter that started out: "Dear Sandy, Ron & all!"

Merle Evans loved the animals, especially the elephants and horses. When I would take him to Milwaukee for the parade, he would sit for hours watching the horses being harnessed to the wagons and the elephants being groomed.

Merle had a fantastic memory and had many stories he shared with me and the Naperville band. He talked about the

1944 fire in Hartford, Connecticut that destroyed the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Big Top and the fact the band played until the bass drum caught on fire!



The Bandstand following the Big Top fire on July 6, 1944.

The first time I took Merle to Milwaukee for the Circus Parade, he was honorary parade marshal. He had a room at the Pfister Hotel in downtown Milwaukee and I stayed with him that night before the parade. He sat in the main lobby in a big easy chair and all the women who had any contact with him came to him and gave him hugs and kisses! He loved it! Many of the clowns and other former circus people crowded around him and lots of them had their picture taken with him.



Columbia Bandwagon in the Milwaukee Circus Parade

Being with Merle, I got to meet down Emmett Kelly and juggler Dieter Tasso, who had both worked for Ringling. It was a most interesting and exciting evening. Later, up in our room, Merle told me the story of rooming with Emmett. It seems that when the circus hit town, Emmett would go to the grocery store and buy green onions, radishes, small carrots, and celery. After washing them, he would put them in a small ice box in the room. Then, after the final show he would take a shower, put on his pajama bottoms (but not the top), turn on the TV, and get in bed. He would then put salt in his navel and eat all the fresh veggies!

Merle also liked to tell the story of being Gabriel! Once in a little town in Missouri, Merle was in the barbershop getting a haircut and heard talk about the "Holy Rollers" that were to be meeting down by the river that night. They were

expecting Gabriel to blow his horn at midnight as they were predicting "The End" was near. Merle said he decided he would be Gabriel. So, he crept down by the river. Hiding in the bushes, at midnight he started blowing his cornet. He said he played every bugle call he knew, and the "Rollers" began yelling and jumping up and down. Most of them ended up in the river!

When he was with the circus, Merle said he would watch the acts in rehearsal for as much as three weeks and then pick the music to fit the act.

The first time I played at a circus, Merle got me the gig. The tuba player in the Carson & Barnes circus band had an emergency operation and was to miss at least five shows. What an experience that was. I sight-read the first show, a matinee at 1:30 p.m., then the evening show at 8:00. My wife went along and after the first show she asked what did I think of the performance, especially the elephants? I told her I never saw anything but the music!

Each act had a numbered manilla envelope of the music and some went on for 7 or 8 minutes. One particular act had eight Karl King marches and at the end, there was an arrow pointing back to the beginning if the act ran long!

Merle was a great friend and everyone who knew him loved and respected him! What a great guy and what great memories!



Merle Evans photo autographed to Kenny Slater (WJU #638)