



WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME



VICTOR H. ROBBINS, (1896-1970), Inductee 1976

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351

Victor Hugo Robbins was born January 27, 1896 in Hodgdon, Maine to Frederick and Emily Jane (Ellsworth) Alexander. Frederick died and Emily married William Harry Robbins March 22, 1900. Harry was more than twice Emily's age. Victor's step-father had at one time played trombone for the Barnum & Bailey Circus under bandmaster James S. Robinson (WJU Hall of Fame 2020) and was also with Patrick Gilmore's band.

At age 10, Vic started out on alto horn but switched to cornet, soon playing solo cornet in both the Madison and Lakewood bands in Maine. He studied with noted composer W. Paris Chambers for a time and then attended Manlius Military School in New York on a music scholarship.

Following graduation, Vic attended the University of Maine and then joined the Navy Yard Band in Boston, MA. During his time at the University, he was a member of the Bangor Symphony and the Bangor City Band, both of which were led by Adelbert W. Sprague, a graduate of Harvard University and the New England Conservatory of Music.



Vic Robbins in 1942 *Buster Bailey Collection*

Following his experience with the Navy Band at the close of World War I, he joined the Merchant Marines as an engineer. However, after only five months, he returned to music and was with the Chautauqua dance bands and various orchestras augmenting silent movies and vaudeville shows.

On January 3, 1921, Vic married Grace E. Cummings (1893-1964). Their child, Victor William Robbins (1921-1980), was born just 11 days later. Vic and Grace divorced October 10, 1927.

In 1922, Vic happened to meet Al J. Massey, who was recruiting musicians for his John Robinson Circus band. Vic signed on and opened in Chicago at the Coliseum in April. The next season, Massey was the bandleader of the Sells-Floto Circus, again with Vic playing cornet. Following the regular season, the band went on to play with a winter circus that opened in St. Louis. It was during that time Massey indicated he was planning to retire and thought Robbins was "just the person and musician to carry on as bandleader."



Vic Robbins and his Sells-Floto Circus Band (circa 1924)

Vic remained bandmaster of the Sells-Floto Circus band 1924 through 1932. In 1924, the center ring concert was an equal balance of classical (*Faust*, *William Tell*, *Poet & Peasant*, *Carmen*, *Suite l'Arlésienne*, *Semiramide*), operetta (*Nelly Kelly and Rosie O'Reilly* by Cohan, *Mademoiselle Modiste* by Herbert, *Friml's Going Up*), and band pieces (*Wedding of the Winds*, tunes by Klover and Bellstedt.) Vic played a cornet solo on *Surf Polka* by Steinhouser.

The Spectacular for 1924 was **Bride and the Beast** and Vic was featured prominently in the program, something quite unusual for such a young director. Following the two-week opening in Chicago where only his name appeared in the program booklet, the one used for the rest of the season featured him with two photos, an article, and a full-page Conn ad with Vic's testimonial.

During the winter off-season, Vic kept busy with various groups. As examples, in January 1924 he was in Lakeland, FL with John Fingerhut's Concert Band. In December that year he was in Tampa with a real estate band directed by Martin Stodghill. For the winter of 1926 he was cornet soloist with the Ira Haynes Band in Arcadia, FL and then Edgar Ball's Black Hussar Band in Orlando. For 1933 and 1934, Vic played cornet with the Kay Brothers Circus. Then in 1935 he was back in a bandmaster role, this time with Cole Bros. - Clyde Beatty Circus which became the Cole Bros. Circus for 1937-1942.

During World War II, Vic again served in the Merchant Marines as an engineer. When the war ended he was bandmaster for the Clyde Beatty Circus (1945), the Sparks Circus (1946), and again the Clyde Beatty Circus (1947-1956.) In the 1950 Federal Census, Vic listed his income as \$3,660 for the 32-week circus season.

After the closing in 1956 of the Clyde Beatty Circus as one of the last large railroad tent shows, Vic retired from the sawdust world, later commenting: *"At the time they went to truck shows ... and truck shows were not for me. Since that time, my only music contact has been the local Elks Band here in Porterville, CA"* (where his brother and mother lived).



Robbins conducting outdoor Cole Bros. promotion concert July 23, 1941, Springfield, IL
Photos by Sverre Braathen courtesy of Milner Library, Illinois State University

It happened that Vic's half-brother, William Nathaniel "Bill" Robbins (1900-1979), was conductor of the City Band of Porterville, CA from 1930 to 1960. Bill was primarily a violinist, but in 1923 had been playing french horn on the Sells-Floto Circus with Vic. At the age of 4, Bill had been considered a violin prodigy. As a youth, Bill was a playmate of Rudy Vallee, the famed singer of the 20s and 30s. Bill graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music, the University of Maine and Shaw Business College in Bangor, plus post-graduate work at the University of Southern California, Fresno State University, and Michigan State College. When the circus was home in Orlando during the winter months, Bill played with the Daytona Concert band and the Florida Symphony. He met his wife when he visited a retired circus clown in Porterville, CA. He quit the circus in

1928 and in 1930 became the director of instrumental music at Porterville High School and Porterville College.

During the eight years following his retirement from the circus, Vic was employed as a night clerk at the Porterville Hotel.

When asked who wrote the best circus marches and galops, Vic ranked the top composers as:

1. Karl King
2. J.J. Richards
3. Russell Alexander
4. George Wiegand
5. Henry Fillmore.

Victor Hugo Robbins died October 28, 1970 at age 74 and is buried in Fresno, CA.

Robbins was inducted in the Windjammers Unlimited Hall of Fame in January 1976.



Victor H. Robbins with his Clyde Beatty Circus band



June 30, 1941 - Janesville, WI *Braathen photo/Milner*



Vic Robbins and his Sells-Floto Circus Band (1924)

Photo from Max Kramer Goodall II collection