



# WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME



## James E. Wolfscale, Inductee 2020

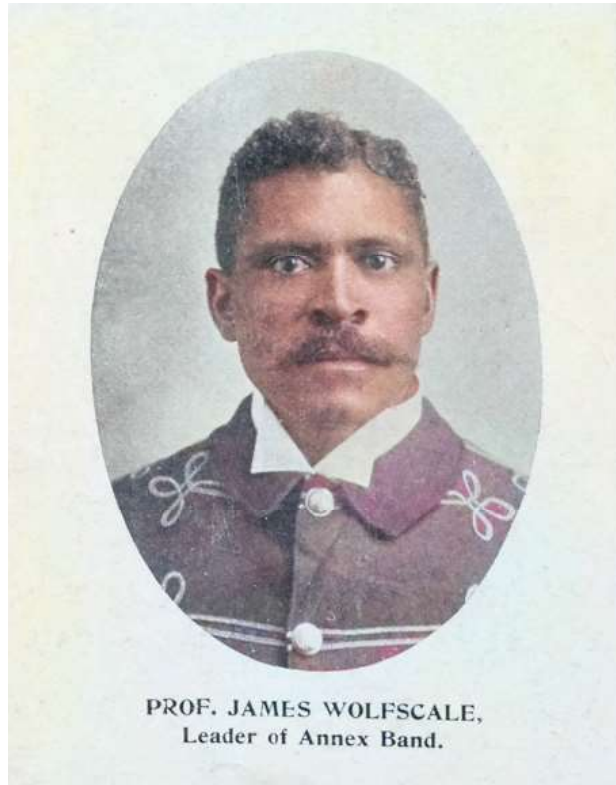
By Rod Everhart. WJU #1351

Circus sideshow bandleader James E. Wolfscale was born December 8, 1868, in Chillicothe, Missouri and he died at age 52 on October 21, 1921, in Chicago, Illinois.

His father, Dennis was born a slave in Howard County, Missouri in 1812 (although his reported birth records varied between 1806 and 1824) and died June 17, 1904. Regardless, he lived to be the oldest resident of Livingston County, Missouri, despite being thrown some distance by a tornado in 1893. As a middle-aged man, Dennis was bought by "Uncle" Joe Wolfscale and remained with him until the Civil War ended, then taking the Wolfscale surname thereafter. In Missouri, slaves were freed in 1865. On February 4, 1866, Dennis married Esther (1841 - 1909). Dennis was a farm laborer, but having retired before the 1900 Census, he listed his occupation as musician. In fact, it was reported he greatly enjoyed playing his banjo before groups "for applause and coins."

Dennis and Esther's son James Wolfscale married Lena Bertha Ballew (1872-1913) on February 21, 1887, with Chicago, Illinois as their home base. They had three sons: Troy W. (1887-1966), Roy Edward (1889-1957), and Ray Artemus (1891-1945.) In 1907, they were located briefly in St. Louis, MO. and the city directory listed James as a brass music teacher. James was proficient on cornet, baritone, and violin.

The three boys were musical like their father and participated in their father's side show or annex circus bands from an early age on. In the sideshow band of 1914 with Barnum & Bailey was Roy (age 24) playing cornet, and Troy (26) and Ray (22) on alto horn. In 1917, Ray was listed on mellophone and Troy on drums.



*Ringling Archives: First Annual Route Book of the Great William Sells and James H. Gray United Shows 1900*

On October 27, 1917, *The Chicago Defender* reported: "The Moonlight on the Levee company, under the management of J. E. Wolfscale, featuring Princess Wee Wee, will open on Vaudeville in New York on November 12, with Slim Mason as principal comedian and a jazz band. Prof. Wolfscale's motto is 'Let Your Last Days Be Your Best', and he is proving this by closing his circus season with one of the best and strongest eighteen-piece bands under canvas. Here is the roster: James E. Wolfscale, Thomas Ramsey, Al Franklin, James Dorsey, Lockwood Lewis, Edward Schofier, Charles Walker, Ray Wolfscale, Frederick Lewis, Herman Jackson, Willie Green, Ernest Smith, Abner Goode, Ben Statton, Kilmer Jackson, Troy Wolfscale, Tommy Woods, and Slim Mason."

On May 18, 1918, *The Chicago Defender* had this article, headlined: **Wolfscale's Band – Famous Organization Opens with Barnum & Bailey Big Show.** The text reads: "James E. Wolfscale, band leader with Barnum & Bailey's circus for the past six seasons, did not open the 1918 season with the Greatest Show on Earth. However, he was called with his aggregation to take the place of the Wm. Reid band, which was canceled last week at Philadelphia. Mr. Wolfscale has the reputation of having the best band of all times, and despite the heavy inroads made in lines of musicians, this season's band is right up to the standard. Here is the roster: James E. Wolfscale, Thomas Ramsey, William Malone, Lewis Fletcher, R. Patten – cornets; Johnny Brown and James Walker – clarinets; Ben Goodall, Willie Green, and Reidus Harton – trombones; C. Mills and William Wells – baritones; Ben Stratton and Kilmer Jackson – basses (tubas); Sam Reed, Ed Tolliver, and Earl Smith – mellophones; Troy Wolfscale, mellophone and trap drums; John Goodloe, Tommy Woods, Frank Martin, and Clyde 'Dollar Bill' Jones – drums."



**John Robinson's Circus Side Show Band around 1920. James Wolfscale with cornet on left.**

In 1889, James was performing in Zephyr, Kansas for the Zephyr Literary Society, a Black women's club. Then in 1892-1894, his Algerian Band & Jubilee Singers was with the W.S. Brown's Punch & Magic Show and also with the Sells & Rentfrow's Circus, touring California in 1894. *The New York Clipper* refers to the troupe as "a Zulu band of ten pieces" alongside "a number of new freaks and curiosities" for the side show. In 1895, Wolfscale was leading the band with Caldwell's Minstrels.

Next, he was with other Sells circuses: Great William Sells & James H. Gray United Shows (1900-1901), and Sells & Downs (1902-1905). He survived the Sells & Downs Circus wreck in 1902. In 1903 he branded his band as the J.E. Wolfscale Vaudeville Company. In 1905, he was also playing 2nd violin. On stage, Miss Essle Williams made a hit with "*What the Band Played*," and Walter Rector was singing "*In Sunny Africa*" with great success. Nat Black sang "*If Time Was Money, I'd Be a Millionaire*," Addie Crumwell found favor with "*I Got Mine*," and Sallie Lee was a hit with "*Taking a Trip Up the Hudson*."

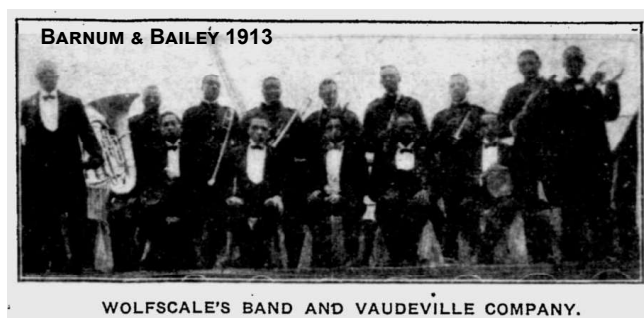
Wolfscale then moved to Cole Brothers with his Georgia Minstrels and cakewalkers, a twenty-one-piece band that also accompanied the minstrel performance. In the July 14, 1906 *St. Louis Palladium* article about Cole's return from a month in Canada, it included "Prof. James Wolfscale has bought a \$65 Holton cornet. He likes Holton better than any make he has used."

James was with Cole Bros. 1906, 1907, and 1909. James' sons Roy and Troy were now part of the band. Ray, the

youngest, joined his father and brothers a year later with the Jones Bros.' Buffalo Ranch Wild West Show (1910-1911.) The 1910 Jones Bros. band roster included: James, Roy, and Troy Wolfscale; William Morgan, E. Smith, Sam E. Reid, E. Terry, A.A. Peeples, Miss Carrie Clement, Miss Mamie McClure, and Miss Bessie Minton.

In 1911 Wolfscale was with the Forepaugh-Sells sideshow. His 1911 Forepaugh-Sells band included: James, Roy, and Troy Wolfscale; W.F. Russel, Ben Stratton, Horace Eubanks, Herman Brown, Carrie Clements, James A. Harris, W.P. Smith, Amos Peeples, Willie Brown, Ben Goodall, and Avis Anderson.

Roy soon left the sawdust world in favor of the jazz era, playing cornet at The Pickford Theater on the NE corner of 35th and Michigan in Chicago's black entertainment district.



James joined the Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1912 for a six-year run (1912-1918.) He built an even bigger band, advertising in the *Freeman* publication for more musicians. In true vaudeville company fashion, he also includes



comedians, dancers, and song shouters that "jammed their tent." When Ringling Bros. Circus combined with Barnum & Bailey in 1919, P.G. Lowery was given the side show band leadership role. With that, James began the 1919 season with the John Robinson Circus. By September, however, he was with Leon's Southern Minstrels. Members of that band included Sam Good, Frank Nichols, James Jordan, George Minor (dancer), Harrison Dinsmore, Hoss Crawford, Dave Parte, and Miss Laisy Leon (calliope soloist.)

James' wife, Lena Bertha, died of cancer at age 41 on December 26, 1913, at Provident Hospital in Chicago. Provident was the first African-American owned and operated hospital in America. She was laid to rest in Chillicothe, MO. Her death preceded that of her parents,

husband, three sons, three brothers, and two sisters. Not quite a year later, on October 30, 1914, James married Littela Decosta (sometimes reported as Zitela, Zitella, or Estella) and they resided at 3144 Walbash Avenue, Chicago. Littela managed Harriet Thompson, the two-foot, six-inch person whose stage name was "Little Princess Wee Wee", a featured sideshow song and dance performer on Wolfscale's show.

When James retired in 1918, he purchased a home at 3610 Calumet Avenue in Chicago. He died October 21, 1921 "of a complication of diseases." He was interred in Chillicothe, MO, the birthplace he had left 23 years prior. Windjammers Unlimited honored James E. Wolfscale as its 2020 Windjammers Hall of Fame laureate.

## OLD EX-SLAVE DEAD, AGED 96

### DENNIS WOLFSCALE SUCCEUMBS TO DROPSY.

Remarkable Negro Born In Howard  
County And Had Lived Here  
51 Years.

Dennis Wolfscale, an old ex-slave, the nearest estimates of whose age placed it at ninety-six years, died at his home in the south part of this city at 6:15 Friday morning. Death was due to a breaking down of the system, aggravated by dropsy.

For fifty-one years Wolfscale lived in Chillicothe or vicinity. He was born in Howard county and was bought at auction when a middle aged man by "Uncle" Joe Wolfscale, who died about fifteen years ago after residing for years in the northwest part of the county.

All during the civil war the negro stayed with his owner and left only when he was made free by the emancipation proclamation. He did not leave Livingston county then but remained here constantly until his death.

Wolfscale was one of the workmen who built the blockhouse on Medicine creek, northeast of Chillicothe. He never fought on either side during the struggle between the north and south.

Funeral from the A. M. E. church Saturday afternoon at 2 o'clock. Burial in the colored cemetery.

*The Chillicothe Constitution-Tribune* Jun 24, 1924

## BODY OF MRS. WOLFSCALE BURIED HERE SUNDAY.

The remains of Mrs. Bertha Wolf-scale, colored, who died in Chicago of cancer, arrived in Chillicothe Saturday afternoon and were taken to the home of her father, Charles Ballew. The funeral was held from the colored Methodist church Sunday afternoon. The remains were accompanied by her husband and three children. The Wolfscalls are with the Barnum & Bailey circus.

*The Chillicothe Constitution-Tribune* Dec 29, 1913

## VETERAN CIRCUS BAND LEADER DIES

James E. Wolfscale, veteran band leader and known the world over, died at St. Luke's Hospital Friday, October 21, at 3 in the afternoon. For years he had bands with Barnum & Bailey, Forepaugh and Sells Bros. and all of the other prominent circus shows. About three years ago he retired from the business and bought a home at 3610 Calumet Avenue, where he resided up until the time he was taken to St. Luke's. He is survived by his wife, Zitella Wolf-scale, two brothers and three sons, Ray, Roy and Troy, who traveled with him since they were small children. The middle son plays cornet at The Pickford. His remains were taken to Chillicothe, where he will be buried beside mother who died seven years ago.

*The Chicago Whip* Oct 29, 1921