

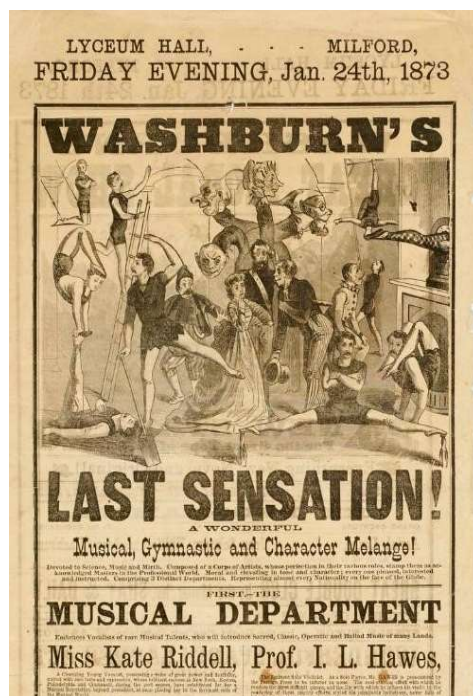
WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

James S. Robinson (1839-1919), Inductee 2020

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351

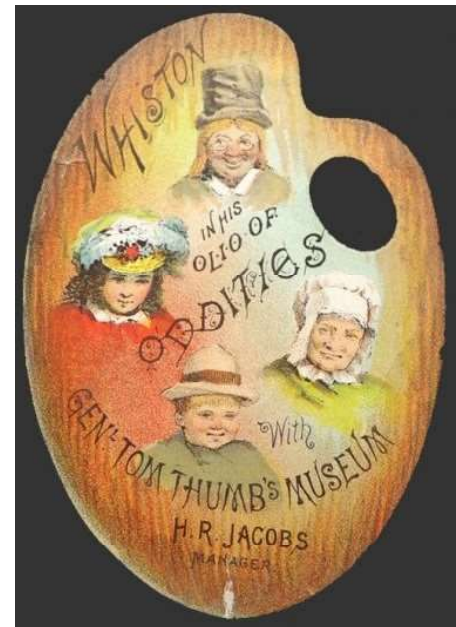
James Stead Robinson was born in Huddersfield, Yorkshire, England on September 19, 1839, to George (1813-1892) and Ellen (Stead) Robinson (1817-1898). He had three siblings: Younger (1842-1889), Isabella (1846-1929), and Matilda (1851-1920.)

Robinson got his first taste of the circus with Hengler's Circus in Scotland. Hengler's Circus was a historic and successful circus in Glasgow, established in the 1860s by Charles Hengler and later continued by his son Albert. The circus's permanent location in Glasgow was in the West Nile Street area, before it moved to Wellington Street in 1885 and then to Sauchiehall Street in 1904. The circus, known for its equestrian acts and spectacular productions, closed in 1924 due to rising production costs and competition from the emerging cinema industry.

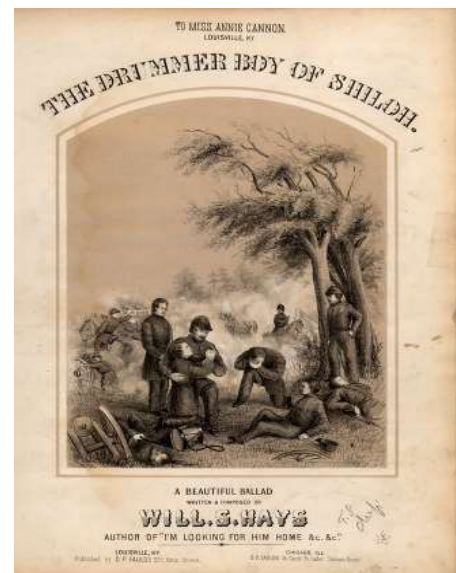


However, as an adventuresome 32-year-old, Robinson left Hengler's Circus on March 12, 1871, and sailed from Liverpool to the United States. He immediately found employment with **Howe's Great London Circus & Watson Brothers Circus**, performing for two weeks at the Mechanics Institute at 62nd Street and 3rd Avenue in New York City. He was then with humorist **Whiston and his Olio of Oddities**, in association with the General Tom Thumb Museum. In 1872 he was with **The Drummer Boy of Shiloh** show, the **Jennie Hight Comedy Company**, and **Washburn's Last Sensation** where I.L. Hawes was the musical director of this "Musical, Gymnastic, and Character Melange!"

Robinson's career as bandmaster then took off in 1873 when he joined **Zamfrety's Humpty Dumpty company**, **Amy Stone Dramatic Alliance**, **Nevell's Variety** (in Montreal, Canada), and **L.B. Lent's "Great New York Circus."** He continued with Lent's show in 1874, plus was the bandmaster for **Bishop's Serenaders at Ward's Odeon** (opera house) in Patterson, NJ. An 1880 broadside program for Ward's included this invitation: *"Most especially to ladies and children, to our matinee, Saturday, when the entire programme will be given in strict adherence to all laws of gentility and modesty. Our motto: Please all and offend none. Entertainment includes farcical sketches, acrobatics, singing, a 'canon ball performance,' and Prof. Wiefenbach, in his challenge specialty of performing on 16 drums at one time."*

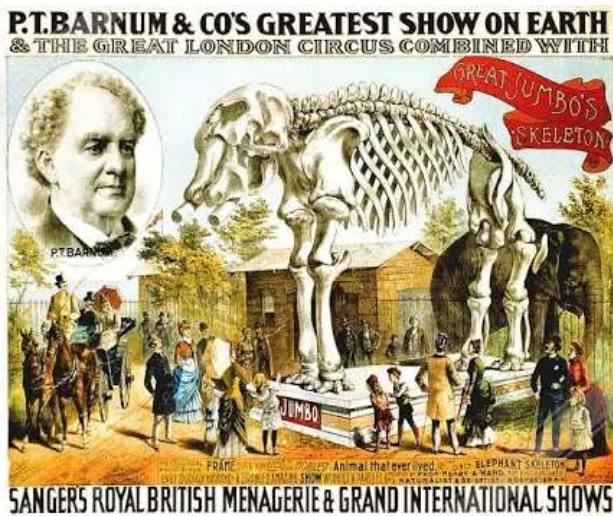


"Whiston and his Olio of Oddities" was a humorist and "facial artist" who presented a collection of peculiar acts and characters. The show included characters like the Yankee Phrenologer and Mrs. Partington, alongside acts such as Major Newell the Skatorial Champion and Zoe Meleke with her performing birds.



The Drummer Boy of Shiloh

In 1881, Robinson joined the **Barnum & London Circus** with 25 in his band and nine in the side show band under A.W. Moses. For that season, P.T. Barnum's "Greatest Show on Earth" had consolidated with the Great London Circus, Sanger's Royal British Menagerie, and Great International Allied Shows, owned by James Bailey, and was officially branded as "P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth and the Great London Circus."



In 1882, Robinson's band was referred to as "Prof. James S. Robinson's Celebrated Brass and Reed Band." Its staffing was 3 Bb & 1 Eb cornets, 2 Bb & 1 Eb clarinets (clarinet), 1 Eb piccolo, 3 alto horns, 3 trombones, 1 Eb tuba, 1 Bb bass, 1 euphonium (euphonian), and 3 percussion. The 1882 *Barnum & Bailey Route Book* showed he had 186 working days with the circus that year and traveled 5,869 miles.

The 1888 show had 21 in the big top band, 10 in the side show band under G.D. Rossi/Sig. Camerona, and 11 in a fife and drum corps led by Otto Willkomm.

In 1890, P.T. Barnum and James Bailey rebranded their combined circuses to form the Barnum & Bailey Circus, “The Greatest Show on Earth”. After Barnum’s death in 1891,

Bailey continued to lead the highly successful and innovative enterprise, which featured impressive animal acts, daring acrobats, human curiosities, and large traveling menageries.

In 1890, Robinson led the **Barnum & Bailey Circus** “orchestra” and Barnum’s “Military Band.” The Concert Orchestra was comprised of 2 violins, and 1 each of viola, flute, clarinet, cornet, trombone, bass, and drums. The Military Band had the leader plus 35 pieces: 6 Bb & 2 Eb cornets, 7 Bb & 1 Eb clarinets, 3 Eb alto horns, 2 Eb french horns, 3 trombones, 1 Eb piccolo, 1 flute, 1 euphonium, 1 baritone, 2 Eb & 2 BBb tubas, and 3 percussion (cymbals, bass drum, snare drums, bells, Xylophone, etc.)

As reported in the *1890 Barnum & Bailey Route Book*, on Robinson's birthday he was "presented by the members of the band with a handsome gold-headed cane as a remembrance of his birthday."

James S. Robinson became a naturalized U.S. citizen on January 26, 1891, and retired from Barnum & Bailey's show prior to the 1882 season, when Carl Clair (WJU Hall of Fame 2004) took on the bandmaster role. He then moved to Paterson, NJ, where he opened the Dover House at 620 Main Street (corner of Main, Chadwick, & Weiss), and organized **Robinson's National Band**. After conducting at this location for five years, he leased it to the Brewing Company of Paterson. (Today, it is The Point Liquors & Bar.)

With some sawdust still left in his veins, he joined **Frank Hall's Royal English Show** in Chicago, IL for the winter seasons of 1894-1896, and the **Dan Rice Circus** in 1895-1896. Summers he was also performing at Manhattan Beach Park (Brooklyn, NY) with an orchestra. Thus, his retirement included only limited moments of leisure!

Robinson was married twice. He married Sarah Ann Barker (1861-1894) on November 22, 1882. They had two daughters, Blanche (William J. O'Meara), born August 30, 1883, and Leonia "Minnie", born August 27, 1885. Several years after Sarah's death, he married Otilie A. Stelton (1865-1933) on April 26, 1898. They had a daughter, Violet S. (Robert W. Williams) born two years later, July 9, 1900. During his years with circuses, Robinson was an avid collector of circus posters and was reported to have owned the largest collection of circus posters in the world.

James S. Robinson died October 31, 1919, in Morristown, NJ and is buried at Cedar Lawn Cemetery in Paterson, NJ next to Sarah. After his passing, Otilie moved to Georgia to live with her daughter and her husband at 120 Cleveland Avenue in Macon and later at 724 Avery Street in DeKalb, GA. After her mother's death, Violet divorced and moved to Washington, DC where she and her daughter (Violet Robinson Williams) were both stenographers.

James S. Robinson was inducted into the Windjammers Hall of Fame in January 2020.