

OUT OF THE PAST

HARRY SHELL - STEAM CALLIOPE ENTHUSIAST

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351



Photo of Harry Shell at Calliope autographed to Babe & Buckles Woodcock.



Harry Shell (5 Aug 1902 - 16 May 1987)

Photo from Milner Collection at Illinois State University

Born in Indiana, but raised in Des Moines, IA, Harry Shell's circus career began in the early 1920s. He was playing trumpet in 1921 with the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus band.



Hagenbeck-Wallace's 1905 Elephant Tableau in 1921, serving as their No. 2 bandwagon. Harry Shell photo (Joseph Bradbury Album # 9 – photo # 54C in East St. Louis, MO.)

Over the years, he played for many other circuses, including Mighty Haag, Christy Bros., Orange Bros., Moon Bros., Russell Bros., and King Bros. circuses.

From 1963 through 1965, Harry was with the King Bros. Circus as bandmaster of their 3-person circus band, comprised of trumpet, organ and drums. While with King Bros., Harry married circus organist Isla Liles Garcia (1901-1966), with whom he had worked for many years.

Harry loved all things circus, but in particular, he became a major fan of steam calliopes.

During the 1950's and beyond, Harry restored calliopes at his home in Farmington, MO. He then proudly and enthusiastically toured them at fairs, steam engine events, centennials and other celebrations across the country.

The 1902 Gentry Bros. Twin Steam Calliope #1 housed at the International Circus Hall of Fame in Peru, IN was re-built by Harry with a new manifold and some whistles.



Harry Shell and Isla Garcia with the King Bros. Circus in 1963

Karl Kae Knecht Cartoon published on July 3, 1955



Karl Kae Knecht (12/4/1883 - 7/28/1972) was the cartoonist for the *Evansville Courier* newspaper from 1906 to 1960. Photo Credit to Evansville Courier (now Courier & Press) as the original publisher and the University of Evansville Library, which houses Knecht's original sketches. Permission received from the Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Digital Archive

Cartoon Enhanced Text: July 4, 1955 is the 100th Anniversary of the Steam Calliope (or Steam Piano.) Joshua Stoddard invented it in Worcester, Massachusetts. Years ago, every circus parade had one. So, too, steamboats. One of the few makers during the 1890's and early 1900's was George Kratz, located here in Evansville, Indiana.

Today, only one circus on tour uses one. Air calliopes replaced the steam-powered ones. There are still a few on display in museums, and Harry Shell of Farmington, Missouri will exhibit one at this year's Indiana State Fair in Indianapolis.



The Gentry Bros. Twin Steam Calliope #1 in the Peru Circus Parade in 2009. Photo by Bob Cline

In 1902, Sullivan & Eagle of Peru, IN built two identical calliope wagons for the Gentry Bros. Famous Shows. Over the years, ownership of #1 changed a number of times, including use by Gentry & Patterson Combined Shows, Walter L. Main, Cole Bros. World Toured Shows, King-Cristiani, King Bros., and Blue Grass Shows (carnival.) Originally, the calliope had 20 whistles. Later it was expanded to 32. Further the coal-fired boiler was converted to propane. In 1994, it was donated to the Circus City Festival, Peru, IN. Likewise, #2 was with various shows over the years, but it was destroyed around 1941.