

TRIBUTE TO HARVEY LANKFORD (1899-1969)

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351

Harvey McKinley Lankford was born January 5, 1899, in Jefferson County, Missouri, although it was sometimes incorrectly reported as January 5, 1900, or August 5, 1900. His parents were Phillip Benjamin Lankford (1858-1930) and Martha DeClue (1860-1938) Lankford.

Harvey, a trombonist, played in the side show band and was its band master for two years with the Cole Bros. Circus (1942-1944). He was with the Russell Bros. Circus (1936-1945), the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus (1946-1948), Biller Bros. Circus (1950), and King Bros. Circus (1954).

Harvey was also an influential jazz musician in the 1930s, having played with Louis Armstrong, Floyd Campbell, Dewey Jackson, Fate Marable, and others. By 1931, he had his own band known as Harvey Lankford's Synco - High Hatters. They played on one of the excursion steamboats running up and down the Mississippi River. With the spread of radios, in 1933 people could tune into the St. Louis radio station KMOX and hear Harvey's orchestra. In 1947 he was also a member of the St. Louis Negro Symphony Orchestra.

Harvey's father, who went by Phillip Lankford III or "P.B.", was also a musician. P.B. began to study music at age eleven and joined the second Negro band organized in the state of Missouri. At that time no teacher of color could be found, and the prejudice was so great that his father (Phillip Anderson Lankford II, 1835-1907) built a band hall

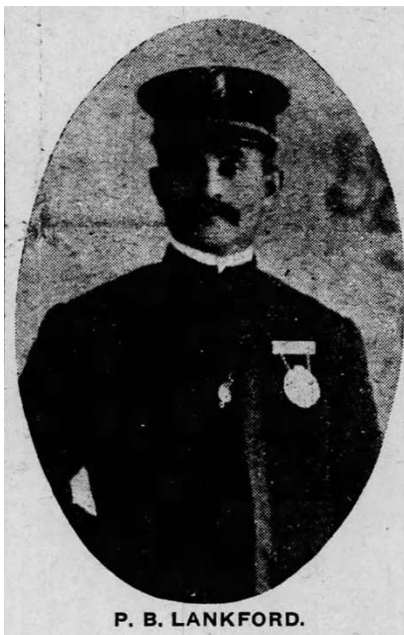


Harvey Lankford, sideshow bandmaster, Cole Bros. Circus 1943-1944

on his farm just outside the city limits for his ten boys, recruiting a white teacher from Philadelphia. After three months the boys were showing signs of musical success, but the teacher received an anonymous note that he had better leave town "or there would be a Dutchman found hanging to a tree." The frightened teacher left immediately. Another skilled musician and teacher, Harry Prentville, was secured from Cincinnati, Ohio, but because of his job he was unable to find lodging and ended up boarding with P.B.'s parents.

P.B.'s mother was Nancy Ella Bass/Johnson (1839-1884). Nancy's mother was a slave who was named "Bass" and Nancy's father was the slaveholder, Thomas Roads Johnson (1814-1895). P.B. progressed best musically among the siblings and excelled at composition and harmony. At age 20 he composed marches and arrangements that were played "by the best bands in the country." In September 1907, at the National Conclave of the Knights of Pythias (African American auxiliary group) in Louisville, KY, a band of over 200 musicians played P.B.'s most recent marches, "*The First Regiment, K. of P.*" and "*U.S. Fighting Tenth Cavalry.*"

P.B. and Martha had ten children, Harvey being the youngest: Charles Alfred (1878), Cora (1879), Phillip Anderson IV (1880), Henry Franklin (1882), Norman Blaine (1884), Missouri (1885), Ida Nancy (1888), Florence Reed (1888), Martha A (1892), and Harvey McKinley (1899.)



P. B. LANKFORD.



The Douglass School Band, P.B. Lankford, Director

Note: When Harvey was born, William McKinley, Jr. was the 25th president of the United States, serving from 1897 until his assassination in 1901.

A promotion in the February 19, 1915, St. Louis, MO *Argus* newspaper announced the Odd Fellows Band, conducted by P.B. Lankford, would be in Concert at Pythian Hall. Included in the program was the march “*Harwood*” by P.B. Lankford, and a trombone solo of Alfred Solman’s “*Why Did You Make Me Care*” by sixteen-year-old Master Harvey Lankford.



In 1925 Harvey was a member of Bennie Washington's Six Aces, which recorded “*Compton Avenue Blues*” in St. Louis for Okeh Records on November 4th. The recording was by Okeh's Mobile Unit while on a field trip. You can hear Lankford's trombone solo at 1:25 at this YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ctge8cEgWeA>

The 1942 Cole Bros. Circus Route Book shows 13 in the Sideshow Band, with P.G. Lowery as director and Harvey Lankford on trombone and assistant director. The photo of Harvey (at right), with the Columbia bandwagon behind him, was taken in 1943 while he was sideshow bandmaster with the Cole Bros. Circus. It is a souvenir post card with his last name misspelled as Langford, a typo that happened occasionally and which he generally just went along with, even autographing the post card with that spelling. Eddie Woeckner (WJU Hall of Fame 1999) was his boss, having replaced Victor Robbins (WJU Hall of Fame 1976) as the Cole Bros. Music Director after the 1942 season.

The Columbia bandwagon (featured on the cover and pages 4-5 of the May/June 2016 *Circus Fanfare*) was built in 1902 by Bode Wagon Co. in Cincinnati for Ringling Bros. to better compete with the return of Barnum & Bailey from its European tour. It was used by Ringling's Adam Forepaugh & Sells Brothers Circus. When that show ended with Ringling's purchase of Barnum & Bailey, the unit was reassigned there. It was sold to Christy Bros. Circus for its use 1927-1930 and then to Cole Bros. Circus where it was used for daily street parades until 1939. Then it was modified as a ticket wagon. Ultimately, it ended up at Circus World Museum for restoration and permanent display.

The 1942 Cole Bros. season was the last one for Lowery, as he succumbed to health issues and died in Cleveland, OH on December 15, 1942. Harvey Lankford then took on the the fulltime sideshow bandmaster role in 1943 and 1944.

In 1944 the Cole Bros. Circus traveled 14,271 miles from April 20 to November 12, playing nearly 400 shows in over 150 cities and towns in 27 states. It was war time, and other circuses traveled less ... Bailey Bros. 10,262, Ringling 8,846, Clyde Beatty 7,184, for example.

The 1946 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Route Book lists the fourteen members of Arthur A. Wright's Band and Minstrels that provided music for the side show. Harvey Lankford was shown as 1st Trombone. Wright conducted and played solo trumpet.

In the mid-1950s, Harvey McKinley Lankford moved to New York City and limited his performances to playing in small club bands. He died in Jamaica, Queens, New York on January 14, 1969, at age 70.



Harvey Lankford (typo - Langford), Sideshow Bandmaster for Cole Bros. Circus 1943-1944