

Windjammer Jacob Reiter's Grandfather

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351



Jacob Reiter, WJU #4119

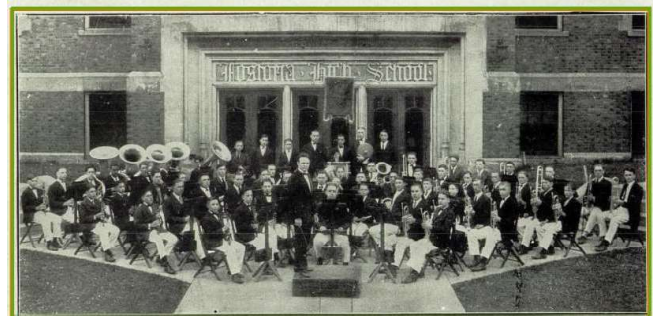
Attending their first Windjammers convention in January 2025 was Jacob (WJU #4119) and Susan (WJU #4120) Reiter of Ballston Spa, NY. Jake was on tuba and Susan on piccolo. It turns out there is a bit of circus genealogy in this family's blood as Jake's maternal grandfather, J. Nicholas Kiebel, was a clarinet-playing windjammer with a personal relationship with Merle Evans and other circus bandmasters.

John Nicholas Kiebel was born April 14, 1909 and earned his degree in optometry from the Northern Illinois College of Optometry in Chicago. But his passion was playing the clarinet and especially so with circuses. A 1960s-era newspaper article was headlined "Optometrist Tootles Clarinet in Circuses" and a subtitle of "Fostoria Man Shuts Office to Join Band Whenever Big Top Rises in Area."

At the age of six, Kiebel would go to the circus grounds and carry hay for the elephants and horses in exchange for tickets. When he was a high school student he started making appearances on clarinet with the traveling circuses.

Kiebel commented on his sometimes 200-mile trips to the circus as, "It's just an enjoyable hobby."

Dr. Kiebel, a 1928 graduate of St. Wendelin High School in Fostoria, was a musician for many years and received his



Fostoria (Ohio) High School Band 1924



Fostoria High School Band 1925

band training at Fostoria High School in the early 1920s. He was a member of that band in 1923 when it won the national championship title at Chicago.

While in college, Kiebel remained a musician at heart and, upon graduation, returned to Fostoria to play with any and all musical organizations in the area. In 1944, the Fostoria City Band was formed under the sponsorship of the local Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter. He played with that band when it won the national VFW senior band championship title at Cleveland in 1947, a title it then defended and held for nine more years. They also held the state VFW championship the last 12 years he was a member.

Kiebel was well-known to circus bandmasters who welcomed him to "sit in" with their circus bands. He played with the bands of Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, Sells and Gray, Kelly-Miller, Mills Brothers, King Brothers, Pawling-London, Cristiani Bros., and Clyde Beatty – Cole Bros. Circus. He played under canvas, in amphitheaters, and on street parades. He joined circus bands for one or two performances at the Ohio locations of Cleveland, Akron, Canton, Toledo, Columbus, Dayton, Fostoria, Bowling Green, Tiffin, Fremont, Lima, and Findlay.

With each circus visit, Kiebel got to renew old friendships.



Cristiani Circus bandmaster Ramon Escorcía with Dr. J.N. Kiebel *Photo from The White Tops, circa 1960*

In 1960 he played with the Mills Brothers Circus under Joe Rossi in Lima and in Bowling Green. That year, he was also with the Cristiani Brothers Circus, under the baton of Ramon Escorcía (WJU Hall of Fame 1979), who had been a circus musician since 1916. Kiebel corresponded regularly with Escorcía throughout the circus season and kept "a route card of most of the circuses so that I know where my friends are," he said. While playing with Escorcía in Columbus at the 1960 Ohio State Fair, he provided some special music suitable for a large band, which Escorcía directed.

In 1956, when Ringling closed under canvas, Escorcía was playing trumpet under Merle Evans (WJU Hall of Fame 1974), whom Kiebel calls "the most famous circus bandmaster of them all." While Merle was on a hiatus from Ringling, Kiebel played with the Orrin Davenport indoor circus under Merle Evans at Columbus and Dayton, commenting "I probably know Merle Evans better than any other circus musicians. I played with him in the Ringling



Dr. Kiebel, O.D. with clarinet
Photo by Pat Marcheon

Brothers Circus when that show was still under canvas."

Dr. Kiebel and his wife Lucy had one son, John Christopher, and five daughters: Theresa, Mary, Judith, Margaret, and Irene. Theresa M. Reiter is the mother of our Windjammers member, Jacob. Unfortunately, Dr. Kiebel died young at age 54 on August 29, 1963, from a heart attack while on a two-week fishing vacation in Bancroft, Ontario, Canada. No doubt both his patients and his windjammer friends sorely missed him. Meanwhile, his grandson is picking up on the circus music tradition with Windjammers Unlimited. Welcome Jake and Susan!



Dr. John Nicholas Kiebel