

Percy Rademacher, The Clown from Sheboygan, WI

By Norman H. Wilbert (Updated and reprinted from *Circus Fanfare*, June 20, 1976)

Percy Rademacher, the famous clown from Sheboygan, WI, carved his own niche in the circus world as both a clown and circus musician. He was born on July 16, 1899 as Arwin Joseph Rademacher and entertained circus fans for over fifty years as Percy.

Although clowning was in his blood it was the life of a musician that appealed to Percy as a youth. Many renowned circuses visited Sheboygan during its heyday. Street parades were in vogue and Percy marveled at the circus musicians perched high atop the bandwagons, attired in brightly uniformed suits. So, he resolved that some day he would also follow the sawdust trail. His aspirations to become a circus musician were enhanced by considerable musical ability as Percy had mastered four different instruments.

Percy's first opportunity came in 1923 when the famous Lindemann brothers asked him to travel with their motorized Seils-Sterling Circus. One of his first duties was to play trumpet with the clown band and participate in the parades.

After five years with Seils-Sterling, Percy joined the Sells-Floto Circus as a trumpet player. Fortunately, he became acquainted with Pat Valdo, a clown with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, on one of his winter vacation trips to Florida where he played with a charity show band. It was there that Pat learned of Percy's musical ability. The resulting friendship proved to be a big asset in Percy's future circus life.

Another well known circus clown, Earl Shipley, agreed with Pat Valdo and encouraged Percy to contact Hagenbeck-Wallace in regard to playing trumpet in their clown band. Having their backing was a significant plus and shortly thereafter Percy signed a contract to toot his horn in the Hagenbeck-Wallace clown band.

Unfortunately, his musical career changed abruptly in 1931 when Percy was clawed by a bear on the right side of his

head and face, splitting his lip. The lip healed nicely but a scar remained and his iron trumpet "chops" were gone. Therefore, he could no longer play the demanding routines of the big top band. However, he could continue playing during the daily street parades and various performances with the clown band.

Determined to stay on with the Hagenbeck-Wallace circus, Percy began to prepare himself for the role of a clown. He created his own unique white face make-up with a wide mouth, red-tipped nose, and two red dots above his eyebrows.

After being clawed, he developed one of his most famous clown acts -- his exploding trick car. He would circle around a fire hydrant in the car. He would be stopped by a clown policeman and given a ticket, and required to put coins in a parking meter. This continued until the meter was full and Percy was broke. At this point he broke the meter, coins fell on a metal cover causing the car to explode, and then Percy frantically trying to put out the fire with a small tin cup of water. The act always brought down the house.

Following the 1935 season he began another time of clowning, this time as a tramp clown. Percy, now known as the "Duke of Kakiak," performed with the Jimmy Lynch Death Dodgers, an auto thrill show, from 1936 to 1942, doing some trumpet playing in addition to clowning. Then he followed with a stint with the Joey Chitwood Dare Devils from 1951 to 1954, and concluded his show travels with Gert Swenson's Thrillcade from 1955 to 1966.

Percy also performed for many years with Shrine circuses in the U.S. and Canada during the winter months. For those he again reverted to his well-known white face make-up. Through the years he worked with all the great clowns: Emmett Kelly, Otto Griebling, and Paul Jerome, just to name a few. When Ringling showed Sheboygan he always had a visit with clown Alley!

REGISTRATION CARD—(Men born on or after February 17, 1897 and on or before December 31, 1921)			
SERIAL NUMBER	1. NAME (Print)		ORDER NUMBER
T 835	Arwin	Joseph Rademacher	10460
2. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print)			
1631 North 9th Street Sheboygan Wisconsin			
(Number and street) (Town, township, village, or city) (County) (State)			
(THE PLACE OF RESIDENCE GIVEN ON THE LINE ABOVE WILL DETERMINE LOCAL BOARD JURISDICTION; LINE 2 OF REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE WILL BE IDENTICAL)			
3. MAILING ADDRESS			
1631 North 9th Street Sheboygan Wisconsin			
(Mailing address if other than place indicated on line 2. If same insert word same)			
4. TELEPHONE	5. AGE IN YEARS	6. PLACE OF BIRTH	
	41	Sheboygan	
	DATE OF BIRTH	(Town or county)	
	July 16 1899	Wisconsin	
	(Month) (Day) (Yr.)	(State or country)	
7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS			
John F. Rademacher 1631 North 9th Street Sheboygan Wis.			
8. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS			
J.F. Irish Horan 418 Queen St. Wilmington, N. Carolina			
9. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OF BUSINESS			
418 Queen St. Wilmington North Carolina			
(Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)			
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.			
D. S. S. FORM 1			
(Revised 1-1-42)			
(over) ☆ afo 10-21630-1			
Arwin Joseph Rademacher (Registrant's signature)			



Clown Percy 1934



Hagenbeck-Wallace cornetists Oscar Cristiani, Tony Paul, and Percy Rademacher Photo posted on Facebook by Sonja Barta

Percy and his wife, Ella, also a former circus performer, retired in Sheboygan. At age 77, Percy was no longer on the sawdust trail, but still delighted circus fans in Sheboygan and other Wisconsin locations as a circus musician and clown when opportunities happened. He entertained at the hospitals, fairs, and worked for a local bank as Breezy the clown!

Percy died March 8, 1978. He will always remain enshrined in the hearts of all Sheboyganites as the man who made good in the Big Top.



Percy - Standing 2nd from left; Elephant bandwagon 1932