

From Circus Trains to Conservation Easements

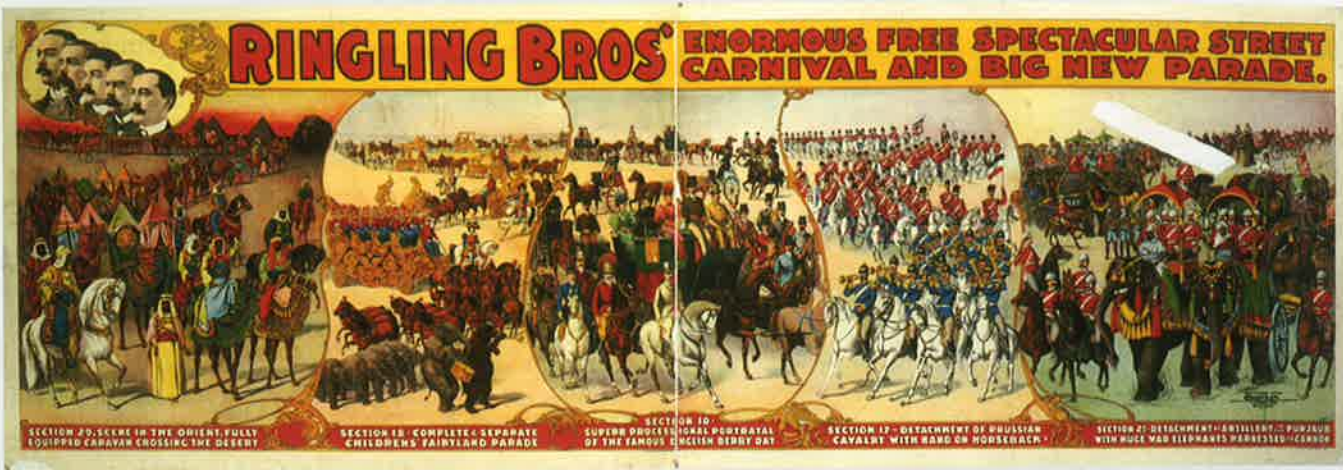
Four generations of Ringlings have left their mark on Montana

BY CAROLINE PATTERSON



The Ringling Brothers Circus visits Philipsburg in the early 1900s.

You could make the case that four generations of Ringling men present a microcosm of Montana history in the 20th century. Whether railroad investor, land speculator, cattle rancher or conservationist—with some circus work and cloud seeding thrown in—each man exemplified his era.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

A poster, circa 1898, shows an Oriental caravan, fairyland parade, English Derby Day, Prussian cavalry, and "Punjab" artillery.

John Ringling, one of the original founders of the Ringling Brothers Circus, passed through Montana early in the 1900s and saw opportunities in ranch land and a railroad spur. Richard Ringling, his nephew, arrived in 1931 and took over the Ringling ranches in White Sulphur Springs, married a local beauty, invested in rainmaking and oil and helped start rodeo companies. Richard's son Paul, who considered riding in Central Park too much like a "dude trick," returned to Montana to "ride like a gentleman." Years later he owned cattle ranches in White Sulphur Springs, Springdale, and Ekalaka. His son, Rock Ringling, a noted fly fisherman, has protected more agricultural land with conservation easements than probably any other person in Montana.

The Greatest Show on Earth

JOHN RINGLING WAS THE BEST KNOWN OF THE original Ringling Brothers, five of whom formed in 1870 a big show with a monster of a title: Ringling Brothers United Monster Shows, Great Double Circus, Royal European Menagerie, Museum, Caravan, and Congress of Trained Animals. In 1907, the brothers bought the Barnum & Bailey Circus, then merged the two in 1919 into the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus: The Greatest Show on Earth!

Also in 1907, a decade after the circus first came to Montana (in Dillon), John Ringling bought land and a house in the White Sulphur Springs area—where he would occasionally spend summers. Through his Smith River Development Company, he bought local ranches and

tried to attract "bona fide farmers" to buy "small tracts for sale on easy terms" as well as town lots in White Sulphur. The venture never really took off, as he was competing with free land offered by the Homestead Act.

As he travelled the country booking circus appearances, John Ringling also invested in railroad spur lines. He built a spur from the Milwaukee Railway line in Leaderville to White Sulphur Springs in 1910. When it was finished, the ever-optimistic *Rocky Mountain Husbandman* reported that the town "from this time forward will begin to take on Metropolitan airs." Leaderville, out of gratitude, changed its name to Ringling, although none of the Ringling family ever lived there. Jimmy Buffett described "metropolitan" Ringling on his 1974 album, *Living and Dying in 3/4 Time*: "Streets are dusty and the bank has been torn down/It's a dying little town."

Taylor Gordon, the son of one of the only black families in White Sulphur, became Ringling's valet and later a concert tenor. His memoir *Born to Be* offers a window into John Ringling's world.

One thing that happened showed me very plainly that Easterners were people of power and conviction any time they had money. The Governor of Montana had a business engagement with John Ringling at eleven o'clock in the morning. Although awakened many times, Ringling was not up yet, and didn't get up until one-thirty. The Governor was six men, he was so hot. ... But he waited. I made up my mind then that the West was fine, but I wanted to be an Easterner.



At 93, Paul Ringling lives on a ranch near Ekalaka.

John moved the circus's winter headquarters from Baraboo, Wisconsin, to Sarasota, Florida, in 1927, where he and his wife Mable built a 30-room mansion called Ca' d'Zan, or "the House of John," where he exhibited his collection of Baroque art. It is now the home of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art.

House of Richard

JOHN'S NEPHEW RICHARD ARRIVED IN WHITE Sulphur around 1917. He married Aubrey Black, a local beauty, in a ceremony the *Meagher County News* described as the "culmination of a pretty romance." Handsome, musical, witty, Richard was ready to embrace his life as a Montana rancher. According to the

Cattlewoman Column, Aubrey was, "small, elegant, practical and direct" and the Ringlings' presence was "a spectacular time for a little western town. ... Big flashy cars moved regularly along the dusty Main Street. Everyone looked important and probably everyone was."

Richard quickly established the Ringling Dairy and the White Sulphur Springs Creamery, with prizewinning stock housed in a state-of-the-art barn built in 1921 with automatic drinking troughs and conveyers that distributed hay, silage, and bedding. Until 1933, more than 300 gallons of milk were delivered to the dairy daily and 100 ranchers were on the payroll weekly for cream. By 1924, 180,000 pounds of butter were distributed to customers that included the Milwaukee Railway. By 1931, however, the dairy was running in the red. After the barn burned in 1933, Richard closed the business.

But Richard kept his fingers in numerous Montana businesses: rainmaking, oil-producing, running sheep. He helped form the Bozeman Roundup Association in 1919 to furnish stock to rodeos across the country. He also helped organize the Bozeman Stampede that travelled to Madison Square Garden in 1923 in ten freight cars of wild broncs, saddle horses, wild steers, and cows and calves, plus a coach for the "gang of cowboys and their equipment."

Then, on September 4, 1933, at the age of 39, Richard was found dead at home of natural causes, after he had spent a day attending the Montana State Fair. His large estate was in considerable financial disarray. Aubrey, his wife, spent 14 years trying to move the estate through probate. "She did a remarkable job of coming out right side up," said her son, Paul.

Central Park, Clowns, and Cattle

PAUL AND HIS SISTERS, Mabel and Jane, were raised spending winters in New York and summers in White Sulphur Springs. Paul, who was born in New York on April 21, 1920, remembers the amazing freedom of those pre-teen summers, riding horseback from the family's Birch Creek Ranch to the distant and mountainous Culler Ranch. "Nobody ever knew ... if I got there or I didn't get there and I may be up at Cullers for a week or maybe longer," Paul said in an interview with Brian Shovers of the Montana Historical Society. "We rode all over that country and hunted and fished. We lived a life I don't think you could really do now."

That idyllic existence came to a close when his father died; their normal family life "pretty much ended" and

the children were sent to boarding schools. Paul worked for the Ringling circus in the late 1930s, "trouping" or travelling every day. The circus trains—of more than 100 cars each—departed in four sections. The first section contained the cookhouse and as many as fifty elephants. The second contained the big top and its crew and ushers. The third section carried the sideshows—the freaks, the tattooed lady, the fat man, the thin man, the giant, the pinhead, the snake charmers, and the hula dancers. The fourth and final train contained the sleeping cars that carried the actors and trapeze artists as well as 72 cars filled with workhorses, performing horses, zebras, lions, tigers and monkeys.

After marrying Althea Shearer on December 18, 1940—his "partner in everything"—and working as a radio operator in World War II, Paul returned to White Sulphur Springs to run cattle on the Ringling ranches. His first year included a bitter winter. "Everything was closed—the railroad, the highway—it got down to 40 degrees below zero," Paul recalled. "I had to ride horseback in the snow from ranch to ranch."

Paul and Althea started their family in White Sulphur—Rick, Ann, and Rock. Paul served in the state legislature from 1953 to 1959 and helped form the Cattlemen's Association in 1959. Also in 1959, he moved south to the other side of the Crazy Mountains near Springdale, where the range had "every poisonous plant there ever was." Four years later, after cresting a hill to discover twelve calves dead from eating those plants, he decided to pull up stakes.

In 1966, Paul bought a cattle ranch that is "just big enough" in Carter County near Ekalaka, in the southeast corner of Montana, where he lives today at the age of 93. "He wanted a deeded grass ranch without any public land," said Rock Ringling, his son.

Cows Not Condos

IT WAS FROM HIS FATHER THAT ROCK RINGLING learned the importance of conservation. "Ranches are like conservation islands," Rock said in a recent interview. "On the whole, ranchers are in the grass business, and you take care of the grass to take care of cattle." Understanding range management had come slowly for some early arrivals in Montana agribusiness, for a long time driven by the demands of the banking industry, which held that grass left on the ground meant ranchers weren't raising enough cattle. The ironic result, Rock noted, was overgrazing,

which lead to fewer cattle instead of more.

Rock's interest in preserving private agricultural land began when he saw the fragmentation of farm and ranch land in 1971, when the first 20-acre "ranchettes" started cropping up. "We all thought, 'Who would want 20 acres? You can't do anything with it,'" he said. "Well, we were wrong. ... We watched a lot of Montanans sell their heritage in order to make a living." That's when Ringling came up with the slogan "Cows Not Condos."

Rock went to work for the Montana Land Reliance in 1990, shortly after he and his wife Bobbi settled in Helena, where they have run the Sanders Bed and Breakfast for 25 years. His family heritage serves him well in an organization that attracts both "the in-state landowners who want to conserve their land and those people who came to Montana to recreate." His background helps him move easily in many circles. "One day I might be at a Montana Stockgrowers Association convention," he said. "The next day I might be having lunch at the New York Anglers Club."

Rock's work offers solutions for both agricultural producers and recreationalists who want to preserve Montana open space. If a landowner signs a conservation easement banning subdivisions or certain other activities on his place, he can be compensated with direct payments, tax savings, or a combination of the two. That financial flexibility helps keep families in the cattle business and can provide valuable estate-planning tools to keep family ranchlands intact. There are more than 907,000 acres of private land under conservation easement in Montana. And how many is Rock responsible for? With characteristic modesty, he paused. "Lots of them," he answered finally.

Aside from his love of fishing, his ability to create a good slogan, and free circus tickets at Madison Square Garden, Rock says his love of the West is something he shares with his ancestors. "I have a deep and abiding love for the open spaces of Montana. And we're not making any more open land these days," Ringling said. "I like that I can drive anywhere in Montana ... and drive by conservation easements that have been completed." ■



Rock Ringling

With research by Lee Rostad