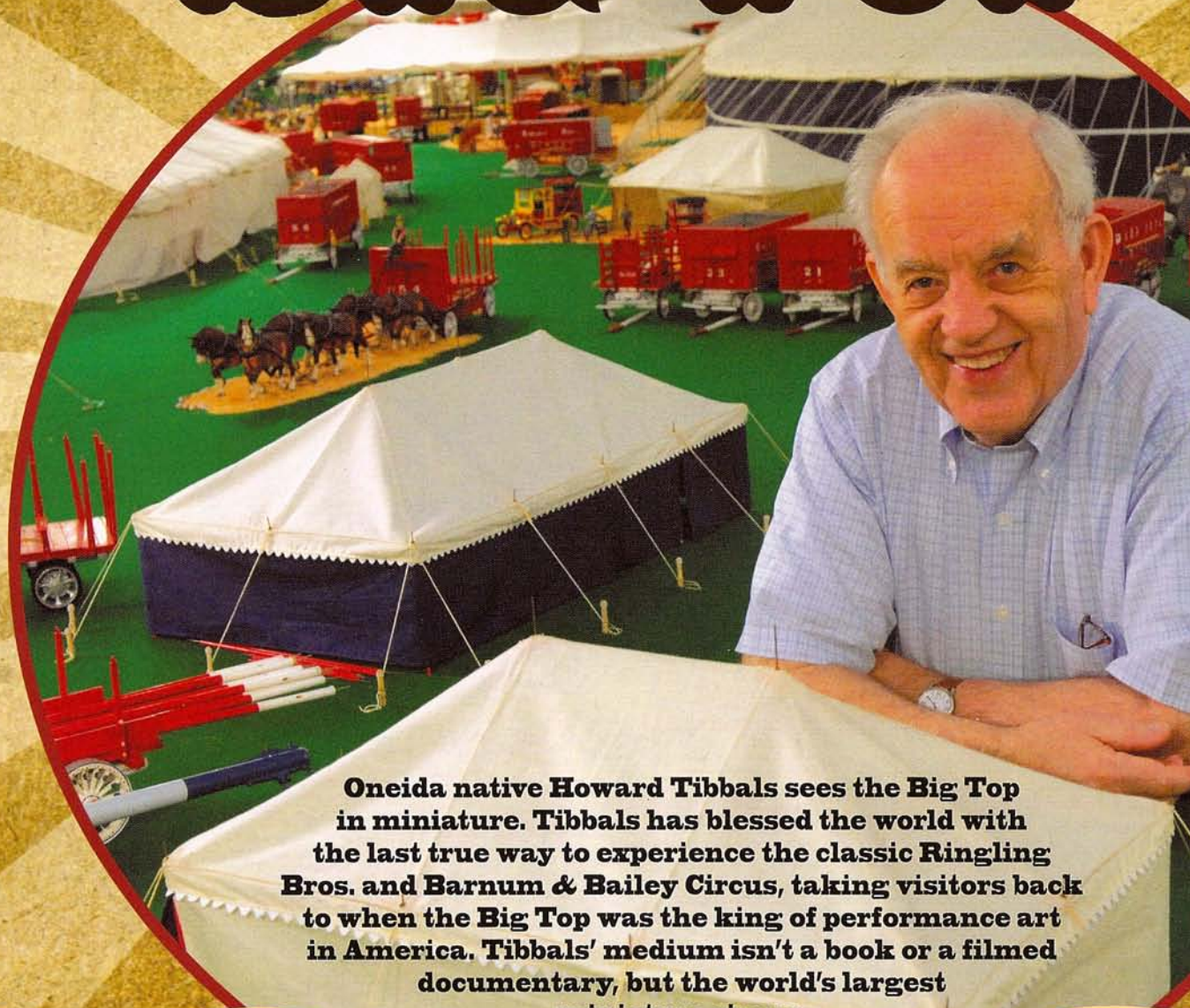


CHASING

THE

BIG TOP



Oneida native Howard Tibbals sees the Big Top in miniature. Tibbals has blessed the world with the last true way to experience the classic Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, taking visitors back to when the Big Top was the king of performance art in America. Tibbals' medium isn't a book or a filmed documentary, but the world's largest miniature circus.

AMAZING!

By Brandon Lowe

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LOCAL RESIDENT HELPS TO KEEP THE CIRCUS ALIVE

HOWARD TIBBALS' BABY BOOK is the record of a trip to the circus at age three. Although Tibbals does not recall that trip, he does remember his second trip, at age five, when the lure of the Big Top symbolically set a lifelong passion in motion. It was 1941.

While most children are mesmerized by the animals and the clowns, Tibbals was attracted to the operation of the circus - the hundreds of people, the ropes, poles, tents, and railcars. It was logistics, not fantasy, that lured him.

That fascination has made him a vital player in preserving the history of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Housed in the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, which opened to the public in Sarasota, Florida in January 2006, is Tibbals' masterpiece. The Howard Bros. Circus Model is a miniature circus that represents the circus during its golden era from 1919-38. The model covers 3,800 square feet, an area large enough to park 11 school buses. The model spares no detail in capturing the grand scale of the circus production.

Tibbals has spent countless hours carving and sewing to create the figures and edifices of the model. Love and passion guide his patience.

"In developing a passion, you divert your whole life to it," he says.

For Tibbals, that passion began with fascination.

He was first exposed to the production process of the circus as a child while summering with relatives. From a neighbor's porch, looking through binoculars that had been used in World War II, Tibbals could see the circus being set up in the distance. He watched patiently and closely, adjusting the binoculars so he could see every detail, down to the stakes that held the tents in place. He had discovered a traveling city that would impress and fascinate him for the rest of his life.

"Our interests often coincide with how we're brought up and the experiences we have as a child," Tibbals says.

After that fateful encounter with the circus, Tibbals began to save his loose change to buy alphabet letters. He would use them to spell out "circus" on his toy

trucks and cars. Every week he would buy new letters, at a nickel each, until he got tired of gluing the word "circus" on everything.

Soon, he graduated to making tents out of string and, by the age of seven, youthful fascination had turned to full blown hobby. "I was intrigued by the logistics," says Tibbals, who refers to himself as a mechanical person. "If you look at all the facets, it is truly amazing. There were 40 major tents that were all packed up, moved and set back up every single day."

To help further fuel his passion, Tibbals' parents bought him a subscription to Popular Mechanics, where he read an article about a Wisconsin man who made circus models. Published in 1952, the article was called "Here Comes the Circus" and described a 79-car model circus train and the layout of the circus grounds.

"That gave me the germ," Tibbals recalls.

A later article gave the dimensions for a model, at which point the young Tibbals started taking notes for his own models. With a lathe given to him by his uncle and a jigsaw from his father, Tibbals started adding to the models he started making at age 12. Some of the pole wagons he made as a child are in the museum today.

Tibbals, who owned a successful flooring company in Oneida, credits his father with helping keep his passion alive, encouraging him with such acts as sending his drawings off to be made into blueprints when Howard was in elementary school. "Dad allowed me to express myself," Tibbals says.

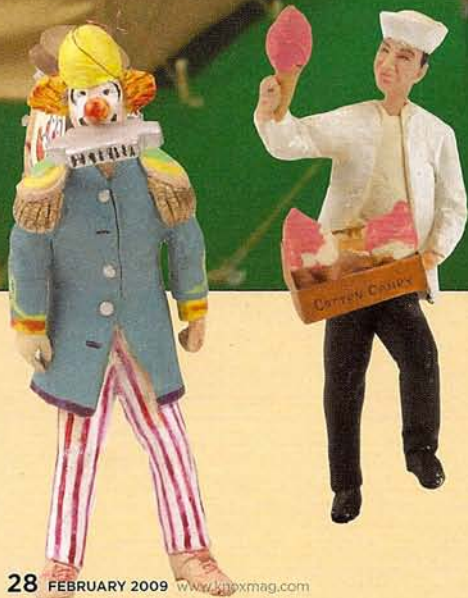
By the time he made it to college at North Carolina State University, Tibbals could not get enough of learning about the circus. It was at NC State that Tibbals met Harold Dunn, also a maker of circus models which he would show at local department stores



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It consists of eight large tents, 152 circus wagons, 1,500 workers and performers, 7,000 folding chairs and more than 500 hand-carved animals.

Contains 42,143 items
...not including small pieces such as thousands of railroad stakes.



The model dining tent has: 53 pickle jars, 140 bottles of ketchup, 144 bottles of Worcestershire sauce, 145 sugar bowls, 145 salt shakers and 200 hamburger buns with lettuce.

Tibbals has handcrafted nearly 1 million pieces to make up his miniature circus, including 1,500 performers, 152 wagons, 7,000 folding chairs for spectators, and dishes and tableware to serve 900 people.

The model railroad layout has: 55 railroad cars, 850 feet of custom designed 3/4-inch scale rail, 7,500 six-inch wooden cross ties, 11,000 rail plates, 32,000 metal half-inch spikes, 800 pounds of gravel.



Covers 3,800 sq. ft., consists of 55 rail cars, 8 main tents, 152 circus wagons, more than 700 circus animals, 1,500 individual performers and workers and 7,000 folding chairs.

Howard and
Knoxville caterer
David Duncan



"In developing a passion,
you divert your whole life to it."



around the country. Dunn had everything Howard wanted, from photos to parts, and became his tutor and mentor.

Together the men would engage in exhaustive research to assure historical accuracy. When Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus wintered in Florida in 1959, Tibbals and Dunn took lunch and beer to the circus' gatekeeper for 10 days straight so they could get inside and see everything up close. They interviewed circus employees, measured equipment and took countless photos, making the trip several times during the 1960s. Tibbals has more than a million photos in his collection.

Tibbals has studied the details of the circus with such accu-

racy that every item in his model can be, and has been, packed into the accompanying miniature railroad cars.

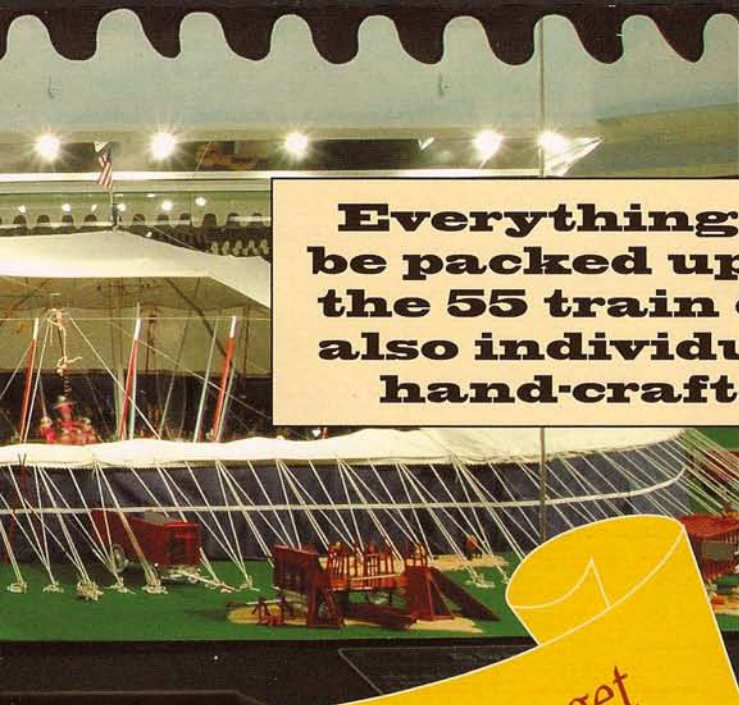
The circus, which made its public premier at the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville, was for the most part completed by 1974. In truth, however, it is a masterpiece over 50 years in the making. He has had help, Tibbals is quick to point out.

"You have to have people to help," Tibbals says. "A gentleman from Pennsylvania, for example, carved the bulk of the animals. It took him one and a half years."

Today, Tibbals' passion seems to be never-ending. He is currently working on two 1913 REO Speedwagons that Ringling bought in 1922. He has already put 1000 man hours into each and neither is completely finished.

Tibbals also bought the full-sized private passenger car that served as a home away from home for John and Mable Ringling. The restoration project is part of Tibbals' ongoing commitment to show the influence of the Ringlings and their famous circus.

For the passenger car, Tibbals enlisted the help of friend David Duncan, a local caterer with a passion for and expertise in Pullman railroad cars. Duncan is also helping with a 28-car



Everything can be packed up into the 55 train cars, also individually hand-crafted.

“When does one get the chance to take a hobby to this level?”

train that will be placed on two miles of track at the museum. Duncan has built Pullman train models for years and is bringing his knowledge of the construction of the cars to Tibbals' circus collection. Hundreds of hours have already been put into that work. Duncan and Tibbals also solicited the expertise of Knoxville interior designer Todd Richesin, who matched all the original paint colors and wood samples. "It has been amazing to take that knowledge and apply it to such a great cause," Duncan says. "When does one get the chance to take a hobby to this level?"

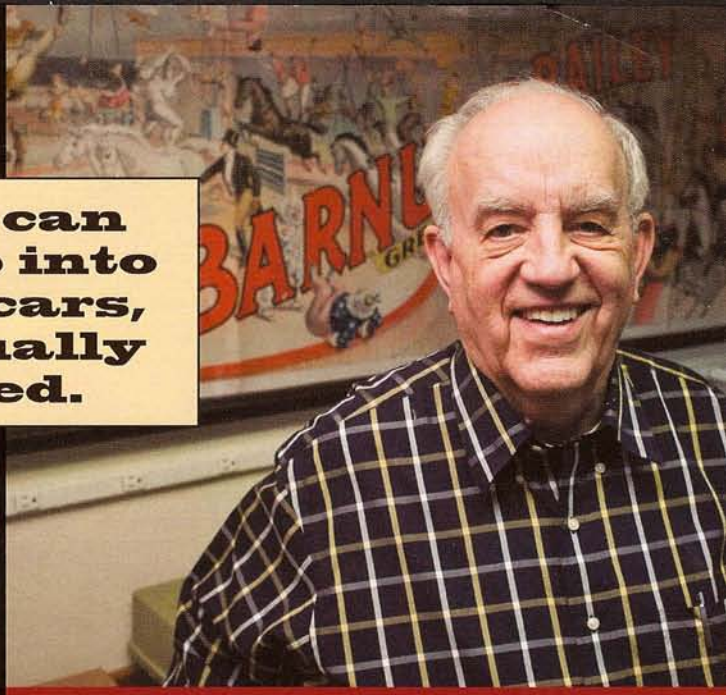
The levels to which Howard Tibbals has taken his hobby have made him a modern day hero to those who cherished the circus as children.

Within the museum is the Tibbals Learning Center, a 30,000 square foot facility which also includes a full scale replica of Tibbals' workshop.

They hope to break ground later this year on a 10,000 square foot archive center that will house his poster and photo collections. The posters and photos demonstrate the circus' influence on performance art and advertising. (See sidebar)

It is breathing new life and interest in the museum, which pleases Tibbals.

"Now my things can be used as a resource to teach people about show business," Tibbals says.



TIBBALS ALSO COLLECTS circus posters, which were vital to publicity for the circus and has over 5,000 of them. He has the largest poster collection in the world of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Bailey realized the importance of publicity which is why Tibbals says there are so many circus posters. And even he doesn't have them all. "Whatever you're collecting, certain pieces become like a coup d'etat. You never know where it's going to come from." In East Hampton, Rhode Island a poster of Jumbo the legendary circus elephant hangs in a child's bedroom. Tibbals has the only Jumbo the Elephant poster collection in existence and that's the only poster he doesn't have. Jumbo was brought to the US at a fairly old age in 1881 from the London zoo and performed in the circus from '82-'85 until a railroad train killed him. He was named, not for his size, but after an African tribe. Elephants actually live longer in captivity, and since the U.S. can no longer import animals, Ringling now breeds their own.

