

Bridgeport Life

FIFTEENTH BIRTHDAY.

SECTION THIRTEEN.

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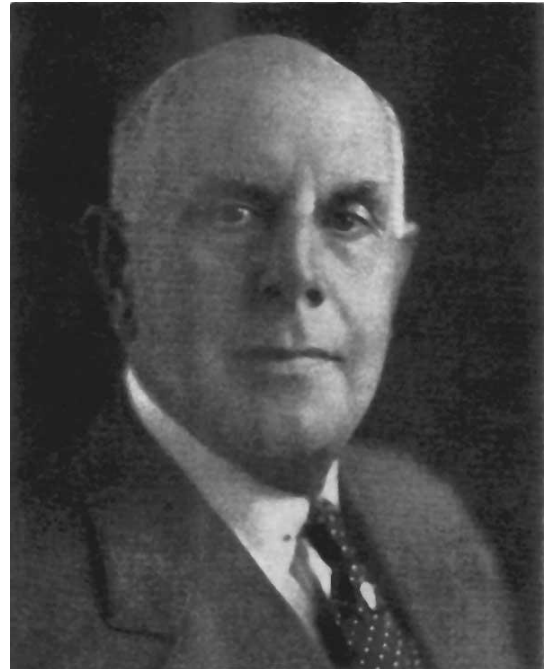
Early Days of the "Greatest Show on Earth"

An Interview With W. L. Belknap.

MR. WM. L. BELKNAP, who relates these incidents of the Barnum Show of the '80's, was born August 5, 1864 on Bridge street (now Middle street) next door to the building now occupied by the No. 5 Engine Company. He is the son of Charles and Marcia Goddard Belknap. His father organized The Belknap Manufacturing Company in 1863. Mr. Belknap started his education at a school in Bridge street opposite his home, taught by a Miss Smith, who later married Attorney Gould of this city. Miss Smith's School stood on the spot which is now the rear of the old Poli Theatre, later known as the Globe. In 1871, the family moved to South Main street, and Mr. Belknap attended a school at John and West streets, taught by a Miss Hayes, whose brother—Wesley Hayes—in the early '70's conducted a book store on Main street. Later, Mr. Belknap attended Prospect School and finally the Park Avenue Institute, which was conducted by a Mr. Jones, who has since died.

Latent Talents

In early childhood, Mr. Belknap gave evidence of the latent talents which were destined to make him a Barnum headliner. At the age of seven he met with his first circus accident. In those days children wore a knitted scarf around the neck and usually tied in the middle of the back. On leaving home one morning in the winter, Mr. Belknap's scarf was pinned by his mother with an old fashioned hair pin and when it came time to leave for school he could not find the pin so he started home, as he thought without it. At the first flush of joy on being excused from school, immediately in front of the school house he turned a hand spring on slippery ground and as he landed his feet went from under him and the whereabouts of the pin became suddenly known. The probabilities are that the pin was



W. L. BELKNAP

Head of The Belknap Manufacturing Company, once a star performer under the "big-top" and who details interesting reminiscences of this career.

driven into his spine as he was paralyzed from the waist and his teacher, Miss Smith, had considerable difficulty in extracting it. The nearest doctor was Dr. Jacques, who had his office and home on John street, at a spot approximately where the Sheffield Restaurant is now located. The doctor attended the boy for several days and the use of his limbs was restored.

A very few years later his father bought for him a very handsome Texas pony, and it was soon found that young William would rather turn somersaults from a spring board over the pony than ride in the orthodox fashion.

Proficient in Sports

As he grew older he was proficient in almost every sport, such as in swimming, bicycling, roller skating, etc., but his real forte seemed to be performances on any sort of improvised trapeze. His father founded the Naugatuck Valley Ice Company and when the ice houses became quite empty toward the end of the summer, these were found to be the boy's favorite gymnasiums. From the top of the ice house was suspended a pulley, over which ran a long stout rope with a loop in each end. One of young Belknap's favorite stunts was to have one his comrades stand in the sawdust on the floor of the ice house with one leg through the lower loop. He would climb to the very top of the ice house place one foot in the other loop and jump from the rafters and haul his friend about 50 feet in the air, where he would be rather precariously suspended.

One of his playmates was the late Mr. Louis Schwerdtle who, with his brother, Edward, founded and operated the Schwerdtle Stamp Company of this city. Mr. Schwerdtle's father was at the time a maker of fine custom made footwear. One day at the instant that young Belknap started Lou on a meteoric rise the elder Mr. Schwerdtle appeared in the doorway and promptly proceeded to make a fine engraver out of a potential circus performer.

Manufacturing History

Mr. Belknap's early history, of course, was closely associated with the history of the manufacturing company that bears his name. His father, Mr. Charles Belknap, and Mr. E. G. Burnham came to Bridgeport from Springfield, Massachusetts as employees of a partnership known as Dwight and Chapin who erected a manufacturing building where the Singer plant now stands. After a few years Dwight and Chapin got into difficulties and Messrs. Belknap and Burnham put personal funds into the business in an effort to save it.

They found, however, that they were operating too luxuriantly and sought smaller quarters in a building in Cannon street which, until very recently, was occupied by the White Manufacturing Company. With this move the founders formed a partnership of Belknap and Burnham and outgrowing these quarters they moved to

a new building which was erected near the railroad station, about where the Connecticut Trolley Express Office stood for so many years. The business was growing rapidly and the two partners became interested in a wider distribution field through the firm of Eaton and Cole, who were large distributors at that time.

Partnership Organized

With these two men a partnership known as Eaton, Cole and Burnham was soon organized and the plant erected on the corner of Water and Main streets. Mr. Charles Belknap, however, did not stay long in the partnership and sold his interest to the other partners, who operated as the firm of Eaton, Cole and Burnham for many years and later disposed of their entire interests to the Crane Company, of Chicago. The plant was operated by Crane Company for many years and comparatively recently sold to Jenkins Brothers. In the meantime, Mr. Charles Belknap organized the company bearing only his name and when the Connecticut Corporate Laws were changed in 1875, he incorporated under the name of The Belknap Manufacturing Company. He acquired from a Mr. Gaylord a piece of land known as 99 Water street, located about half way between South avenue and South Main street, and his successors operated on that site until the year 1922, when the Belknap Manufacturing Company acquired a commodious and modern plant at 800 Union avenue.

It was in the little shop at Water street that Mr. William Belknap experienced his next circus accident. Out of sight of his father he had improvised a trapeze, on which he would practice at every opportunity, but one day someone accidentally or by way of a practical joke drove in the trapeze bar a short hook similar to the ones used in the Crossley Carpet Factory—which stood about where Hunter and Havens main office and warehouse now stand in Water street. These hooks were used to dry out the carpet after the dyeing operation. Mr. Belknap failed to see the hook in the trapeze and received a terrible gash in one of his hands, the scars of which he carries this day.

Musical Club

Just when Mr. Belknap made up his mind that he was going to be a headliner in the Barnum Show he does not remember, but there were many influences to induce this turn of mind. As a child he attended the Universalist Sunday School, where Mr. Barnum was very active. Mr. Barnum held many parties for the Sunday School children and Mr. Belknap always attended. He has vivid recollections of these affairs. He recalls the awe in which the children watched Mr. Barnum's great musical clock, showing a complete blacksmith shop with all of the animals and figures in motion, to musical accompaniment. He also recalls that it was at one of these parties that he can first remember any mechanical turn of mind.

Much to the delight of the children at one of the parties the dessert was served in moulds and Mr. Belknap's portion happened to be a delicate gelatin in the form of an egg. He remembers thoroughly enjoying it, but mentally making a note of the fact that the egg had no yolk. He never forgot it and some years later had the fun of designing a device so that a yoke might be cast in the center of such a dessert. These parties were held at the time in Mr. Barnum's original Seaside Park home, which was known as "Waldemere" and many years later Mr. Barum from his private box in Madison Square Garden, saw one of his Sunday School class, with two partners—known as the Lavinia Brothers—perform marvelous circus acrobatics.

Put Act Together

In the little shop in Water street, young Belknap had noticed the antics of a chap by the name of Herbert Buckley. Buckley operated a machine with one hand and with the other juggled three or four tools and pieces of merchandise, and amused himself through the noon hour with all sorts of acrobatic stunts along the main line shaft. Finding that their tastes were very much the same, they went at it seriously and soon they put together an act of considerable merit. In those days all good acts were supposed to be imported, so the boys designated a name suggesting that implication and called themselves "La Vina Brothers." In due time they secured an engagement at Tony Pastor's Theatre in New York City and Mr. Pastor having an idea of publicity

made a compound word of their title and advertised them as "The Lavinias."

Their feature act at Tony Pastor's was a double slack wire, that is, two slack wires parallel with each other. The points of support were thirty-two feet apart, with the wires having four and one-half feet slack at the center point. Herb and Will each did solo work and then the two performed on the same wire simultaneously, and they concluded the act with balancing ladders between the two wires.

Were Experimenting

It was in doing this trick that they had considerable unpleasantness with Mr. Pastor, because three times during the engagement the wire broke. They succeeded in convincing Mr. Pastor, however, that it was all in the business and it might be expected at any time, but they did not tell him that they were experimenting to see how fine a wire they could use. In slack wire walking this is very essential and a finer and lighter wire is much easier for the performer.

With the coming of the circus season in the Spring of 1887, Belknap and Buckley made their first appearance under the canvas with Delavan's Show in Meriden. The following press notice from the Meriden Republican, dated May 10th, 1887, gives some idea of how their act was received:

...."but the crowning act was that of the two LaVina brothers on the slack wires. They do on the slack wires what most jugglers and acrobats cannot do on the ground. They are simply great and must be seen to be appreciated."

Marvelous Feats

The report of the evening show in the same paper reads as follows:

"The second of the greatest performances of the evening was that of the LaVinas on the double slack wires. They do the most marvelous feats ever attempted on the treacherous slack wires with the utmost ease. They are the great attraction of the show this year. They put all other slack wire performers ever seen here completely in the shade."



THE "CLOVER LEAF THREE."
Famous Trio of which Mr. Belknap was a member and
which made its debut with Barnum and Bailey Show
in 1889.

After closing out with Delavan the two young men returned to Bridgeport and spending a great deal of time in a local gymnasium became acquainted with a young man by the name of Clarence King, whose gymnastic work so attracted them that they invited him to become the third Lavinia Brother and they became known as "The Lavinias" or the "Clover Leaf Three" and were billed and advertised in this fashion.

Debut With Big Show

It was under this name that they made their debut in the Big Top at the opening in Madison Square Garden of the Barnum and Bailey Show in 1889. In the New York Star of March 24, 1889, the boys received special mention, and in the New York World of the same date the Reviewer states that "The Three Lavinias performed marvelous athletic acts." In other New York papers the young men were known as "The Lionized Lavinias" which seems to indicate that the present search for circus adjectives is not new. We wonder if Dexter Fellowes was the press agent for the Barnum Shows at the time?

In those days it was not sufficient for a performer to be good in his own specialty, but in order to travel with the circus he must take part in many parts of the program. The Lavinias appeared seven times during each

performance. A program of Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth and Great London Circus as it appeared in York, Pennsylvania, shows the Lavinias featured in three, but finding they could do other things they were soon pressed into service. After appearing in the grand spectacular entry, followed by the spring board leaps over the elephant, the Lavinias took part in Living Picture Statuary Work, solo and ensemble work on the slack wire concluded their part of the performance with their feature act, which was known as "Triple Hoop and Lofty Suspended Perch Feats.—The only exhibition of its kind ever attempted."

Never Badly Injured

In spite of many falls, Mr. Belknap has a distinct recollection that he was never badly injured in falling from the wire, although he did suffer many times in learning the work. He found that the meanest fall that a man can get is when the wire is suspended only one inch from the floor for practice. When the performer loses his balance the wire shoots from under him and unless he is walking with canes it is very likely to stand him right on his head.

The great danger in the ladder trick is not the one that seems to be most apparent to the observer. The danger would appear to be that the ladders may spread apart and let the wires go from under them, but such is not the case. The skill in this trick is to keep the weight on the two feet of each ladder so balanced that the tension is the same on both ends of the wire between the points of support. If this nice poise is not maintained a whip will develop and one foot of the ladder will jump right out.

Unusual Performance

While on tour with the Barnum Show, the Lavinias gave a most unusual performance at the conclusion of the two wire act. At the conclusion of the act Belknap and Buckley straddled the two ladders in pyramid fashion and King performed a spectacular gyration at the top of the two ladders, and on one occasion Mr. Belknap became suddenly conscious of the fact that King was on the way down and not in the usual manner. Purely through physical reaction Mr. Belknap extended his left arm and caught King around the waist. The trick

brought forth such applause that the artists jumped to the ground and took a very nice bow and called it a day.

The act which brought the Lavinias to the attention on Messrs. Barnum and Bailey was one which the Lavinias originated and which has not been exactly duplicated ever since their time.

It was known as the "Perch Act" and the apparatus consisted of three steel rings, each approximately four feet in diameter. Two of these rings were fastened directly together by a swivel, and the third was joined to the other two by a long pole—about ten feet in length. The single ring was fastened to the top rafters of the old Madison Square Garden, which was exactly 67 feet from the floor, so that the bottom ring was about 45 feet from the floor level. Each man worked in one of the rings—King in the top one, Buckley in the upper of the pair that were fastened together, and Mr. Belknap in the bottom one. After a few fancy contortions, each trick was ended by King making some kind of spectacular descent and being cause by the other two men after a sheer drop of 18 feet.

Had To Lower Tanks

It is interesting to note that when on tour this paraphernalia was hitched to the very top of the center pole in the big tent and when King made these drops the shock was so great that it bounced the old lighting equipment around so badly that they could not keep the equipment in order, and it was necessary when this act was being done to lower the old tanks to the floor.

At the time this act was being done, State Laws had been passed in most states, requiring the use of safety nets and imposing a penalty of \$500.00 if the nets were not used. The Lavinias, however had made a study of nets, and they knew that there is only one safe way to land in a net and, that is, on the shoulder blades. Inasmuch as their work was done either head or feet first they knew that if they landed in the net in that manner the result would be worse than going down on the ground and they chose to work without nets. In fact, they never did use one. In all the time they performed in the perches, they had but one accident and that was in the City of Milwaukee. In the performance of these aerial tricks the element of time is

most essential and for some reason—which none of them could explain afterwards—in performing their finale trick the timing was off and it very nearly resulted in the death of two of the men.

How Trick Was Done

In this trick, King in the top perch and Mr. Belknap in the bottom faced the audience in the same direction—Buckley in the opposite. After a few hand balances King shot out of the top hoop and dropped 18 feet to Mr. Belknap's toes. The impact gave Belknap enough swing so that he threw King right toward him through his own hoop face-to-face and hand-to-hand. This momentum drove Mr. Belknap backwards through his own hoop and he caught by his knees and after a few swings threw King up into the hoop above where Buckley caught him.

This trick was very spectacular and extremely dangerous and on the occasion mentioned in Milwaukee, for some reason the first intimation Mr. Belknap had that things were not normal was when he saw King's feet coming through his hoop instead of his hands. With no chance to catch him or protect himself, King's feet hit Mr. Belknap right in the chest and they both went out of the hoop. Neither had any idea how it happened and the only recollection Mr. Belknap has is the fact that he landed on his hands and knees in the circus ring and King coming down head first, landed in the middle of Mr. Belknap's back. Neither man was hurt and, true to traditional circus lore, they went right up and did it again in a conventional manner.

Nearly Ended Lives

Those of us who have had the misfortune to experience the discomfort of corns and bunions think of them unpleasantly, of course, but not usually as a matter of life and death, but in the Perch Act of the Lavinias the bunion came very near being the end of two men.

At the close of one of their tricks, Buckley hanging by his hands in the bottom hoop held Mr. Belknap toe to toe, and Mr. Belknap hand-to-hand with King held King while he did his beautiful work. For the toe-to-toe to work artists are provided with a role of canvas which slips under the tongue of the canvas slipper, so that the

holding is done virtually by the instep. Due to the use of so many different styles of shoes Buckley had developed a terrible bunion and on one occasion when this trick was being done Mr. Belknap's hold slipped and the weight of Belknap and King was thrown right on Buckley's bunion. He never mentioned it until some twenty years later, when he confessed that he was really unconscious during those few seconds—all he knew and could remember was that he must not let go, and the agony lived with him for days after.

High Light

A rather interesting high light on the nature of their act was the observation of an old gentleman by the name of Cibalus. Mr. Cibalus was the father of the well known Larry Cibalus who has since become so famous as a director of comic opera and more recently moving picture productions.

The elder Mr. Cibalus was a balloon jumper by profession and at the time of the early efforts of the Lavinias he took a great interest in them and helped to polish up their work. For months, Mr. Cibalus, who had been engaged all his life in a hazardous occupation, used to come to the circus ring and watch the perch act. At first the young men thought that he was watching them for critical reasons, but after he had seen the act twice a day for weeks without remarks, Mr. Belknap got curious to know why he should come in for every performance and when Mr. Belknap frankly asked him what he was looking at, Mr. Cibalus—being of Spanish origin and speaking rather poor English—simply shook his head and said "Some Day." Knowing the boys as well as he knew them, he probably felt that he could give some valuable information to the coroner.

Out of Profession

The injury which forced Mr. Belknap out of the Big Show strangely enough did not come from his chosen profession in the perches or slack wire.

In their anxiety to be with the Barnum Show the men agreed to almost anything and they allowed to be written into their contract, a clause that in the event that it became necessary they would participate in the opening leaps, which took place right after the grand

entry. At first Mr. Bailey did not insist, but so many men were hurt in doing it the management finally insisted Mr. Belknap participate.

Injured in Leap

As a boy he had practiced considerably in fancy diving at his brother's pavilion—where the Locomobile Works now stand—and in so doing he had always learned to make one and a half turns and hit the water head first. In order to land on a circus mattress properly, another half turn was necessary and whether this old habit persisted or whether the spring board was not just right Mr. Belknap does not know. The spring board, it must be realized, is rather a tricky piece of paraphernalia. In good dry weather it is full of life and at times it will actually go down and come back and give the performer a kick and turn him over too far. In wet weather it is sluggish and the performer must learn by testing it just what he may expect.

On the occasion of Mr. Belknap's unfortunate accident, he took off the spring board to make a double somersault over a string of elephants, but somehow in making the last turn he became "cast" in the air and could not complete the turn, with the result that he landed on his left shoulder, resulting in an injury that eventually brought about unpleasantness with Mr. Bailey and a mutually agreed cancellation of his contract.

Appeared Here

The injury necessitated three months of convalescence during which time the best the Lavinias could do was to fill in with theatrical engagements using only their statutory act. According to the Bridgeport Standard, they appeared as a filler between the acts of "The Chimes of Normandy," which was running at the Theatre Belknap, which was operated by Mr. Belknap's older brother Charles. They also made another Bridgeport appearance with a road show known as "Grogan's Elevation." The Theatre Belknap was later known as Proctor's Grand Opera House and is now the site of the Park Theatre.

As soon as the acrobatic work could be resumed the Lavinias went out with the so-called Sunderland Shows,

and at the completion of that tour they found their interest in the circus waning. Their ambition, like all others in the profession, was to reach the top and to be billed as a feature with Barnum and Bailey combination, and having accomplished that, the lure of the circus was fading. Returning to Bridgeport, the act was dissolved. King died very young, but Buckley never lost the lure of public performance and became a very fine magician. He has appeared in the Poli Circuit many times since and once within the last decade. On those occasions Mr. Belknap has never failed to head the applause for his old partner, and the fanning bee which followed always started off with "Do You Remember That Day? etc." Buckley now a man of approximately seventy years is retired and when last heard of was living in Florida.

Although many years have intervened, Mr. Belknap had the most pleasant recollections of his association under the "Big Top." Like all others, he recognized in Mr. Barnum his great showmanship, and in Mr. Bailey wonderful executive ability. The performers were under immediate jurisdiction of Mr. Bailey, who felt that he had to make good all of Mr. Barnum's publicity. He was so conscientious that a trifling matter like a broken shoulder could not possibly stop the show, and it was this difference of opinion that led to the cancellation of the Lavinia Brothers contract.

By this time The Belknap Manufacturing Company had assumed such proportions and Mr. Charles Belknap such an advanced age that there was apparent need for a man of Mr. William Belknap's energy and ability, and he became associated with his father in the operation of the business. At his father's death, Mr. Belknap became the Company's President and fills that capacity today with all the dynamic energy that he put into his circus act forty years ago. Through his untiring efforts and vision the Company's output of fine bronze values has assumed international as well as nationwide distribution. Mr. Belknap enjoys fine health and is in general excellent physical condition. His looks belie his years. He truly represents "Barnum's Bridgeport."