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Waste Not, Want Not: The Dyer Marion 'Ichabod' Reynolds Circus Collection

John Terreo
John Willard Brister Library

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The current century replete with a vast plethora of technology and consumer paraphernalia has witnessed the creation of the multimedia collection. The records of a person, family or organization are no longer restricted to the traditional correspondence, diaries, financial ledgers, deeds of ownership, and certificates of birth, marriage, and death but include items of a more contemporary format such as audio and video tapes, films, photographs, sound recordings, and possibly anything else that has been invented in the last fifty years. This situation has become more pronounced with materials deliberately assembled by a collector specializing in a particular subject area. Consequently, those responsible for the processing of multimedia collections are confronted with new problems and challenges. Discussion of the manner in which the staff of the Mississippi Valley Collection (MVC) processed the Dyer Marion "Ichabod" Reynolds Circus Collection should provide some degree of assistance to those who might someday face a similar task.

The MVC staff is frequently questioned about the provenance of this collection because it is atypical of the department's collecting areas. The shortest answer to this complex query is that the MVC functions as the special collections department for the Memphis State University (MSU) Libraries; the university on occasion has acquired collections which, while not specifically fitting into MVC's collecting scope, support areas of study being investigated by students, staff, and faculty. Due to the uniqueness and academic value of many collections, they are housed in the MVC where they can be made accessible to researchers and provided with a secure environment conducive to long-term preservation. For that reason, this particular collection is part of the MVC's holdings.

In 1969, Albert Johnson, an instructor in the Memphis State University Speech and Drama Department and avid circus enthusiast, learned that Dyer Reynolds had put up a part of his circus collection for sale. A collector of circus memorabilia since
the age of five, Reynolds was reputed to have amassed one of the largest private collections in the United States. Johnson persuaded the university to purchase the collection on the grounds that it documented the history of a uniquely American entertainment medium and art form. When contacted by the university, Reynolds reduced his sale price to a mere fraction because he felt that possession by an academic institution would make the material more available to the public. From the time of its arrival at MSU until 1974 when it was transferred to the Mississippi Valley Collection, the collection resided in the building occupied by the Speech and Drama Department.

Because of a small processing staff and previous priorities, little in the way of organizing the collection could be done upon its initial receipt by the MVC. Processing did not commence until the early spring of 1980 at which time the tiny MVC processing team (which doubles as the department's reference staff) discovered an enormous task ahead. This particular collection consisted of over one hundred containers of various sizes which occupied nearly one hundred linear feet. In addition, the collection in its journeys from Reynolds to MSU Speech and Drama Department to MVC had been packed and unpacked and repacked several times for shipping purposes. As a result, the original order of the donor had been totally destroyed. The first survey by the processing staff revealed that materials of like or similar nature were scattered throughout the collection. The only things in the processors' favor were that the approximately one thousand monographs contained in the collection had been separated upon its arrival in 1974 and integrated into MVC's book holdings and that twenty-five reel recordings of circus music had been duplicated on audio cassette tapes. Consequently, sorting became the first order of business.

Considering the collection's condition, the MVC processors concluded that the contents of each container would have to be removed and then systematically grouped according to type of material such as correspondence, photographs, audio tapes, posters, films, artifacts, and program magazines. Because of the collection's bulk and disarray, it became necessary to place empty cartons on the floor and the tables of the processing area in order to
accommodate the various material formats.

The initial sorting revealed some very unusual items. On one occasion the MVC staff was startled by a cry of "Oh, my gosh!" and several people rushed to the processing section. Fears were quickly put to rest when the processor displayed a small plastic bag which contained an object resembling dried grass and peanut hulls. On the bag's front, written in red letters, was the inscription "Souvenir Pachyderm Poo. Courtesy of Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey Circus."

Other items which were either the cause of surprise or distress were part of an elephant's toenail, two complete clown costumes, and various animal teeth and fangs as well as artwork concerning circus life and history that had been composed by Reynolds himself. Besides the discovery of several unusual items in the collection, the primary sorting uncovered that Reynolds had included materials which dealt with his personal life and the life of a close friend, fellow collector, and prominent electrician of the circus industry--Edward Riggs "Whitey" Versteeg.

While the early stages of sorting were underway, the MVC curator wrote Reynolds to inform him that processing of the collection was underway. In reply, Reynolds stated that he was pleased to hear that organization of the collection had begun. He thought that MSU had lost interest in the collection as he had not heard from Albert Johnson for several years. Reynolds related that he was seriously ill with pulmonary emphysema and asked whether the university would be interested in acquiring the remainder of his collection; and if so, would it be possible to send someone to his Los Angeles home to pack it properly for shipment.

Memphis State accepted Reynolds's offer, and in June of 1980, the MVC curator and a member of the processing team went to Los Angeles to pack and supervise shipment of the collection's second accession. While in Los Angeles, they were able to visit with Reynolds in his hospital room and to discuss the collection and his reasons for assembling it. This discussion proved highly beneficial for a number of reasons. Reynolds related how his nickname and Versteeg's were derived. According to him, the first time a person begins employment with a circus or carnival, a sobriquet is bestowed upon him. The
nickname reflects either a physical characteristic or a personality trait. For the majority of people associated with the circus this appellation becomes permanent. Since Reynolds was a tall and thin individual, Versteeg began calling him "Ichabod" after the character in the Washington Irving story, "The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow." Versteeg gained his nickname because even as a young man, his hair was very white; hence, "Whitey." Many circus people are known to each other only by their nicknames. For that reason Reynolds requested that the collection be designated the Dyer Marion "Ichabod" Reynolds Circus Collection.

He explained to the two MVC staff people that he had become enthralled with the circus at a very early age. As he grew up, he became interested in how the circus had been superseded as the dominant entertainment medium in America by newer forms such as radio, television, and motion pictures. Reynolds believed that the golden age of the American circus and its decline should be preserved for posterity. Therefore, he began collecting and making things which described the circus not merely as an entertainment medium but as an industry, business, and unique art form.

During this discussion, Reynolds stated that he had placed the remainder of the collection in no special order. This factor would later influence the decision to merge both portions of the collection. Further, a member of the processing staff was on hand to assist in its packing. Insofar as possible, items were grouped together according to the sorting arrangement then being done at MVC. As a result of this action, integration of the two groups was greatly facilitated.

Following the second accession's arrival at the MVC in July 1980, sorting proceeded at a slightly improved pace; the initial categorization had been virtually completed and a discernible series pattern continued to emerge. Besides the materials pertaining to the lives of Reynolds and Versteeg, a sizeable amount of the collection related specifically to two circuses: Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey Circus and the Al G. Barnes Circus. In addition, there were hundreds of handbills, tickets, pennants, posters, programs, season route guides, stationery, business papers, and contracts as well as
artifacts which included tent flags and a wagon wheel with a thirty-two inch diameter. These items represented over one hundred different circuses which existed during the period 1878–1979. There were also approximately fifty magazine titles which pertained to the circus and related entertainment industries. A few of these publications were represented by only two or three issues; yet, the majority were in runs of several years with scores of issues. Further, hundreds of oversized items had been discovered that included posters, heralds, artworks done by Reynolds, and a very large novelty doll. The other formats of the collection were audio and video materials such as twenty-four phonodiscs, almost nine hundred loose photographs, fifteen reel-to-reel audio tapes, twenty-four audio cassette tapes, and ten 8mm films.

As a result, the processors concluded that a series arrangement would be appropriate and on a provisional basis settled upon the following order:

Series I  Dyer Marion "Ichabod" Reynolds
Series II  Edward Riggs "Whitey" Versteeg
Series III  Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey Circus
Series IV  Al G. Barnes Circus
Series V  Other Circuses
Series VI  Artifacts
Series VII  Publications

Oversize and audio and video materials would be separated to appropriate areas within the MVC.

The next phase in the operation would be threefold: (1) conduct a second sorting of the first accession which would include organizing the various materials into alphabetical or chronological sequence and the weeding of duplicates; (2) begin sorting of the addition; and (3) start planning an exhibit based on the collection.

By the end of 1980, the sorting and integration of the two accessions had been completed and an exhibit prepared. The time had come to evaluate the collection in terms of description for the purposes of composing a finding aid. The staff had to consider in its appraisal the mass of the collection, the reference requirements of the MVC, and the department's personnel situation. In order to expedite matters, the processors decided to make the provisional series arrangement permanent. The next task would be to devise an order for each series
and to tackle all subsequent problems. Because the materials concerning Reynolds and Versteeg had been assigned the first two series, their correspondence would be listed first according to standard manuscript processing rules.

This posed the processors with an immediate and major difficulty. In the first series were about four thousand items encompassing over fifty years, while the second series contained a thousand letters covering forty-two years. To describe each letter according to standard manuscript cataloging format (that is, TO: so-and-so, FROM: so-and-so and the date) would be too time-consuming for the small processing staff. They decided upon a chronological arrangement by year. In the case of the Reynolds correspondence each folder would contain between twenty and thirty letters for each month of each year represented. The same would apply for Versteeg's letters except, as he had only a fourth of Reynolds's amount, each folder in this series would contain the same number of letters but only for a single year. The same procedure would apply to the correspondence in series III and IV. The processors believed this to be the most efficient way to deal with such a large volume of correspondence. They thought too, that a researcher would be more interested in the collection's other materials. Following each man's correspondence would come an alphabetical listing of biographical materials such as high school yearbooks, birth and death certificates, various types of licenses (namely, driver and vendor) and financial records.

The order for Series III, Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey Circus and Series IV, Al G. Barnes Circus would follow the same pattern; correspondence first succeeded by general materials such as contracts, diagrams, payroll records, and program magazines in alphabetical sequence with each kind of material having its own folder. Items pertaining to all other circuses would be placed in series V and organized by type (that is, handbills, pennants, press kits, and season route cards) and alphabetically by name of circus thereafter. As in the earlier series each item or circus was assigned its own folder. Due to the large number of items, descriptions would be kept brief. The collection's artifacts would be contained in series VI. As in the
preceding series, the items were arranged in alphabetical order by type. Because most of these materials were rather large, only two or three could be stored in a single carton.

In the provisional series arrangement, periodicals and other kinds of publications had been placed in series VII. The processors questioned whether they should be retained or removed from the collection and transferred to the MSU periodicals department. As most of the magazines concerned some facet of the circus or carnival industries or their history, the processors opted to retain them with the collection. Arrangement would be alphabetical by title of periodical and thereunder by issue date.

With this much of the collection's arrangement decided, the staff had to deal with several hundred oversize posters and artifacts, approximately nine hundred loose photographs, many audio tapes as well as films, and two dozen phonodiscs. They concluded that the earlier decision to separate these items to other areas within the MVC was the most workable. As the department has a special area for oversize items, the staff decided to place posters and artifacts in that section. The posters were placed in large map folders alphabetically by name of circus. Artifacts, such as a very large gorilla doll and a conical clown hat, were placed in oversize containers constructed by the staff and sent to the oversize section. The wagon wheel was placed in this special area, too. The loose photographs were assigned to MVC's iconographies section. Prior to separation from the collection, they were categorized according to either circus name or subject matter. For example:

FOLDER A. 73 Black and white photographs, various sizes, Al G. Barnes Circus, circa 1920-1930

Also separated from the collection and placed in MVC's iconographic section were approximately two hundred picture postcards which concerned the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art and several circuses. These items were handled in a fashion similar to the loose photographs.

All audio tapes (wire reel, reel-to-reel, and cassette) were placed in the MVC's audio recordings section as were the phonodiscs. Here again, the descriptions remained brief and in general terms. For example, the finding aid description for a
particular phonodisc reads as follows: 

Ten 8mm films posed a serious storage problem due to their highly explosive chemical content. The MVC staff applied to several agencies for a grant in order to have the films duplicated to modern 16mm film and video cassette tape. The National Endowment for the Arts approved MVC's application, and the 8mm films were duplicated to the contemporary formats. The unstable originals were discarded.

The final labor involved the actual composition of the finding aid which took several months to complete, although the abbreviated descriptions were used. By May of 1982, the guide had been completed and the MVC staff breathed a sigh of relief. Their triumph was to be short lived, however. A month later, Geraldine Reynolds, the mother of Dyer Reynolds, contacted the MVC. She wanted to donate items of circus memorabilia that her son had given her during his life. As before, the university accepted the offer, and Mrs. Reynolds shipped this third accession to the MVC.

At the time of this writing processing of this latest acquisition has just begun. This portion of the collection is somewhat different from the earlier two because it contains about three dozen miniature figurines portraying circus animals and acts. These miniatures pose a preservation problem because Reynolds used short-term, commercial materials in their construction. Further, some means of storing them must be devised as well. In addition to the miniatures, there are photographs, scrapbooks, and other similar types of materials as were found in the first two accessions.

Although the Reynolds collection has served to benefit the MVC, MSU, and the general community, any institution contemplating such an acquisition should carefully survey its resources, needs, and goals. While a multi-media collection will present processing and storage problems, it does furnish processors with a change of routine and gives them the opportunity to test their skills on a higher level. Processing a multi-media collection also
unites all staff members in a common project. Furthermore, advantages such as favorable publicity and enhanced visibility provide the institution not only with help in soliciting donations or receiving grants but also with increased patronage.

Excellent work done by the MSU media relations office with the Reynolds collection has gained attention on the local, national, and international levels. As a result, circus researchers from Canada and South Africa have visited the MVC as have people from Ohio, Texas, and California. Such publicity has allowed the MVC to highlight many of its other holdings and to achieve an outreach which probably would not have been attained otherwise.

Besides the benefit of greater exposure, the Reynolds collection has proven to be a rich research source for MSU's graduate and undergraduate students. For example, students from various areas of study have written papers which included how the general organizational set-up of the circus has influenced other businesses, the advertising methods of P.T. Barnum, and a short history of the Al G. Barnes Circus. In addition to academic researchers and university students, several people from the Circus Model Builders of America (an organization dedicated to preserving the history of the circus via the construction of miniature scale replicas) have used the collection in their work. The MVC has also loaned items to other institutions for exhibition.

At the present time, the multi-media collection is considered something of an irregularity, and justification for the acquisition of the Reynolds collection (which does not fit into the MVC collecting policy) is frequently posed as a question to the MVC staff. However, as the technological revolution continues and the printed word becomes increasingly supplanted by video and audio formats, the multi-media collection will become a common holding. Its administration and maintenance will be a primary function of special collections libraries and archives.
The collecting focus of the MVC is the cultural, social, political, literary, and scientific history of the lower Mississippi Valley Region.

One of the early methods of recording sounds employed a special kind of wire which was wrapped around a metal reel. When placed on a wire reel player/recorder, the wire reel unraveled to an empty metal reel and in the process the recorded sound was heard. The principles and operations were similar to those used by modern audio player/recorder machines. Today, wire reel devices are very rare. In order to preserve the music recorded on the wire reels in this collection, the MVC searched for and found such a machine in working order and was able to duplicate the sounds contained on the wire reels to audio cassette tapes. The original wire reels remain with the collection and the cassette duplicates have been included as well to serve as user copies.

After much fruitless research regarding this item, the staff assumed it might have been an actual souvenir which was produced in limited quantities as a gag or joke. The MVC could be the only special collections repository in America with such an artifact among its holdings.

Elephants like human beings grow cuticles on their feet. In their natural habitat running and walking keeps them worn down. However, in captivity movement of the animal is restricted and it becomes necessary to trim its hooves daily to protect the animal's physical condition and its psychological disposition. If the cuticles are not trimmed each day, the elephant will experience discomfort which eventually leads to pain, frustration, and anger.

Edward Riggs "Whitey" Versteeg (1900-1969) earned the distinction of being one of the foremost electricians in the circus industry. From 1941 to 1956, he served as electrical department supervisor for Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey Circus. When
Reynolds went to work for RBB&B in 1951, he became a close friend with Versteeg with whom he shared similar interests. Upon Versteeg's death, Reynolds inherited a portion of his collection of circus memorabilia.

6 Albert Johnson died in 1971.

7 Throughout his life Reynolds experienced breathing problems which often necessitated prolonged periods of hospitalization. As a child this condition was diagnosed as asthma, and not until 1961, did physicians determine that he suffered from pulmonary emphysema.

8 Reynolds spent most of his early life in Rhode Island where he was born in 1930. Following the discontinuation of the tent or "Big Top" format in 1956, he moved with Versteeg to Baldwin Park, California. A few years later, Reynolds moved to Los Angeles, where his parents had taken residence.

9 Eleven Scrapbooks of photographs were found in the collection. As each of these contained well over a hundred pictures and related to a specific circus or circuses as well as the personal lives of Versteeg and Reynolds, the processors decided to leave them intact. It was judged that this would be the best course considering the time needed to carry out removal.

10 Due to widespread interest in the collection, the administration decided that an exhibit was needed in order to demonstrate the collection's extraordinary nature. This added to the processing team's work as it was no easy task to organize a collection and prepare an exhibit simultaneously. This was the first display of materials in the collection. The second was done in the summer of 1981 and another the following summer. In addition, various items were loaned to the main branch of the Memphis and Shelby County Libraries in the spring of 1984 to form the core of a temporary circus exhibit for that institution.

11 The first exhibit ran only during August and September 1980, whereas the two succeeding ones ran
June thru September of 1981 and 1982 respectively.

12 The processors were also working on two other collections at this time.

13 Many circuses and carnivals were represented by only a single item, while others were delineated by dozens of items of several different kinds.

14 Dyer Reynolds died on 22 October 1980.