



Module 10 Talking Points

- Some of the buildings at Circus World are over 100 years old and were once used to house animals like elephants, tigers, and giraffes that were part of a circus.
- The buildings are next to Baraboo River where there was plenty of water for the animals.
- The circus in Baraboo was started in 1884 by five brothers. Their last name was Ringling. The brothers were Al., which was short for Albert, Otto, Alf. T. which was short for Alfred T., and John and Charles.
- There were two more brothers named "Gus" and Henry but they were not part of the circus right away.
- Al. Ringling was the oldest of the Ringling Brothers.
- Al. Ringling was born in 1852 in Chicago.
- Al. Ringling's parents were August and Salome (Sal-Oh-May) Ringling.
- Both August and Salome Ringling were immigrants to the United States. August was born in Germany and Salome was born in France.
- They met and married in Milwaukee and started a family.
- August Ringling made a living for his family by making and selling harnesses for horses. Harnesses are the leather straps and metal parts that are used to hook up a horse to a wagon or carriage so that a horse can pull it.
- As the Ringling boys grew up, some of them were trained by their father on how to make harnesses out of leather.
- The Ringling family moved to Baraboo in 1855. The village was growing and there were more and more horses here that needed harnesses.
- Al. Ringling learned how to be a harness maker but he wanted to do something different. He wanted to own his circus someday. Several of his brothers had the same idea.
- When Al. Ringling was old enough, he went to work for traveling circuses and learned how to do things like walk on a tightrope and how to balance a plow on his chin.
- In 1882 four of the Ringling brothers started their own traveling show. This was not a circus but a variety show with acting, singing, and comedy routines that was held indoors.



- This show helped the brothers practice their performance skills and raise money to start their own circus.
- Finally in 1884 the Ringling brothers were ready to start their own circus. They built their own wooden bleachers and cut down trees to make into tent poles for their circus tent.
- They put on their first circus show in Baraboo.
- We know that the tent could hold about 600 people. The Ringling brothers performed various acts and a few animals like a horse and pig were also in the show.
- The Ringlings performed at 114 towns in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota that first year. They returned to Baraboo for the winter storing all of their equipment.
- When the circus started, Al. Ringling was the only one of the Ringling brothers who was married. He was married to Lou Morris. She was part of the circus just like her husband and her brothers-in-law.
- Lou Ringling acted as a snake charmer in the circus and also performed as horse rider. She was in charge of the costumes and she helped drive a wagon when needed.
- The Ringling brothers moved their circus by horse and wagon for the first six years. This was incredibly hard work sometimes as roads were not paved in those days and sometimes wagons and horses sank deep into the mud.
- The Ringling Brothers added elephants to their circus during their fifth season. Many people did not think a circus was a "real" circus until it had at least one elephant.
- The Ringlings first purchased two elephants and added more over the years. Eventually their circus would own over 40 elephants.
- Many other animals were added to the circus including camels, zebras, kangaroos, bears, tigers, giraffes, and even a hippopotamus.
- All of these animals came back to Baraboo every year for the winter after traveling with the circus.
- The Ringling brothers hired many people to work for their circus.
- Besides the performers, there were many people behind the scenes. Jobs included setting up and taking down the tents for the circus almost every



day, taking care of animals, equipment and costumes, feeding people, and handling the customers that came to see the circus.

- After six years of moving the circus by horse and wagon, the Ringling brothers started to move their circus by using the railroad. This made moving their growing circus much easier.
- At this time the Ringling brothers had over 200 employees and hundreds of animals. The circus fit onto 18 railroad cars.
- When the Ringling brothers started their circus there were no radios, televisions, or computers to help advertise their shows.
- Posters were put up to let people know that the circus was coming to town. Several weeks before the circus would show up in a town, circus employees would arrive and put up hundreds of posters wherever they could find room. Some posters were made up of many pieces of paper put together to make one scene and could cover the side of an entire building.
- After the circus arrived in a new town, a parade was held to invite people to come to the circus.
- The parade was filled with beautiful wagons, animals, bands, and performers.
- Many of the wagons had wooden carvings on them. Sometimes the carvings were covered in thin sheets of real gold to make the wagons really impressive, especially in the sunshine.
- At each town the circus was set up on a large open field and consisted of many tents and wagons. The largest tent was called the big top and this is where the circus performances took place. Besides the big top, the circus included a "side show" where people could pay extra to see interesting things.
- A menagerie, or traveling zoo, was also included where people could see all of the exotic animals that came along with the circus.
- Every fall, after performing around the country, the circus would return to Baraboo. More and more buildings were built in Baraboo to house the animals, wagons, tents, equipment, and costumes.
- Over the winter, wagons and equipment were repaired and painted, costumes were sewn and a whole new show was planned for the following year.



- When the circus was back in Baraboo, the animals had to be walked regularly to get exercise so it was not uncommon to see elephants and other circus animals being led around the city taking a walk.
- There were many circuses in the United States. As the Ringling Brothers Circus grew they sometimes bought smaller circuses and ran them separately or absorbed them into their own show.
- In 1907 the Ringling brothers purchased their largest rival, the circus owned by Barnum & Bailey, which called itself "The Greatest Show on Earth."
- The Ringlings ran their own circus and the Barnum & Bailey Circus separately for a few years before combining them into one giant circus. The circus was then known as Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus – the Greatest Show on Earth.
- The Ringling brothers had a large family and they also had a large extended family. Their aunt and uncle, Gottlieb and Maria Gollmar, who also lived in Baraboo, had fourteen children.
- Inspired by their cousins, the Ringling Brothers, four of the Gollmar sons started their own circus in Baraboo just seven years after the Ringling brothers. While the Gollmar Brothers Circus never grew to be as big as the Ringling circus it was still a large circus and also returned to Baraboo each fall.
- Besides the Gollmars, the Ringlings also had some cousins in Baraboo named the Moellers. There weren't nearly as many Moeller children as there were Ringlings and Gollmars though. In fact there were only four Moeller cousins, two boys and two girls.
- The two boys were Henry and Corwin Moeller and they learned how to build wooden wagons with their father. After the Ringlings and Gollmars started their circuses, the Moellers would make circus wagons for them. Some of them were plain and some of them were fancy.
- The Moellers sometimes made wagons that were used only in the circus parades, like the bell wagon.
- The Ringling Brothers became very rich running their circus empire. They employed over 1,600 people who all traveled with their circus. They worked well together and created the largest circus in the United States.



- The Ringlings were some of the richest people in Baraboo when they lived here. Al. and Lou Ringling built the largest home ever built in Sauk County.
- Their stone mansion featured stained glass windows, fine woodwork, electric lights and several bathrooms. Most people at this time did not have any running water in their house.
- The mansion even had a ballroom for big parties.
- Some of Al. Ringling's brothers also built large homes in Baraboo but none was as big as Al.'s.
- Al. Ringling also built a new theatre for Baraboo in 1915. The new theatre was built for live events like plays and musicals but could also show moving pictures or movies which were new at that time.
- The building was very elegant and cost over \$100,000 at the time which would be like \$2.5 million today.
- Al. Ringling did not get to enjoy his theatre for very long. He died just six weeks after it opened.
- Today the history of the circus in Baraboo and around the United States is preserved at Circus World Museum.
- The Museum opened in 1959 on the grounds of the original Ringling Brothers Circus Winter Headquarters. The museum has grown to have the largest collection of antique circus wagons and circus related artifacts in the world.
- Circus World also has live big top shows and other performances every summer to give visitors a circus experience.
- Circus World is one of 12 state historic sites in Wisconsin and is the number 1 site in attendance.