

Bronco Bill – A Black Country Showman

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Not to be confused with the character in the title role of the well known Clint Eastwood film “Bronco Billy” or the equally famous silent movie cowboy Bronco Bill Anderson. No this little remembered impresario has closer associations with the Staffordshire Black Country than he did with the Wild West. His real name was John Swallow and he was born in Edinburgh on the 21st November, 1875. He was the son of a circus proprietor of the same name. Apparently the younger John Swallow began his riding career on the back of a Shetland pony at the age of three. He later went on to become an accomplished acrobat and equestrian performer.

John Swallow Senior’s International Circus travelled extensively throughout the United Kingdom with an occasional tour of the Continent thrown in. The young John Swallow is known to have also done at least one European tour as a performer with the legendary Barnum & Bailey’s Circus as well as a number of tours of the United States with the same Company which extended over several years.

Eventually he returned to Britain, sometime between 1910 and 1912 and set about putting together his own show. He was strongly influenced by the numerous Wild West Shows of the time and the fact that virtually every American Circus included a Wild West feature. Swallow is said to have chosen his stage name due to his fondness of the early Western movies and the films of Bronco Bill Anderson in particular. When it was finally set up John Swallow’s enterprise therefore took to the road under the guise of “Bronco Bill’s Circus & Wild West Show”. Due to Swallow’s experience and familiarity with every type of horse, both working and performing, it was not surprising that the entire outfit was a horse-drawn affair.



During the First World War “Bronco Bill” Swallow was engaged in the breaking and training of horses for the Army. After the conflict was over and things began to get back to normal the Circus frequently set up its winter headquarters in the Wolverhampton area of South Staffordshire. This eventually led to the Swallow Family taking up permanent residence in Waterloo Road, Wolverhampton, with a “Yard” based in nearby Gorsebrook Road. Swallow and his wife Annie Peck had four children, two boys and two girls. One of his sons (another John) became a journalist and eventually became the General Manager of the “Express and Star” newspaper. His brother Bill became a partner in the Wolverhampton Estate Agents Bussy & Swallow. One of Bronco Bill’s grandsons (yet another John) also became a journalist, making a name for himself on local television news programmes with Independent Television.

In 1920 John Swallow linked up with Sir Garrard Tyrwitt-Drake and David Taylor to form Ringland’s circus. The new enterprise made its debut in March that year at Bridgnorth. Swallow left the following year and reinstated Bronco Bill’s Circus and Wild West Show. At the start of each tour season the Circus would invariably put on a performance at the locally known “Brick Kiln Patch” close to the former site of Joseph Brazier’s Gunlock Works, now the location of Wolverhampton’s Retail Market.

By 1930 John Swallow had elected to retire and the last performance of Bronco Bill’s Circus took place at Stafford in October of that year. However this is not quite the end of the story. A spectacular two day auction was held in a field off the Cannock Road to dispose of all the animals and equipment. On the 3rd and 4th of November this unusual sale drew in buyers from all over the United Kingdom as well as a few from the Continent. The Props for a Roman Gladiator act were bought by the famous Black Country comedian Billy Russell, though what he did with them remains a mystery. A total of seventy-two horses were sold along with two Indian elephants called Salt and Saucy. The elephants were purchased by Mr Harry Wilding of Birmingham. Fortunately John Swallow decided to retain his yard in Gorsebrook Road because it transpired that Wilding was short of funds and unable to meet his commitment and Swallow had to take the elephants back.

Swallow then changed his mind and decided to keep Salt and Saucy after all, and once again took to the road. In 1931 he embarked on a tour of Ireland with the pair as part of John Duffy’s Circus, billing them as “Bronco Bill’s Wonderful Performing Elephants”. Following this, he and his act became associated with many different medium sized circuses and they continued to perform throughout the British Isles until Swallow suffered a heart attack in 1945. John Swallow died in Canterbury on the 2nd August that year and was buried at the Jeffcock Lane Cemetery in Wolverhampton. Salt and Saucy were handed over to Dudley Zoo, where they remained until they were sold on again in 1947.

Sadly the headstone marking John Swallow’s last resting place bears no mention of “Bronco Bill” therefore few are aware of the much revered and respected Showman who lies interred there.