

My Dad co-founded the Circus City Festival in Peru, Indiana. It was an adventure every day for a five-year-old. Here is what I remember, writes [Mark Mathes, SFW president and book editor](#). Peru was Winter quarters for circuses before and after the Ringling Brothers discovered how pleasant and economical it could be to train and re-stage their circus in Sarasota, Florida. The year was 1958 and my father published and managed the Peru Daily Tribune. Active in the chamber, he and community leaders struggled with ways to promote the small central Indiana community north of Indianapolis. Many retired circus performers clowns and crew still lived



in the area.

Ollie Miller, a railroad brakeman, and his wife Midge, lived in a home that was more circus museum than house. He pulled out clown shoes that seemed to be two feet long. Midge paraded in circus costumes that still smelled of grease paint and powder.



What could they do? The Circus City Festival was established in 1958 to build on that legacy. They dreamed to engage the community's young people with professional and recreational skills provided by an amateur youth circus, much like the Sailor Circus we know today in Sarasota. Hundreds of Peru residents remembered the last days of services during the regular season and when they trained in barns and corn and wheat fields. Folks like Emmett Kelly were touched by the circus. He operated a camera store across the street from the newspaper where my father traded. His father was the famous sad face clown, Emmett Kelly. A portrait of him made by my father is my favorite in Sarasota. My own father convinced young Emmett to follow in his famous father's footsteps. The Peru community leaders weren't the only ones who had ideas to capitalize and preserve the heritage of the American circus. Folks in Baraboo, Wisconsin developed similar ideas. Baraboo claimed the Ringling brothers among its historic circus heritage. The race was on to find and negotiate for anything still surviving from the circus. Many times it was a rusty or decayed circus wagon abandoned in a grain field or a barn. Sometimes the Hoosier volunteers discovered a ticket wagon or a circus calliope first. Other times, the Wisconsin teams prevailed. It was my job to scrape the rust and the flaking paint back at the barn in Peru. The push was on to rebuild the wagons while circus crew members recruited young people who wanted to learn a vanishing art. Could it magically come together by July?

—mark mathes

