

# A new home for a Ringling rail car



*text by Leelia Cornell with photos by Tom Cornell*

*The Ringling train car beside Miser's pond. Each window is a room that once was home for Ringling performers.*

Since 1884 circus parades have been common in Peru, Indiana. And today, Peru produces the largest annual circus parade in the U.S. on the third weekend of every July.

However, on June 23, 2017, Peru witnessed a circus parade unlike any other. It was impromptu, unorganized and not advertised, but no one could miss the 86 foot long, 10 foot wide, 65,000 pound Ringling train car number RBBX 41302 with the Ringling logo splashed across it in red moving through the streets of Peru – brushing the limbs of trees that lined the streets. Escorted by a state police car, it led a procession of vehicles from the train yards of Peru to the home of Brian, Tina and Skyler Miser just outside the circus city. Balanced cautiously on eight rubber, semi truck wheels welded to the middle of the train car's underside, the car was pulled

by a tow truck. Behind it followed the vehicles of the extended Miser family, the press and a few friends from the Peru circus. The entire entourage was creeping along at 10 to 15 MPH. How did this Ringling train car find its way to the streets of Peru?

In January, 2017 when Ringling announced they were closing, Brian Miser of Peru and formally with Ringling, was in Tampa. People were talking about what was to happen with Ringling's equipment. Brian expressed he might be interested in a train car if one became available. Brian lived on the Ringling train in 1982 for a year while he performed as a flier with the Red Unit. (This was immediately after Brian graduated from North Miami High School, Peru, and our Peru youth circus.)

In 2003 Brian was again performing with the Ringling Red Unit

along with his wife Tina. Their act was a double human cannon ball. They had a compartment assigned to them on the train, which was part of their benefits from the show, but they lived in their own camper. Their daughter Skyler was born while they were with Ringling. Tina left the show at the end of 2010 but Brian stayed on until 2013 where he performed as the human fuse cannon ball. Brian leased his original cannon act to the Ringling Red Unit until it closed in 2017. Ringling was a big part of Brian's life.

Brian's desire for the train car was not only because this was part of his life, but also – and most specifically – because he wanted to preserve a piece of circus history. What better place for the home of that than Peru, Indiana where circus has been alive and well since 1884.

Before the Depression, Peru was the home of many important circuses in America, and later in time, Peru was also home of three other circuses which wintered at another location. Today Peru is home of the Circus City Festival and the Peru Amateur Circus as well as the International Circus Hall of Fame.

In Cincinnati a list of cars for sale was made available and in March there was a closed bid for the cars. Brian at first thought he wanted a car with eight units, but he later decided this car with four units would best fit his needs. Only two cars from the Red Unit were purchased by former performers.

Brian researched the history of his car including who lived in it over the years. He discovered this car was manufactured in 1949 for the Pennsylvania Railroad as a sleeper. In 1991 it was purchased by Ringling. This car was then home for Ringling performers of the Red Unit until they closed. Since the train wreck in 1992, during which cabinets came off the walls injuring people, all the cabinets, furnishings, walls and doors were built to fire code.

A performer is allotted a unit or room according to their status on the show. It doesn't matter the size of the family; it is the status of the employee that determines the size of the living space of any



*The table and kitchen of one of the 8x12' rooms. The table makes into a bed.*



*Brian Miser tells the story of this room on his train car. At 8x16', the room is prime real estate. Behind Brian is a double bed. The table on the right by the window also makes into a bed. The kitchen is at the left.*

given family. Those with high status enjoyed more space. The ringmasters had a third of a car and staff was allowed half a car! Where some rooms are larger than others, all rooms are configured like a camper and every room has a window.

Many rooms are quite small. When Brian lived on the train in 1982, he was given a compartment with only room for his bed and enough space for him to stand beside his bed and his "kitchen", a sink and hot plate. He said he could barely turn around. A little refrigerator sat on the tiny countertop and a small cabinet was above it. He did have a separate bathroom just wide enough for him to fit inside. Many performers lived in such quarters.

As you enter the Miser's car, you walk down a two foot



*View of Miser's place from the county road. The Ringling train car rests at its new home across the pond from Brian's barn.*

wide hall lined with windows stretching its entire length. The hall gives access to the rooms where performers once lived. The first part of the Miser car is divided into two separate rooms each 8x16 feet. For the 10 years Brian was on Ringling as a human cannon ball, he and Tina were allotted a room this size. Brian said rooms this large are considered prime real estate on the Ringling train since most are smaller.

On this car, until May, one of these two “large” rooms was the home of a wire walker and his girl friend who was a dancer, and the other room was the home of the boss clown. Both of these two rooms are furnished with double beds and also a bed that can be made from the table, like in a camper. There is only just enough room to walk or stand between the bed and the kitchen. The kitchen has a sink, stove, oven, cabinets and microwave plus a small TV. There is also a separate, very small, closet-like room with a toilet and a shower which face each other. There is storage under the beds, above the beds and under the table seats. As you enter the room there is a small closet up high with drawers below like a dresser. The occupants of each room gave the space their personal touch. The wire walker and dancer’s room was carpeted with shag carpet – even up onto the walls – and was adorned with swag curtains. It had a house plant which survived the journey all the way to the Miser’s house! The boss clown’s home wasn’t as fancy.

The rest of the car contained first a tiny room with a miniature washer and drier, the circuit breaker and cleaning supplies. Next were three more rooms 8x12 feet. One was the home of the car’s security officer (every car had a security officer) and the other two were the homes of two BMX bikers. Earlier in time, one of these 8 x12 rooms was home to a family with children. When a new baby joined this growing family, Ringling cut a hole between the two rooms to create a door to join them together allowing the family to have more space!

### Life on the Ringling train

When the train pulled into its destination, it stayed at a rail yard outside the center of the city, usually far from where the performance was to be. One of the first things done was to hook the train up to a fire hydrant near the train. This supplied all the water for washing. The people needed to buy bottled water to drink and for any cooking. All water from the sinks and showers drained to the tracks while the sewage went to the doniker tanks on either end of the under part of each car. Brian said since the sink drains were open to the tracks below, the clickity clack of the tracks was not muffled at all as it came up into the sink drain beside his bed. He put a towel over the drain to diminish the sound. Power to operate lights and electric devices on the train came from

generators. There were two generators for each car, but only one was used at a time. It took 700 gallons of diesel fuel to operate all the generators on the Ringling train for one day.

Some of the people who lived on the train had their own vehicles. Either one family member drove their vehicle to the next destination or the performer hired someone to do it. Many didn’t have their own transportation and for those people, buses would transport performers and workers to the arena. Shows were typically performed at 10:00 A.M. and again at 7:00 P.M. or three shows a day, 10:00 A.M., 3:00 P.M. and 7:00 P.M. If there were only two shows a day, buses would bring people back to their home on the train in the afternoon. After the final show in the evening, the people would return and sometimes party all night. They squeezed into the narrow halls all up and down the train having a grand time.

Generally, the show stayed in one location for multiple days. Once the engagement was complete at a location, the performers would return to the train and the workers would begin loading the equipment back onto the cars. It would take until around 4:00 A.M. for the train to be ready to leave. The animal cars were the first ones behind the engine because this is where the smoothest ride is to be found. The safety and comfort of circus animals are always first in the minds of circus people. The comfort of people came secondary.

The train traveled at no more than 40 MPH, taking more than 24 hours to reach their next destination. During that time, the people never left the train until they reached their destination.

Not long ago the Miser’s car knew this life well. The circus is a family. Close bonds are formed within the circus. All of life – from birth to death, happiness to sorrow – took place here. It was a life only a few knew – and now it’s over. Here on the Miser’s property outside Peru the memory of this life is being preserved. Here is a slice of Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus on their property outside of Peru, Indiana.



The crane has placed cables onto the train car ready to hoist it up in order to remove the first set of trucks (wheels). Brian Miser is on the right in the red shirt. The flatbed trailer is in the right foreground waiting for the trucks.



A set of trucks are removed from the car.

### The Journey to the Miser’s House

The Misers were told once the performers moved out of their homes in the car, it would not be long until the car arrived in Peru. However, it took many weeks. Often they were told the car would be there by a certain date – and then it was delayed. The car didn’t come a direct route from Connecticut to Peru and it had many delays. When it finally arrived late on Tuesday night June 20, it was not expected that day.

Early Friday morning June 23 the adventure began of moving the car to the Misers. The Norfolk and Western Rail Yard in Peru was a hub of activity as workmen, a crane, a large tow truck, a bobcat, the Misers, extended family, the press and on-lookers – mostly from the Peru circus – gathered in a holiday spirit to prepare Ringling car number RBBX 41302, which sat on a siding, to make the journey to the Miser home.

Central Crane Company from Roanoke, Indiana began the operation by attaching cables to the roof of the car to lift the front end up from the track. The crane worked in unison with a large tow truck from Merritt’s in Kokomo, Indiana. While the front end of the car was elevated, the tow truck placed a platform under the back of the car to stabilize

it. Once this was accomplished, the front set of trucks (train wheels plus the brakes) were removed. A set of trucks include the wheels, two on either side of the car, plus the brakes. A set of trucks weigh 18,200 pounds. The man in charge of the crane operations is a clown with the Ft. Wayne, Indiana Shrine Circus – which seemed fitting! He was thrilled to do this job. Once the front trucks were removed, they were pushed along the tracks. (At each stop of the



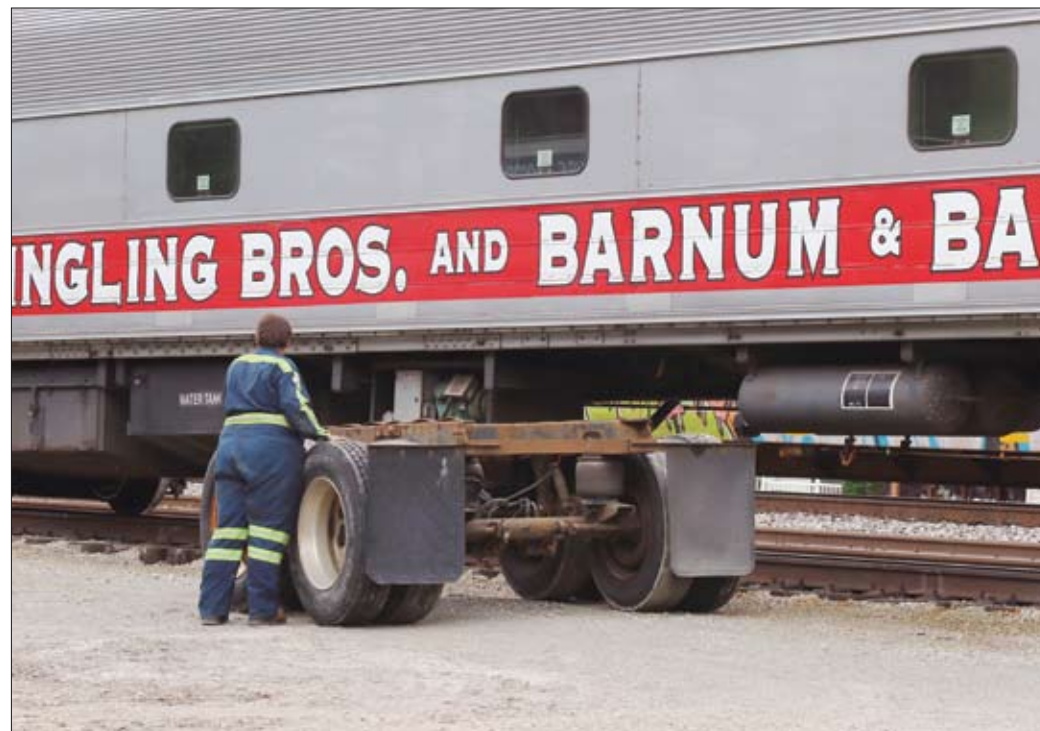
One end of the car is hoisted. At right on the tracks are the set of trucks just removed. The crane on the left has its counter balance extended out so the crane doesn’t tip over. At the other end of the car the tow truck is in place with its stabilizing platform.

circus the trucks were inspected on the Ringling train.) The car was then swung out from the tracks a bit to allow for easier access to the underside of the car.

Men with acetylene torches then removed the water tank and air tank which were connected to the middle of the underside of the car. The crane then swung eight rubber semi truck wheels off a flatbed trailer and moved them close to the car. Welders attached the wheels to the middle of the underside of the car. Now the rear of the car was hoisted upward and the back trucks were removed. The tow truck again stabilized the car. The crane then lifted both sets of trucks and placed them on the flatbed truck to be transported to the Misers. The tow truck hooked up to the front of the car, since now the train car was completely off the tracks and was being supported by the rubber wheels. It was ready to make its road journey! Eight hours had passed since the work started.

The hardest part of the road trip was the right angle turns, starting with the turn out of the rail yard. It took 15 minutes of maneuvering

back and forth several times to get out into the street! The slow pace through town brought them to U.S. 24. The Misers live on



*The rubber wheels are placed awaiting being welded onto the car.*



*The car is now off the tracks and being pulled by the tow truck. It is being maneuvered in a right angle turn out of the rail yards.*

a county back road, and once off U.S. 24, there was yet another turn onto the Miser's driveway. Once on U.S. 24, many of those following passed the slow train car and went on ahead to prepare for its arrival at its new home.

When the car arrived, the right angle turn into Miser's driveway took another 15 minutes of maneuvering. The tow truck then backed the car all the way up the Miser's long drive and over to the shore of Miser's pond where a short section of track awaited the car. The flatbed trailer was also there with the two sets of trucks ready to be reattached to the car. The process of hoisting up the train car, putting the trucks back on, removing the rubber wheels and placing the car on the tracks took many hours. It was a long day, but a good day.

### **A visit to the Miser's place**

Two months later we visited Brian. The train car, with the Ringling logo in red across its length, sat over-looking the Miser's pond. We toured the car and then walked all around it outside. We also examined its underside and learned a great deal. The Misers have been cleaning the car and putting their own touches into it. Brian rewired it, making it accessible to power from the grid, and installed a new heating and air conditioning unit. They keep its water tank filled with water from their well.

It is a fitting place for this important piece of circus history to be resting in this peaceful setting near Peru where circus roots go back to 1884. Circus is very much alive here. We strolled over to the



*The crane is placing the second set of trucks onto the flatbed trailer for transport to the Miser property.*



*The car arrives at the Misers and is being pushed backwards up the driveway. It was an intricate process to keep it from tipping over.*



The crane is placing the car on the Miser's section of track beside their pond. Harold Miser is observing on the right.

pond. At one end of the pond is a fly pedestal and trapeze rigging. One can fly over the pond and drop into the water. There is also a mini-trampoline by the pond so one can bounce into the water. A full sized trampoline sits near by.

Brian's barn occupies the bank of the pond opposite the train car. From the outside the barn looks like the other red barns that dot the rural, farming landscape of Miami County. But inside this very spacious building is circus! This is where the Misers store their five cannons. Also inside is Brian's workshop where he creates all kinds of things from metal and wood. There are his lockers when he was on Ringling, and many other things too numerous to relate.

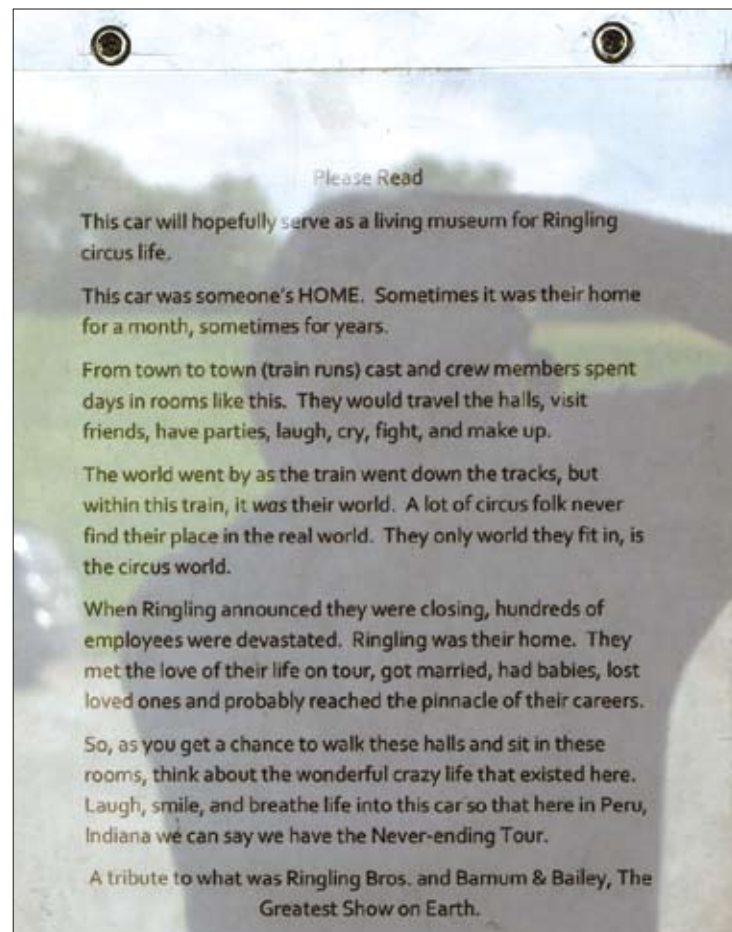
There are different circus riggings in the barn typical of a circus presence and the home of circus people. From the rafters hang silks, trapezes, a lyra, webs and straps. Brian made many of these rigs and pieces of equipment. It was interesting seeing his cannons. He has had his one cannon in five countries on three continents: Japan, China, Canada, Mexico, and most recently Germany.

We stood at the entrance to the barn talking while looking out at the pond. The summer crickets sang in the summer sun. Life seemed good. Brian grew up not far from this property in Miami County, Indiana and was part of the Peru Amateur Circus when he was young. (One has to live within Miami County to be a part of the Peru Amateur Circus.) He is grateful for all the circus gave him. He went out from here into the circus world and is a great performer. He has returned to rig and train in our youth circus. He is proud of his heritage here in Peru and of our circus. His desire is to promote the Peru circus and to help guide the young performers of today.

As we left, we looked back up the long driveway at the scene from the road. A green meadow undulated back from the road to the pond, the large red barn beside the pond with the train car sitting prominently on the opposite shore for all to clearly see. The backdrop to this peaceful panorama is a woods stretching beyond. Yes, it is just right! This memorial to a way of life that was and is no

more has a perfect home. It is preserved here.

May life that was on the Ringling train not be forgotten. 📌



This is the sign the Misers have placed on the door going into the car. It tells their stated purpose of having this car.

Wesley Williams is plainly aware that he's not the only unicyclist in the circus ring, so he's got to offer a unique act. What he is really selling to his audiences are his charisma and lots of smiles. This new YouTube video brings out Wesley's personality both in and out of the big top. He also provides some



sage advice for other youthful circus aspirants who want to make their own mark on the entertainment industry.

At age 19 Williams is well on his way to a successful circus career, thanks to a flock of bookings on holiday and school shows and outdoor circuses, like the Big E Circus Spectacular and Circus World Museum's summer offering.

— Lane Talburt  
<[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoxSQ4G\\_Lc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoxSQ4G_Lc)>



'Greatest Showman': Official Trailer For Hugh Jackman Starrer Promises Musical Spectacle

<<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/greatest-showman-official-trailer-hugh-jackman-circus-musical-watch-video-1057444>>



Circus Smirkus: A Life-Shaping Experience  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07C8imhToK4&feature=youtu.be>>



This Sister Act Brings Serenity To Circus Life  
<<https://www.npr.org/2017/12/31/571981915/this-sister-act-brings-serenity-to-circus-life>>

Sister Dorothy Fabritze (right) invited sisters from a local convent to a November circus performance in Palmdale CA. She has spent 18 years in the Catholic Church's circus ministry.



**CIRCUS VIEWS**  
Internet links for circus views from Don Covington III and other CFA members

Cirque du Soleil's Crystal Shines in Chicago – Blending Circus and Ice Show – Circustalk

<<https://circustalk.com/news/cirque-du-soleils-crystal-shines-in-chicago-blending-circus-and-ice-show/>>

NOTE: The Circustalk website requires a sign-up.



Sister of murdered circus star helps exonerate wrongfully convicted man



A circus performer for metro Detroit was murdered 25 years ago. Now his sister is telling 7 Action News the wrong man was locked up for more than two decades.

<<http://www.wxyz.com/news/sister-of-murdered-circus-star-helps-exonerate-wrongfully-convicted-man>>



After 5 months, 'Circus 1903' closes at Paris on Las Vegas ... The circus show from yesteryear has fallen victim to the entertainment realities of today.

<<https://bestoflasvegas.com/article/after-5-months-circus-1903-closes-at-paris-on-las-vegas-strip.html>>



Industry Editor Exclusive: The Rise and Fall of Cirque du...

Broadway led other entertainment companies to believe that conquering the Great White Way was possibly not that hard. The Rise and Fall of Cirque du Soleil on Broadway by Cara Joy David

<<https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Industry-Editor-Exclusive-Rise-and-Fall-of-Cirque-du-Soleil-20170920#>>