



THE BIG TOP LIVES ON

CIRCUS WORLD OFFERS A GLIMPSE OF THE PAST

By Lisa M. Schmelz

When I was young and could carry off a sequined bodysuit, I dreamed of joining the circus and dazzling the crowds with my trapeze skills. Without a second thought or long-term disability insurance, I would soar gracefully through the air to some

dashing leotard-clad man patiently awaiting me — upside down — on the return fly bar. In his firm grip, with a trust only trapeze artists and bomb squad veterans can know, we would twist, flip and sail our way into the hearts of the mere mortals below.

Sadly, my dreams of living life mostly 25 feet up came crashing down when I had a panic attack at age eight on the Golden Gate Bridge. Even in the middle lane, seat-belted and unable to see out the back window of my parent's Chevy, I was terror-filled at the realization that there was no net ready to catch us should we fall. All that was between us and the Pacific was a long stretch of asphalt in a quake-prone region. If we plunged, I wouldn't even have had the satisfaction of dying in a snazzy trapeze ensemble. Where's the glory in that?

Acrophobia has remained with me all these years, but it has not eclipsed my awe for all things "circus." Nearly every form of entertainment can find its roots — or at least some third cousins once removed — in the circus. You can thank — or curse — this blessed institution for modern performers like Lady Gaga.

"I don't know," says veteran ringmaster David SaLoutos, laughing at the Gaga reference. "Maybe she goes to the sideshow. But she definitely goes to the circus roots as an entertainment form. She embodies a lot of that colorful and larger-than-life aspect. Circus was the most popular form of entertainment in this country for well over 50 years, and there's still something about it that appeals to the, if you want to say, child in all of us."



In Wisconsin, you can experience the thrill that never grows old at Circus World in Baraboo, where SaLoutos has served as ringmaster since 1978, guiding audiences through a cotton candy world of magic and dreams. Circus World sits on the grounds of what was once the Ringling Bros. Circus winter quarters, along the

IF YOU GO

Circus World is located in Baraboo, Wisconsin, on the grounds of the Ringling Bros. Circus winter quarters. A National Historic Landmark, the museum and big top are open **May 21 through Sept. 5**. Admission is **\$14.95 for adults, \$12.95 for senior citizens, and \$7.95 for children five to 11; children under five are free.** For more information, call 866-693-1500 or log onto circusworld.wisconsinhistory.org.

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banks of the Baraboo River. In 1884, it was here that the brothers founded one of America's most beloved circus families. More than a century later, you can still see the circus of yesteryear up close on these shores. There are all the acts you'd expect of any circus, plus a museum steeped in history and the world's largest collection of circus wagons.

Under a one-ring big top, SaLoutos directs live animal acts, featuring elephants and tigers, world-class jugglers, single-bar trapeze artists, acrobats, and an array of comedic entertainers. Beyond the big top, there's a breathtaking collection of intricately carved and beautifully restored circus wagons. More than two-thirds of all known circus wagons in the world are housed at Circus World. Equal parts beauty, transportation and advertisement, circus wagons could be powered by horse or loaded onto the flatbeds of trains.

Circus World also lets you peer into the past via hundreds of artifacts and exhibits, each telling a story all its own. During the performance season, guided tours of historic Ringlingville, the name for the original Ringling Bros. Circus winter quarters, are available daily. Buildings here date back to 1897 and are the largest surviving group of original circus structures in North America.

A recreated circus wardrobe department, showcasing 19th-century costumes, gives visitors an idea of how taxing it was for designers and their staff to create the 2,000 costumes needed for each new season.

Even Lady Gaga herself would pine for some of these magnificent duds. But would she wear it 25 feet above the ground, hanging upside down in the splits?

Probably. [ew](http://ew.com)



Lisa M. Schmelz is an educator and freelance writer. She lives in Delavan, Wisconsin, with her husband, Hank. They have three children. Every spring, Lisa walks seven miles of the Lake Geneva shore path with over 200 seventh graders.