



ED GEFEN/The Times-Union

The Big Top tent, with six main tent poles and action in all three rings, is the main attraction at the miniature Howard Bros. Circus at the Tibbals Learning Center at the Ringling Circus Museum in Sarasota. The circus, which Tibbals has been working on for more than 50 years, is an authentic replica of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus from the late 1930s.

THE GREATEST MINIATURE SHOW ON EARTH

INSIDE

By the numbers

Some of the numbers associated with Tibbals' project are mind-boggling. F-4



Actual size of one of the thousands of plastic folding chairs. There are 7,000 of them in the Big Top.

With over 44,000 pieces, Tibbals' lifelong project is now the Ringling Circus Museum's newest attraction

By SUZANNE MARTA
The Dallas Morning News

SARASOTA — Walking through the miniature "Howard Bros." circus, it's hard to find a moment to blink.

There's so much to see, you'd hate to miss anything.

Leaning toward the glass-enclosed display, Pam Hitt tried to absorb as much as possible as each tiny scene sparked a fond memory.

"There's the little dogs," Hitt exclaimed, pointing to a group of performing pooches preparing for their act. "I used to love the little dog and horse acts."

For her friend, Cheryl Burnette, it was the trapeze artists and elephants.

"I never realized how much went on

behind the scenes," she said, marveling at the level of detail in the more than 44,000 meticulously placed pieces.



Tibbals

It's part of a \$76 million, seven-year expansion program, which includes a new visitor center, restoration of the historic Asolo Theater, a new art gallery and returning of the grounds to their original 1920s splendor.

CIRCUS continues on F-4



JIM STEM/The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art

What circus would be complete without the ice cream? You can almost taste the swirly soft-serve from the Frozen Delight truck. The 3,800-square-foot display includes everything that was involved in setting up and tearing down the circus — more than 44,000 pieces.

Circus: The last big-top show played 50 years ago

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Circus fans will have plenty to explore. Sarasota was the winter residence of the Ringling Bros. circus, and the grounds include the grand home of John and Mable Ringling.

The Tibbals Learning Center, which opened in January, focuses on the rich history of the big-top shows of the late 19th and early 20th century.

In those days, dozens of traveling shows competed fiercely for customers with exotic animal acts, death-defying feats and shock-inspired sideshows.

The last big-top show played in 1956, when circuses shifted their shows from tents to large arenas.

The shows during the big-top era were a logistical miracle, moving about 700 animals and about 1,500 workers and performers each day from town to town by railroad.

It was that feat, getting a circus set up in time for the day's performance, that first caught the attention of collector and master model maker Howard C. Tibbals.

As a young boy, Tibbals recalls using binoculars to watch the circus set up from a neighbor's second-floor bedroom.

"I'm pretty sure I wore out my welcome," Tibbals said with a chuckle.

"I was there all day." At 19, he wrote to Ringling Bros. for permission to use the famous show as his model and began assembling a "big top" of his own.

Tibbals gathered details from historical photos and took meticulous measurements of circus equipment to be sure his version would ring true.

Fifty years later, Tibbals is still adding pieces.

The Howard Bros. circus is based on the American shows of the late 1930s, at a scale of 1 inch to 1 foot.

If it were actual size, the circus would cover more than 20 acres.

Sections of the miniature circus have toured the U.S. throughout the years, but this is the first time the complete circus has been on display.

Walking through the exhibit, visitors can peer into all the aspects of circus life through miniature versions of events throughout history. Speakers positioned around the exhibit play sounds appropriate to the scene, such as the sound of horses near the stable areas and the whir of a saw at the nearby flooring company.

The details are impressive. Tibbals even crafted the spikes needed to secure the hand-made rail ties.

In the dining tent, about 900 place settings cover the long tables, complete with platters of food. A little farther, there's impresario John Ringling's private tent, with workers unloading his private automobile from a special rail car.

Under the big top, which

If you go

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art includes the Tibbals Learning Center, Ringling Museum of Art, Ca d'Zan mansion, Circus Museum, Mable's Rose Garden and grounds.

Tickets: \$15 for adults; \$5, children; free, children 5 and younger.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day.

Information: (941) 359-5700; www.ringling.org.

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Before visitors get to the Big Top (rear), they see the entrance to the side show tent. According to the museum, when Tibbals began work on his model more than 50 years ago, he was denied permission by Ringling management to use that name on his railroad cars and circus wagons. "Since circuses tended to bear the family name of the owner, I just started calling it the Howard Bros. Circus for fun," Tibbals said.

could accommodate 15,000 spectators, the famous long-legged clown Lou Jacobs steps out of a tiny car. (Jacobs' actual car is parked next door in the Circus Museum.)

No detail is missed. There's even a miniature manure pile.

And even though this installation is permanent, everything can be packed away and loaded onto the 149 circus wagons and 55 rail cars on which they would have arrived, "just like the real circus," Tibbals said.

While the Howard Bros. circus is the main attraction, visitors to the Tibbals Learning Center can also search through more than 5,000 circus ads from the late 1800s to the 1940s.

Another display allows kids of all ages to design their own colorful poster.

In the center's upstairs exhibits, visitors can learn more about circus history.

A video splices vintage circus footage with clips of the nouveau Cirque du Soleil. There's also a timeline starting with ancient Greece that depicts the first chariot races, which were used in some big-top shows during the early 1900s.

In a tribute to the old sideshows, visitors can push a button to raise a curtain and reveal the tiny suit, cane and chair belonging to Gen. Tom Thumb, a dwarf who starred in P.T. Barnum's shows.

Another miniature circus, including a 150-foot circus street parade made by Tibbals' mentor, Harold Dunn, lines the walls.

Visitors can also step inside a small workshop, built for Tibbals to continue his project on site.



JIM STEM/The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art

Tibbals' attention to even the tiniest of details is evident in his depiction of this band member preparing to tie his tie in the group's dressing tent. ...



... and his work on famous clown Lou Jacobs, who entertained Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus audiences for more than 60 years.

JIM STEM/The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art

Howard Bros. Circus by the numbers

44,000 Pieces so far.

33,000 Hand-made spikes used to build the railroad.

55 Rail cars when the exhibit opened.

996 Feet of railroad track.

20 Acres of land the Howard Bros. circus would cover if it were actual size.

50 Years Howard Tibbals has been working on his miniature circus.

14 Months it took to install.

7,000 Plastic folding chairs under the big top.

1,500 Performers and workers that would travel with a circus of this size.

3,800 Square feet in the Howard Bros. circus, the world's largest miniature version.

700 Individually crafted circus animals.

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