

# Circuses and golden horseshoes

The CSU Regional Archives is currently extending its opening hours to include the first Saturday of the month.

This initiative has been put in place to cater for those researchers who are unable to visit the Archives on weekdays during normal business hours.

The next Saturday opening will be on March 2, from 10am to 3pm.

at the  
archives

Wayne Doubleday



Imagine a life without technology – no mobile phones, no TV, no computers, not even a radio to listen to.

Prior to the invention of these modern day technologies, travelling circus shows provided an inexpensive family night out, entertaining both the children and the adults.

Residents of Wagga have been given opportunities to see live circus performances since at least 1875, when the well-known British and American Ashton's Circus spent four nights in Wagga for one of the very first times.

After a four-year absence, Ashton's returned during the Wagga Cup race week in conjunction with St Leon's circus.

St Leon's, whose tent was pitched at the corner of Gurwood and Trail streets, excelled in horsemanship, with the show closing with one of the St Leon brothers riding bare-backed around the ring, carrying a girl on his shoulders.

Other acts included double-somersault throwers, Japanese wonders, plus the more traditional circus items such as juggling, trapeze, dogs and monkeys.

Ashton's Circus was set up at the rear of Nixon's Mill in Johnston Street.

Its asset was Tom Thumb, the smallest and cleverest show pony, who was only 32 inches tall. Ashton's shows were made up of equestrian routines, acrobats, tightrope dancing, performing monkeys and balancing acts.

If you fast forward to the 1900s, circus shows were heavily based around the involvement of larger performing animals, like elephants, lions and hippopotami.

However, the animals – the elephants in particular – caused a great deal of chaos in the Wagga area.

In December 1947, a cricket match in Bolton Park was rudely interrupted when elephants from Wirth's Circus stampeded the cricket oval.

In 1969, a Wagga sportsman went outside during the night to investigate a strange sound in his Morgan Street backyard.

He understandably could not believe his eyes when he found himself face-to-face with an elephant.

The elephant had escaped from a Bullen Brothers circus while the men were dismantling the tent after a Wednesday night performance. The back gate, clothes line and parts of the garden had to be replaced.

The spirit of the circus was lost slightly from the 1970s onwards due to the introduction and popularity of videos and television.

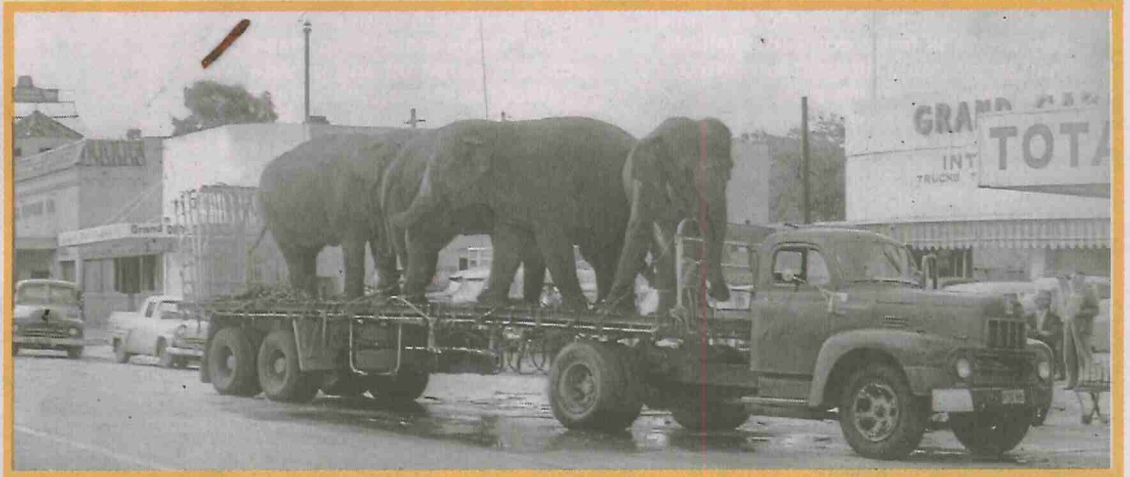
However, in 2000, Circus Royale drew big crowds to the Wagga Showground for their two-hour show.

Even though elephants are no longer included in circus acts, the traditional favourites such as flying trapeze, jugglers and unicycle riders were more than enough to attract a large audience, even before adding brand new routines including contortion, horses, camels and fire acts.

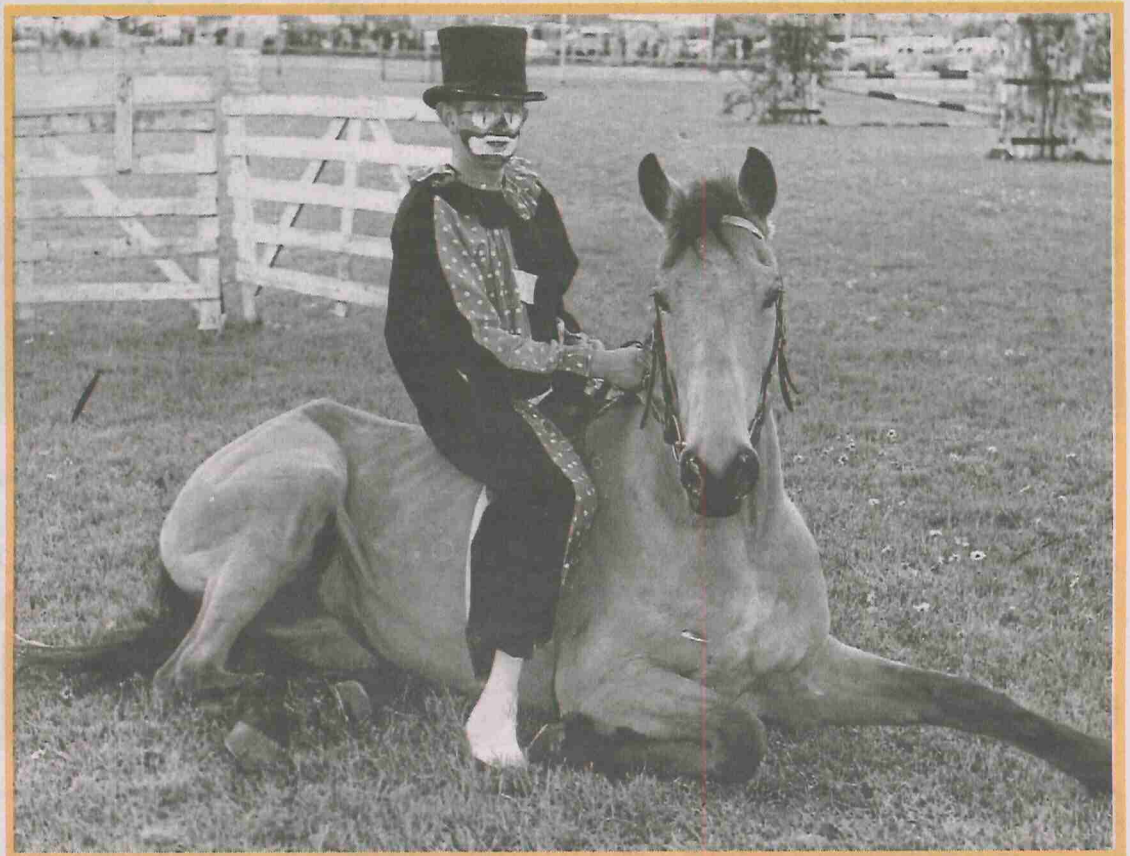
## Tinker Brown and those golden horseshoes

WILLIAM Charles (John) Brown, better known as "Tinker" Brown, was the owner of a circus that toured the Victorian goldfields.

His circus mainly consisted of equestrian and dramatic arts, which included vocalists, comedians, a Shakespearean jester



Four elephants tour Fitzmaurice Street in Wagga to advertise the circus is in town (from the Tom Lennon Collection [RW1574]).



Ungainly clowns and graceful horses are an established tradition at circuses (from the Tom Lennon Collection [RW1574/76]).

and a contortionist.

Tinker came to NSW as a convict. A few years after marriage to Susannah, Tinker and family arrived in the newly proclaimed village of Wagga in the late 1840s and opened NSW Wagga's first store and hotel, "The New Ferry Hotel".

Tinker and Susannah became involved in many different areas of business, among which was the purchase of a circus.

By early March 1855, Tinker Brown found that he couldn't draw an audience to his circus in Wagga, so he decided to pack up and follow the crowds to Beechworth, which was attracting people from all parts of Australia.

There were gambling dens, alcohol shops and dance halls set up for entertainment, but the arrival of a circus was received extremely well.

There are a number of stories about Tinker Brown and his golden horseshoes.

One of these states that in order to draw even more attention to his circus, he purchased nuggets of gold and had them beaten into the shape of golden horseshoes and fitted for Jorracks, his spotted pony, which was his best show horse.

Only two golden horseshoes were made and

they were placed on the two front feet of the pony.

The circus tents were set up and at night the show opened with Jorracks, the star of the show, dancing around with delight, showing off his sparkling horseshoes.

With the huge success of Tinker Brown's circus in Beechworth (probably mostly due to his golden horseshoes), it came as a big shock when he died on November 26, 1955, just three weeks after his arrival in Beechworth.

His body was brought back to Wagga and he was buried in the old cemetery behind Church Hill.

Later, when the new cemetery was opened, a tombstone in the Church of England section of the Wagga cemetery was laid in memory of "WC Brown".

Compiled by Liz Dietrich

References: *Wagga Wagga Express*, Sep 17, 1879, Sep 24, 1879, Sep 27, 1879; *The Daily Advertiser*, March 14, 1969, July 5, 2000; *The Wodonga And Towong Sentinel*, May 16, 1941; *Genealogy.com*, Forum, *Moxon Family – Circus and theatre performers, late 1800s onwards*, Dec 14, 2006; *The Worker* (Brisbane), Dec 15, 1947; *Wagga – A History* by Sherry Morris.

## what you need to know

■ The CSU Regional Archives are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Located in the Blakemore Building on South Campus of the university, access can be gained via College Avenue or Hely Avenue. Members of the public are welcome to visit the search room, where professional archival staff can assist with inquiries. For those people unable to visit the archives in person, staff can provide a research service for straight-forward inquiries for a fee of \$55 per hour including copying and postage. For further information, phone 02 6925 3666, email [archive@csu.edu.au](mailto:archive@csu.edu.au), or visit our website at [www.csu.edu.au/research/archives](http://www.csu.edu.au/research/archives) for a full listing of holdings and more detailed information.