



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Emmett Kelly (1898-1979)

Emmett Kelly, a Sedan, Kan., native, grew up on a farm in rural Missouri. After working various jobs, he settled into cartooning for a silent film company in Kansas City. During his time as a cartoonist, Kelly created the character Weary Willie, which would later become the beloved clown persona he portrayed for most of his life.

Although Kelly had found a steady job that he enjoyed, he dreamed of joining the circus. To follow this dream, he bought a trapeze and became a circus aerialist with Howe's Great London Circus. He also doubled as a white-face clown. Eventually Kelly joined John Robinson's circus when he met and married Eva Moore, another trapeze artist. The two became known as The Aerial Kellys until Eva got pregnant the following year.

Kelly decided to develop a clown character from his Weary Willie sketches in hopes of making more money to support his family. However, his boss disliked the idea of a tramp clown. After the Great Depression hit, hobo clowns became more readily accepted, and in 1933, Kelly began appearing as Weary Willie.

Weary Willie was a revolutionary character at the time. His tragic air appealed to the sympathy of his audiences, although he also performed stunts like white-face clowns. His "sweeping the spotlight" routine was especially popular, and Kelly even performed this routine in the movie "The Clown and the Kids."

In 1942, Kelly joined Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus after performing for a variety of shows in England in the '30s. He spent 14 seasons with Ringling Brothers, taking the 1956 season off to be the mascot for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Kelly also acted in Fellini's film "The Clowns" in 1971, Cecil B. DeMille's "The Greatest Show on Earth," and in several Broadway productions.

Following his departure from Ringling Brothers, Kelly worked for the Shrine Circus; in night clubs, indoor circuses, trade shows and resorts; and made guest appearances worldwide. His son, Emmett Kelly, Jr., performed a similar Weary Willie character for several years. In 1979, Kelly suffered a heart attack and died in Sarasota, Fla.

Today, Kelly is memorialized in his hometown of Sedan, Kan., at the Emmett Kelly Museum. On April 23, 1989, Kelly was one of the first inductees to the International Clown Hall of Fame, and Weary Willie is probably the most well-known tramp clown character the circus has ever known.

