



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Merle Evans (1894-1987)

Merle Evans was born in Columbus, Kan., one of seven children to John and Elisabeth Evans. The family was well respected and hard working. Evans grew up performing a variety of odd jobs for numerous local businesses, from shining shoes to driving a grocery store delivery wagon to driving cows. He also had a number of hobbies, including a particular favorite of listening to the local band play.



When Bill Bowers took over the local band, he simultaneously started a boys' band. Evans was the first local boy to join the group, ordering a cornet to play. He practiced every chance he had and earned the nickname Doc for carrying his instrument case everywhere he went.

In 1909, the S.W. Brundage Carnival Co. came to Columbus to play for a local reunion. Evans joined the group and traveled for their performances, making \$10 a week. By the end of his first season, he was leading the band. He also played with the Cotton Blossom Showboat band in Missouri.

For ten years, Evans traveled with a number of groups, culminating in his working with another famous Kansan when he became bandmaster of Jess Willard's Wild West Show. Evans' big break came in 1919 when he was discovered by Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus and took the baton of The Greatest Show on Earth.



Evans spent more than 50 years with the Circus and became known as the Toscanini of the Big Top. Evans loved circus music and he led the band while playing marches, gallops, schottisches, tangos, rhumbas, fox trots, waltzes, polkas, one-steps and cakewalks. As the circus traveled to venues throughout the country, Evans always had his band ready to play, even when they were playing two or even three 3-hour performances in a day.

Music was the heartbeat of the circus, and Evans was recognized as a master of his craft. In Evans' time as leader, he is thought to have performed for more than 156 million spectators. Evans even performed through the famous Hartford Circus Fire in 1944 in an attempt to calm the fans as they tried to escape the blaze. When not playing with the circus, Evans directed a variety of other bands and even served as guest conductor for both the Army and Navy bands at concerts throughout the United States.



Throughout his conducting career, Evans had the pleasure of leading bands in countries across the globe, including conducting in Russia as part of a U.S. Cultural Exchange program in 1963. Evans received more honors than any other bandmaster in history. He also produced a number of circus music records.

In 1962, the Circus Historical Society dedicated the Merle Evans Circus Museum in Evans' hometown. Evans' best friend, Ned Aitchison, had worked with his wife to collect memorabilia honoring Evans' legacy. Evans lived the last years of his life in Sarasota, Fl., with his wife, Nena, until his death at age 93.

