



**On The Earie**  
**by Tom Powell, OABA News Ambassador**

**Lee Stevens** was sitting at one of what he referred to as one of my favorite watering holes, **Showtown USA**, in Gibsonton, Fla., when I contacted him about the 37<sup>th</sup> annual circus that was presented by the **International Independent Showmen's Association** to three packed crowds on Saturday, January 5.

“They keep getting bigger and better, so we are talking about extending it to Friday and Saturday in the future. We get our audience from the club south to Sun City. In our publicity, we haven't even targeted the Tampa market because of the fact we wouldn't be able to handle crowds that size,” said Stevens.

Chris Christ, who partnered with the late and great **Ward Hall** in sideshow operations for many years, was again in charge of getting the word out. All three shows were dedicated to the memory of Hall, who passed away this year. The master showman was inducted into the **OABA Hall of Fame in 2008**.

“I'm sitting at the liar's table,” said Stevens, knowing that I would immediately picture the site in my mind. Present with him were Magician Lance Gifford, Freddie Vonderheide, former son-in-law of show owner Rod Link, 85-year-old Joey Givens, who worked sideshows as Joey Tate, World's Strangest Mother, and Bearded Lady, and Carol Phillips who had a wolf act. Her late husband, Don, was a unicyclist. I envisioned others who sat there in the past, including Bill (The Brush) Browning, Buster Anderson, Gene (Hot Sauce) McQuater, John (The Peddler) Curtis, Connie Royal, and a host of others.

**Showtown USA**, which was founded by Andy Osak, who was the Gibtown Club's second president, in 1966, and his wife, Ethel, is now owned and operated by Rick Osak, son of Andy and Ethel's late son, Chuck.

Nothing much changes. The breakfasts are very good, as are the evening's blue-plate specials. Since the days when Christine and I were hanging out there, Taco Tuesday has become a popular event, along with karaoke music, according to Janice Lane and Patsi Burnette, a pair of regular attendees. “We go there for the breakfasts, and...” said Stevens. Asked what came after and, he laughed and cracked, “all of the BS that follows. We just sit around cutting up Jackpots and remembering old friends.”

The biggest event ever held there was what was called **The Trial of Joe Lane**. Because of being involved in a disagreement, Lane, who spent many years with **Gooding's Million Dollar Midways** and **Lawrence Carr Shows** as one of the best ride men in the business, found himself being barred because of his involuntary participation in an imbroglio. At least the involuntary part was his contention.

Word went out quickly that if convicted, the verdict would involve hanging. A mysterious lawyer for Lane would be flying in from out of town. That turned out to be me. When I arrived at the Tampa Airport, I was picked up by sheriff's deputies, and with blue lights flashing, arrived at Andy's, which is what we called it back then, to everybody's surprise. Big Hearted Jerry Bohlander, known as The Little Man With The Big Heart, was sitting there with a robe on as he had been chosen to be the judge. There was a jury box with 12 Gibsontonians of Joe's peers, and an ominous noose hanging in clear sight.

The greatest promoters in the world couldn't have come up with a better plan to draw a crowd. **Showtown USA** overflowed, tension mounted, as everyone anticipated the verdict. Not to brag, but after some expert testimony, and brilliant eloquence from his lawyer, Lane was declared innocent, and free to once again frequent the premises from which he been so unjustly banished. I have pictures.

After reminiscing, Stevens, who was club president in 2004, and is now first vice president again, went on to list and thank the countless volunteers who gave of their time and talents for the circus. The **Globe of Death and Cycle Circus** was presented by Johnny Rocket, whose real name is Johnny Daily, and Tina Winn, who will also be working the club's **Bikefest**, Jan. 10-13. The tent, which handles 1,200 spectators, was provided by Serge and Stevie Coronas of **Circus Hollywood**, and their son, Serge Jr., who was on hand to take care of sound, lighting, and other effects.

Suzy Vidbel did a cloud swing, followed by Christopher Williams, billed as The Man Who Hangs By His Hair. with Stevens lining up all the acts, and serving as host, the ringmaster was John Kennedy Kane, who has worked with the **Clyde Beatty, Cole Brothers, Big Apple**, and other circuses. **Prospect Stables** presents the John Cuneo Black Friesen Stallions were trained and presented by Sabrina, Desiree, and Tanya Hermann. "That's the way they wanted," it said Stevens.

Ricky Martin presented his comedy dogs. To the delight of all, Brian Franzen appeared with two elephants, one African, and one Asian. Since PETA has been responsible of outlawing elephant acts in many states, I asked Stevens how he got around that. "I didn't give a damn," he answered, showing his disdain for the organization.

The 20-piece **Circus Band** was conducted by David Pruyn, whose dad performed the same job with **Ringling Brothers** for 20 years. David is also the current leader of the famed **Tommy Dorsey Band**. "Everybody chimed in to help. It was fantastic," said Stevens, who along with his wife, Judy, spent 10 years traveling with **Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus**. "David Starkey (club president in 1995) was my main man, my brother, my friend, who would do anything that was needed. Kim and Ronnie Netterfield, with Kim's mom, Janice Lane, traveled 45 miles from their home to bring in the popper. Pee Wee (Philip) Hoskins had his grab joint and famous **Pee Wee Burgers**. Lance Ramos provided camel and pony rides. Tammy Long brought in inflatable slides."

Ticket sellers included Samantha Fairly, Jennifer Habeck, Doug and Jo Ann Perkins, Vickie McLaughlin, Paul Jeannotte, and Michael Coburn. David Acree was in charge of ringside reserved seats, and he also sold coloring books.. Admission was \$12 in advance, or \$15 at the gate. "That's too cheap for what we offer. We're going to have to consider going up on the price," said Stevens.

"After the shows we had one of the biggest parties ever at the club that night. Pee Wee, who was club president in 1985 and 1997, cooked spaghetti and lasagna." Helping in the kitchen were **current IISA Club president Rinda Popovich**, and her husband, Mark, president in 2012; Archie (Hawk) Lidey, president in 2003, and his wife, Becky; Scotty Oakes, president in 1999, and his wife, Peggy; Wilbur Cooke, president in 2002 and 2010; Hiram (Scooter) and Beverly Ryals and George and Jolene Williams.

When Andy Osak was alive and I was editor of **Amusement Business**, he would always call me about possible Gibsonton zoning changes so I could alert all the carnival people who were on the road. We became the closest of friends and as a way of showing his gratitude, he began a Polish Picnic that was held on every Thursday of the trade show for over 40 years. It became a great tradition. Those zoning

laws are still a problem. Thanks to guys like Larry Habeck and Jim Elliott for staying on top of it.

Please send news to [tomp@oaba.org](mailto:tomp@oaba.org), or call **615 319-1258**, particularly with any memories you may have of **Showtown** when Andy and Ethel were holding court.

**Have all great days, and God Bless!**