A Ringling by Any Other Name: The Story of John Ringling North and His Circus by Ernest Albrecht

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The Seminoles added substantial amounts of land to their reservations during the 1930s and 1940s. “The consolidation of a Seminole land base,” noted Kersey, “provided an isolated, secure haven in which the Indian people could determine their own rate and extent of acculturation” (p. 86). Overall, Kersey paints a symbiotic relationship between the New Deal and the Seminoles. The federal government provided myriad benefits while the Seminoles entered American life on their own terms. Kersey brings a refreshing perspective to this aspect of Seminole life. He neither despair nor disapproves of some Seminoles raising cattle, wrestling alligators or attending school. The Florida Seminoles raises a number of questions. First, the book is narrowly conceived and developed. The argument would have been strengthened by bringing the storyline into the 1950s. Kersey never adequately explains why 1942 provides a suitable termination for this volume. Secondly, a stronger foundation for the book’s setting is needed. Social and ecological factors, such as the Tamiami Trail, tourism and the evolution of the Everglades, should be more fully developed and integrated. Overall, however, readers of Florida history are indebted to Kersey for his love affair with the Seminoles.

Gary R. Mormino


Any biographer of a Ringling runs the risk of getting caught in a crossfire between the descendants of the five Circus Kings. Quarreling over the estate of John Ringling began after his death in 1936 and continued in and out of court until 1968 when the circus was sold. Nobody knows how many lawyers were gainfully employed during the protracted legal wrangles within the family. But they must have been numerous if the ones fending off suits by the I.R.S. and the state of Florida are included.

John Ringling North, the subject of Ernst Albrecht’s biography, was in the middle of fiesty controversies, enlivened by the frequency with which the combatants changed sides. Much of the feuding has been covered in earlier books on the Circus Kings and their descendants, but a fresh rehash is probably necessary to illuminate North’s career. The paucity of relevant private letters and diaries has inevitably driven the author to rely on the uneven memories of survivors of the circus wars. He has cast fresh light on North’s motivation, but it is difficult to believe anyone as indolent could outmaneuver his relatives so often.

North was the son of the only sister of the Circus Kings. Born in 1903, he held odd jobs as a teen-ager, tried other professions, but returned to the circus to help Uncle John after the latter suffered a crippling stroke in 1932. Uncle and nephew were too much alike to care for each other. The one disinherit the other but absent mindedly left young John as executor of his estate. It was this omission that enabled North to outmaneuver his relatives most of the time.

He managed to control the circus from 1937 to 1942, was ousted for five years, regained his position, and then held it for the next twentyone years. North was never what the journalists call a “hands-on” manager. As a reincarnation of Uncle John, he went to bed when most people were getting up and squandered enormous amounts of energy throwing parties or attending them. In
John Ringling North standing outside the newly opened John Ringling Hotel in Sarasota, circa 1944.

Photograph from *A Ringling by any Other Name.*
the process, be consumed quantities of alcohol, played music, danced and chased a succession of women. Being a playboy helped North to make useful contacts in the upper levels of the entertainment world. How much the circus benefited from these boozy exchanges is a matter of conjecture.

The author commends North for innovations that revived attendance in the wake of the Great Depression, but faults him for gradually losing interest after World War II and turning management of the circus over to subordinates. His withdrawal was partly due to factors beyond his control that undermined the popularity of circuses: competition from television, rising transportation costs, shortages of unskilled labor and prolonged warfare with unions. Albrecht speaks with authority about such matters, and any specialist preparing an institutional history of American circuses will be grateful for his contribution.

George H. Mayer


Creating a good architectural guidebook is a very difficult undertaking. Buildings must be identified, researched and photographed, and the information then packaged in a fashion that addresses the interests of professional architects, history buffs, students, motorists and armchair travelers. When a guide covers an entire state, its publication becomes particularly challenging.

The Florida Association of the American Institute of Architects has undertaken the task of assembling a guide to Florida’s historic architecture with resourcefulness and vigor. The association called upon architects in each of its chapters to document locally significant properties. Beginning with basic information prepared by graduate students in the Department of Architecture at the University of Florida, the chapter architects prepared thumbnail histories of 945 sites, located each on a map and photographed all but four of them. The project coordinators, F. Blair Reeves and Mary N.G. Reeves, dealt with scores of writers from the sixty-seven counties that are included in the guide.

The result is a fascinating chronicle of regional architecture and construction traditions. All types and styles of buildings are included. There are grand mansions like Vizcaya in Miami, millworkers’ cottages and homesteads on the Gulf Coast, Spanish Revival theaters, sturdy lighthouses, Victorian churches, classical courthouses and downtown business blocks. Particularly interesting are the vast resort hotels and industrial structures that served the specialized Florida economy – a citrus packing house in Avon Park, a warehouse at a long-staple cotton processing factory in Madison and an ice plant in Melbourne that supplied households as well as fishermen.

The book focuses on buildings that were erected in Florida before the advent of air conditioning, when builders and architects were forced to accommodate their designs and construction techniques to the demands of the tropical climate. The book’s introductory essay on the state’s architectural history laments how more recent development has created buildings in