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***Ringling: The Florida Years, 1911-1936* by David C. Weeks**

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Ringling: The Florida Years, 1911-1936. By David C. Weeks. Gainesville, Florida. 1993. University Press of Florida. xvii, 350 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth - \$49.95. Paper - \$24.95.

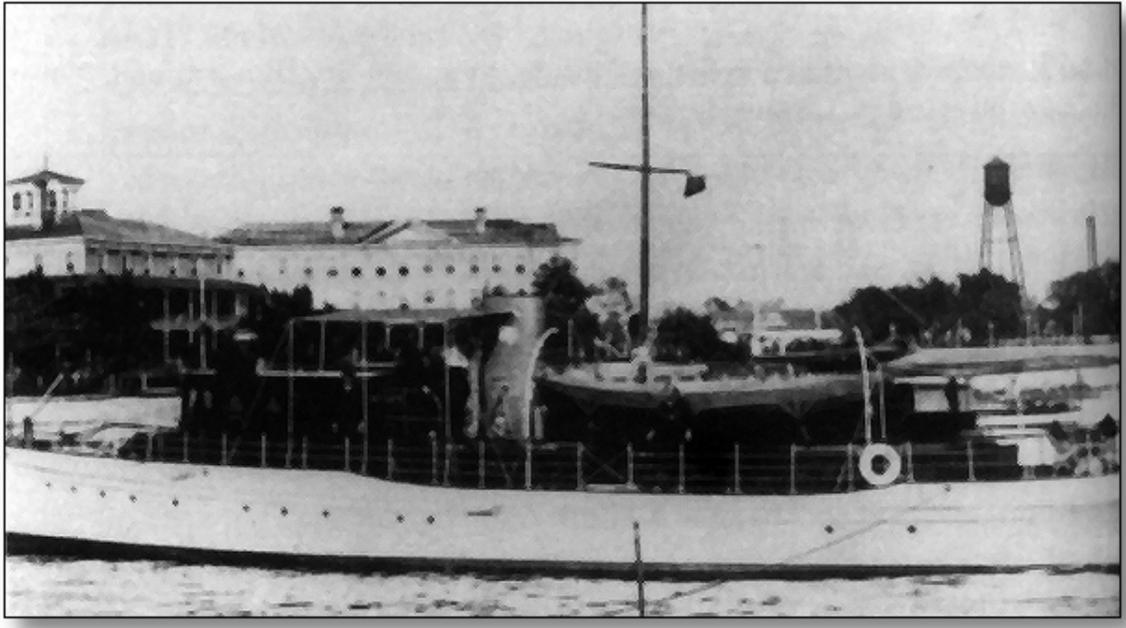
It is easy to exhaust a vocabulary of superlatives on *Ringling: The Florida Years*. But the reader needs to be patient because the initial but erroneous impression is that the author intends to canter over old terrain. He first dwells on the paucity of documentation about the Circus King and then provides an extended treatment of the early years in Sarasota.

The fear that antiquarian zeal, enlivened by occasional speculation about an enigmatic figure, will prevail is unjustified. It soon becomes clear that the preliminary material is relevant to establishing John Nicholas Ringling in his socio-economic milieu and providing a persuasive evaluation of his career. David Weeks has ransacked all of the available letter collections, court records, and recollections of surviving contemporaries to produce an arresting biography. The rewards are all the greater because he resists the temptation to rehash the already familiar history of the circus, and instead he concentrates on Ringling's role as a leader in areas hitherto largely overlooked.

In the process, the author verifies his major contention that the destinies of Ringling and Sarasota were entwined to the ultimate benefit of the city. There is a detailed and authoritative treatment of the aspirations that gained expression in the creating of the Ringling Museum of Art. Weeks demolishes the notion that Ringling imitated William Randolph Hearst by purchasing quantities of art objects on impulse. Like most beginners, the Circus King acquired statuary and paintings of dubious quality, but his taste improved because he relied increasingly on the advice of discriminating professionals. The chapter on the assembling of the collection is done so meticulously that it should be required reading for docents, to say nothing of visitors to the museum.

Later in his study Weeks produces a lucid account of the ten-year assault on the Ringling estate by creditors trying to break the will which conferred the museum on the state of Florida and prohibited its removal from Sarasota. The legal complexities are clarified as never before. Ample attention is given to the mini-war of the Roses conducted by the Ringling heirs, with the combatants prone to change sides in endless plotting to control the circus. John Ringling North, the nephew of the Circus King, finally emerged as the winner, and he also receives the credit for keeping the museum intact. Weeks must have trained as a lawyer but recoiled from the jargon of the profession because he has improved on earlier accounts, the bulk of which read like refrigerator warranties.

Not surprisingly, John Ringling is depicted as an elusive figure: one secretive about his financial dealings and his personal life. Although he did a lot of entertaining, such relationships were casual, sustained by prodigal hospitality rather than intimacy. Drawn mostly from the business world, they thrived on favors done and received as Ringling pursued his far-flung enterprises. Such friendships also unraveled when his financial empire slowly crumbled after the abrupt end of the Florida land boom. Weeks makes a brave effort to represent Ringling as basically honest, but provides considerable data for the opposite conclusion. The probability is that the resort to questionable financial practices increased during the great depression. Business partners learned



John Ringling's first steam yacht, *Wethea*, at the city pier in Sarasota in 1914.

Photograph from *Ringling: The Florida Years*.

the hard way that if they crossed the desert with Ringling they needed to carry the water bottle. His cunning turned into paranoid suspicion of relatives and friends who tried to save him from bankruptcy after 1932; the personality change was due to a series of thromboses.

Weeks puts a positive spin on a gloomy ending by hailing Ringling's fitful philanthropies which ultimately turned Sarasota into a cultural center. So sketchy a review conceals the encyclopedic knowledge that Weeks has brought to bear on a small but noteworthy episode in American history.

George H. Mayer