

WALTER SAVIDGE AMUSEMENT

BY REBECCA A. BULLER



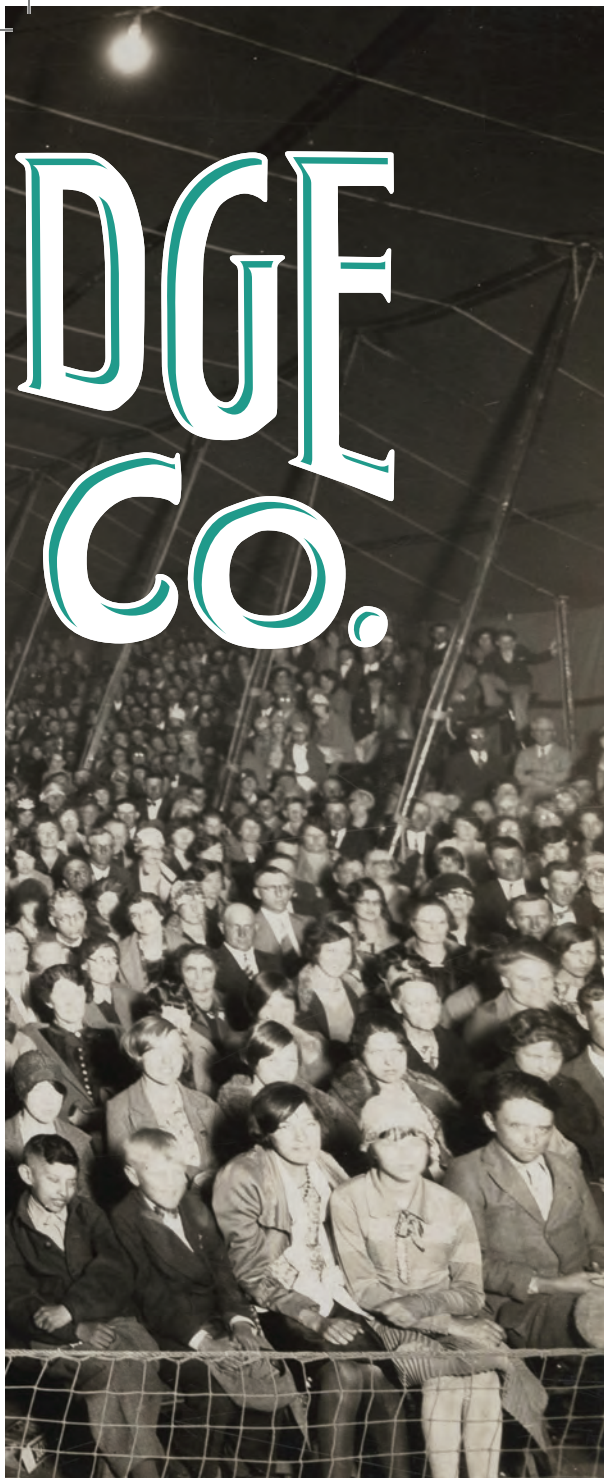
Figure 6. View from the stage of the tent theater where the Savidge Players performed. Date and location unknown. NSHS RG1667:1-13

Traveling shows were a popular form of entertainment in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They came in all shapes and sizes and consisted of anywhere from one person to hundreds of employees. Some shows served as a family's supplemental source of income, while others were large business operations employing many people. Late spring and summer were popular times for theatrical troupe performances, carnivals, and circuses. Shows incorporated multiple entertainment styles, blending elements of comedy, dramatics, exhibitions, hands-on

amusement, and music. Circus shows featuring acrobatic tricks and wild animals combined with Wild West shows full of rootin' tootin' cowboys and "savage" Indians (Figure 1); such a show traveling by railroad was common in the early twentieth century. Occasionally, in order to compete, shows attempted to distinguish themselves. Traveling shows continually had to get bigger and better in order to attract customers.

The Walter Savidge Amusement Company was one of the most prominent traveling shows performing in small towns in Nebraska and surrounding states. From 1906 to 1941 the business

DGE Co.



100 Wild Animals Exhibited Free in Parade!
TWO BIG SHOWS for ONE ADMISSION PRICE

ROBBINS BROS.
BIG 4 RING
WILD ANIMAL
CIRCUS UNITED WITH
PONCA BILL'S WILD WEST

INCLUDING:
BUGER RED, HANK LINTON, OKLAHOMA DAN
MONTANA JOE, PRAIRIE LILLY
TEXAS BILL, DAN OFFAT
 and the world's greatest bucking horse riders, ropers and bull
 dodgers, together with a band of Sioux Indians, presenting
 a real Wild West

4 Rings - 2 Stages - Steel Arena - Wild West - Horse Show
BIGGEST WILD ANIMAL CIRCUS in the WORLD

30 Double Length Cars Equals 60 Freight cars 500 PEOPLE 300 HORSES 600 Educated Animals 10 Acres of TENTS Herd of Elephants and Camels 100 WILD ANIMALS Exhibited in Parade 100 WAGONS 2 Electric Light Plants 100 FUNNY CLOWNS	 ROBBINS BROS. PERFORMING ELEPHANTS ten in number, World's Greatest Circus Act PONCA BILL WILD WEST including Buger Red, Hank Linton and 20 well known cowboys	4 Riding Stunts Premier Bare Back Riders of the World CAPT. TIEDOR and his Trained Sea Lions including "Mere" the talking seal CAPT. FORTTELL and his ten African male lions in a dare-devil act ASHCRAFT and his Polar Bears including shoot-the-chest TOM SMITH and his high jumping Russian Wolf Hounds and Horses
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AERIAL LLOYDS, MADGE JAPS, BOUNDING LAWANDE, KENNET WAJET
CHESTER SHERMAN and the ACROBATIC KENTS

10 - Performing Sea Lions - 10

Performing African Lions, Tigers, Panthers and Pumas	Performing Zebras, Horses, Ponies, Monkeys, Dogs, Cats, Birds
HOUSE BACK RIDING LEOPARD	BAND OF SIOUX INDIANS
10-PERFORMING POLAR BEARS-10	ATTACK ON THE COVERED WAGON

TWO BIG SHOWS for the ONE PRICE OF ADMISSION
 Will Positively Exhibit at

LONG PINE SATURDAY JULY 26th

Figure 1. *The Long Pine Journal*, July 17, 1924, 4.

and its entourage spent April through September working in Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Kansas. Though the length of engagements varied, the company usually spent several days in one location, offering a variety of entertainments including carnival rides and freak shows.

How people spend their free time reveals intricacies—sometimes hidden, occasionally obvious—about place, time, and identity. What people did for fun in local places exposes, for instance, the complexities of what was occurring at the state, national, and global scales. People

shape their cultural and physical spaces through entertainment, creating a cultural landscape which in turn shapes them. Knowing this, we can recognize how entertainment reflected social life and larger-scale trends of race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, nationality, and religion. With its emphasis on the characteristics of place throughout time, historical geography has much to tell us. At its core, a place's cultural landscape is an "unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form."¹

Figure 2. *The Long Pine Journal*, June 20, 1913, 5.



This study examines cultural landscapes through a historical geography lens, exploring the intersections of place, time, and entertainment in rural Nebraska primarily from the mid-1910s to the early 1940s. By showcasing the Walter Savidge Amusement Company we can discover some of the characteristics of traveling shows, an entertainment that was well-known to people of the time, but has since largely been forgotten.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many people felt that traditional Victorian American morality was under fire, and that the industrialized city was increasingly a place of corruption and stifling evil. If the American people—native-born European American Christians, that is—were to progress and flourish as a race, they must get out of the evil city.

The Chautauqua was one of the main traveling shows that addressed people's fears of a declining moral culture (Figure 2). Starting in Chautauqua, New York, the movement focused on strengthening rural people's Christian moral and spiritual improvement. Chautauquas were comprised of a variety of entertainers, often from the East, traveling to rural areas throughout the country

promoting Americanization, Victorian American style. Chautauquas were especially popular during summers in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, providing a source of entertainment and "good" for all ages. They were held under the shade of a tent; special areas near communities were frequently set aside as the "chautauqua grounds" for the days-long educational and theatrical bonanza.² Hundreds of people would come to the Chautauqua grounds to camp for days or weeks, making a vacation out of it. Events might include presentations, Christian sermons, orchestra music, "world famous" opera singers, and magic acts.³

Some other traveling shows capitalized on social fears by promoting conservative, rural values. The Walter Savidge Amusement Company was one such socially-accepted "squeaky clean" business in Nebraska. The leading figure behind the enterprise was the company's namesake, Walter T. Savidge (Figure 3). Savidge kept his scruples, holding his employees to his own high standards. Patrons were impressed and had no reservations attending when the show was in town. The *Omaha World-Herald* sang the company's praises: "The crew is not made



Figure 3. Walter T. Savidge. NSHS RG 1667-6-9

of crude fellows who ‘flop’ in strange places, no indeed. Savidge and his company are welcomed with open arms each year in towns that he has played before.”⁴

The company kept its business morally pure for a general audience. Newspapers reported that the show “never skinned [the] public.”⁵ Employees even told of a time when one local Indian chief visited. He was so impressed that he promised to bring his entire family. Savidge was surprised when the man returned with 200 others.⁶ Company records, unfortunately, provide no further information.

The company’s workers did not have the sordid reputation that “carnies” sometimes have today. Walter was strict, holding high behavioral and moral expectations of his employees. He only hired employees who were heterosexual and married, and fined and fired workers who gambled, swore, or smoked. Workers could also be fired for being untidy or causing trouble. Within the region it toured, the company earned a reputation as “the cleanest show in America,” with people referring to it as “The Sunday School Amusement Company.”⁷

Savidge’s conservative background was probably shaped by his childhood in predominantly white, rural, agricultural northern Nebraska. He was born on August 25, 1886, in the

Holt County post-office community of Deloit. When he was a boy, the family moved to Humphrey and also to Leigh. Savidge’s love of traveling shows began at age twelve when he attended a Ringling Brothers Circus in Humphrey.⁸ From then on he filled his childhood with adventures, trying to replicate on the farm the stunts he witnessed in shows. He especially enjoyed tightrope walking acts, and practiced at home with a rope tied between the barn and shed.⁹ He also traversed a rope from the top of a windmill to the ground, using an umbrella as a hopelessly ineffective parachute.¹⁰

The Savidge family was an adventurous group. Members of his extended family living near Deloit and Ewing became famous for their risk taking. The Savidge Brothers (Figure 4) were among Nebraska’s earliest aviators, building and flying their first airplane in 1911.¹¹ They barnstormed Nebraska and surrounding states for several years, until Matt was killed in a crash in 1916 while skywriting. Though deeply shaken, the rest of the brothers continued. The summer of 1917, for instance, found them holding auto polo shows—playing polo using a stripped-down automobile—in addition to aerobatics with their three airplanes. Then known as the Savidge Brothers Auto Polo Players, or more commonly as “a family of daredevils,” they guaranteed “to turn . . . cars over at least 3 times[,] to smash 1 to 6 wheels at each game[,] and to raise hair on a bald man’s head.”¹²

Walter had already spent years in the traveling show business by the time his cousins took up aviation. He had run away from home at age sixteen in hopes of “joining the circus” and similar



Figure 4. Central Aviators, the Savidge Brothers of rural Ewing, October 2, 1912. NSHS RG2508-10



Figure 5. The Flying Baldwins, date and location unknown.
NSHS RG1667-1-15

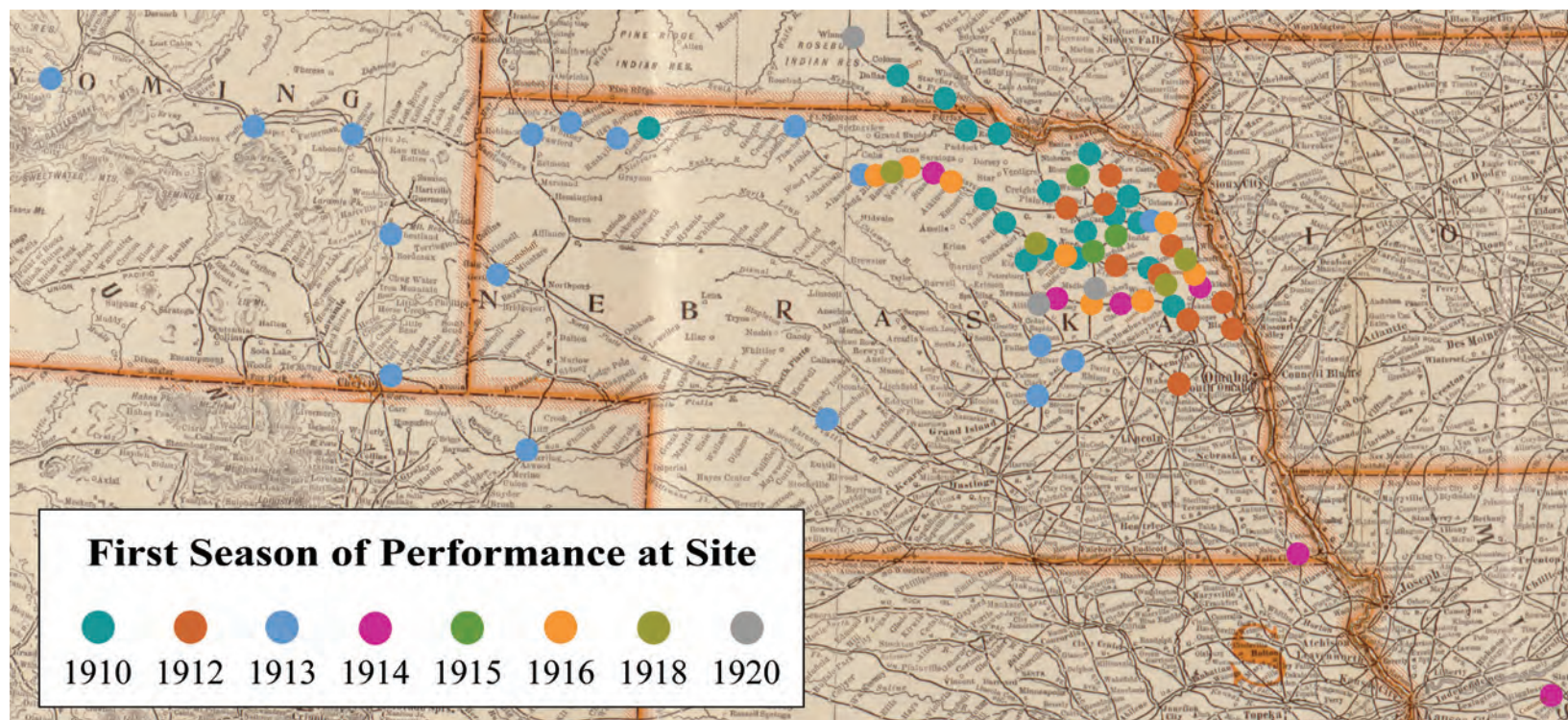
ventures. Soon picnic and fair organizers were employing him as a tightrope walker.¹³ In the very first years of the twentieth century, the president of the Wayne County Fair board, Frank M. Griffith, paid Savidge five dollars to perform at the event.¹⁴ The young daredevil astonished spectators with his skills.¹⁵ In his spare time he got to know some of the other performers.¹⁶ Someone introduced him to a young lady, Mabel Griffith, who had watched his performances. Griffith played the piano and performed tricks with her with family's horses. The young tightrope walker was overtaken by her charm, grace, and personality.¹⁷ It was a propitious meeting.

Walter and his brother, Arthur, formed the Savidge Brothers Amusement Company in 1906, when Walter was just twenty years old.¹⁸ It started as a one-tent show, with Arthur serving both as one of the managers and as a performer.¹⁹ The length of stay in one location usually varied between one and three days. In 1910, for instance, the troupe was in Battle Creek on July 16 and showed in Elgin three days later.²⁰ In the early 1910s the company used the Flying Baldwins (Figure 5) as its main attraction. The entertainers performed tightrope,

high swing, and other daring aerobatic routines. Because the Flying Baldwins brought in so many paying customers, the Savidges paid the group a hefty \$300 each week.²¹

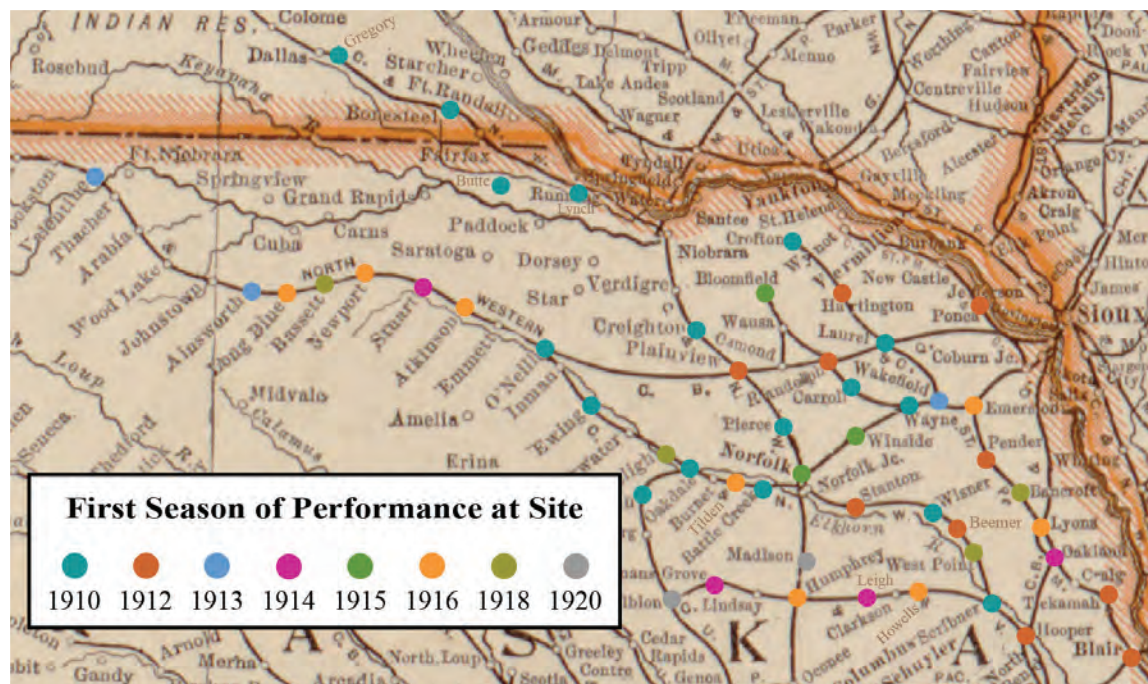
The Savidge Players were another big draw. Consisting of dramatic companies from Chicago and New York, the troupe performed in a specially-made canvas tent capable of seating 1,600 people (Figure 6). Except for Arthur, all the players were professional actors. They put on a variety of popular plays, including *Abie's Irish Rose*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Mother's Millions*, and *Three Wise Fools*. Arthur, using the stage name Elwin Strong, was known for his ability to play a convincing Dr. Jekyll. Vaudeville acts were performed between scenes. Having such a theatrical production required a good number of employees, including usually about fifteen actors, eight stage men, and numerous vaudeville entertainers.²²

The Savidge Brothers Amusement Company traveled to many towns after opening each season in Wayne, the company's headquarters (Map 1).²³ When the company arrived, local boys helped set up the carnival for an inside peek and a potential free ticket (Figure 7).²⁴ Though the company



First Season of Performance at Site

1910 1912 1913 1914 1915 1916 1918 1920



First Season of Performance at Site

1910 1912 1913 1914 1915 1916 1918 1920

Figure 7. Map (and detail of map) showing performance locations of the Walter Savidge Amusement Co., 1910-20. Locations are shown on *General Railway Map Engraved Expressly for the Official Guide of the Railways and Steam Navigation Lines of the United States, Puerto Rico, Canada, Mexico and Cuba (1918)*. Library of Congress

traveled primarily in northern and northeastern Nebraska, it also visited south-central South Dakota. During the 1910 season, for instance, the company worked in eighteen communities. Most, such as Laurel, Crofton, and Creighton, were located near Wayne in northeastern Nebraska, but the entourage also traveled to Gregory and Bonesteel in south-central South Dakota. Gordon, in northwestern Nebraska, was probably the farthest from Wayne that they worked.²⁵

Though he and his brother were busy with their corporation, Walter thought it important to take college courses, and enrolled at the Nebraska

Normal School in Wayne. There he came across his old acquaintance Mabel Griffith, now one of the music instructors at the college.²⁶ With their common history, the two had many warm recollections to share and reason to spend time with one another.

Like Walter, Mabel Griffith had spent most of her life in rural Nebraska. Originally from the Wayne area, she grew up on a homestead four miles north and one half mile west of town. Both of her parents had been born in Iowa—her father, Frank, in Red Oak, and her mother, Elizabeth Reid, in Burlington. Like Walter, Mabel came from a tough



Figure 8. Complimentary ticket to the big feature. NSHS RG1667, Box 1 of 3, Folder Series 1 Ledgers, Volume 1915

and adventurous family. Before they had children, Frank and Elizabeth lived in a chicken house while they waited for their farm house to be built. Once they moved in to the house with a wrap-around porch and white picket fence, they got down to the business of farming, raising cattle and horses, and having a family.²⁷

As one of six children growing up on a farm, Mabel sought out exciting activities. She enjoyed riding horses, using a red-plush side saddle, and later learning to ride astride. She began learning the piano when she was eight. At the Wayne County Fair, she drove teams of horses, then played the piano for spectators. At such a tender age, she was so skilled at handling the “high-spirited” team of horses that she and her horses earned awards of five dollars each for being the best driver and the best team.²⁸

Since her parents were fairly well off financially, they could give Mabel schooling befitting of a young, cultured Victorian lady. After high school, she took classes at the Nebraska Normal College in Wayne, finishing her teaching course in 1902. Much of her training was in music, especially piano. Following her graduation she briefly served as the assistant teacher of music at the college. Her education, skill, marital status, and money enabled her to attend the Boston’s New England Conservatory of Music in 1903. She taught there one year before returning to the Great Plains. She then spent several years teaching music in numerous communities, as well as creating and selling oil landscape paintings.²⁹

Mabel was the epitome of a cultured Victorian lady when she returned to Wayne and became reacquainted with Walter. Although their statuses differed—Walter was a student and Mabel a teacher—the two took a liking to one another and soon decided to marry. Since it was customary

for women to give up their careers once they married, on May 2, 1911, Mabel traded her teaching career in exchange for love and a life on the road, where she would become an important part of the company.³⁰

Another family relationship was turning sour. With the success of the Savidge Brothers Amusement Company in the late 1900s and early 1910s came disagreements between Arthur and Walter over the way business was being conducted and money allocated.³¹ Sometime after the 1910 summer season and before the 1912 summer season, the brothers had “managerial disagreements” and discontinued their professional arrangement.³² Arthur kept his stage name of Elwin Strong and created the dramatic troupe Elwin Strong and Company. On October 13, 1914, his group performed *The Call of the West* at the Long Pine opera house (Figure 9). This cowboy play, “a romance of the early seventies” with “special scenery and effects,” showed only once.³³

In 1912, Walter and Mabel used \$500 capital to create their own production team, the Walter Savidge Amusement Company.³⁴ That year, the new company’s management decided to stay closer to home, appearing only in northern, northeastern, and east-central Nebraska towns.³⁵

In 1913 Walter and Mabel traveled farther and to more communities. After the usual season opener in Wayne, the entourage immediately headed west, playing in towns such as Ainsworth, Valentine, and Rushville. Next they appeared in Chadron and Crawford. Continuing west into Wyoming, they performed in Casper and Lander, and then backtracked east to show in Douglas before turning to the south to play in Wheatland and Cheyenne. The company continued south and east to Sterling, Colorado.³⁶

In the second half of the summer season, the entourage slowly made its way back to Wayne. From Sterling, it headed east through Scottsbluff and Gothenburg, then headed northeast through Silver Creek and other towns, turning north after Tekamah, and traveling northwest back to headquarters via Pender and Wakefield. Overall, the Walter Savidge Amusement Company showed in twenty-two communities in 1913, including sixteen in Nebraska, five in Wyoming, and one in Colorado.³⁷

Walter and Mabel’s lives revolved around the company. They traveled from late spring to late fall, usually April to October. The outdoor carnival shut down when the weather cooled, and many of the performers returned to their

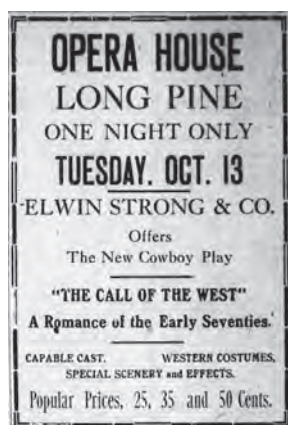


Figure 9. Source: *The Long Pine Journal*, October 9, 1914, 4.

homes across the country to await the next summer season.³⁸ During the first few years of the business, the Savidges hit the road with roughly eighteen others, giving vaudeville performances at opera houses throughout Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota.³⁹ After a show's finale, the company might remain behind and put on a dance. Winter travel could be uncomfortable. Instead of enjoying the usual luxuries of their Pullman train cars, employees spent nights in a local hotel, many of which "had heat only in the hallways."⁴⁰ Mabel referred to the time spent in the "dreary, cold hotels" as "miserable."⁴¹

As wife of the show's namesake and, arguably, a major decision maker, Mabel had numerous responsibilities. She was the accountant and secretary, keeping the finances and books in order. She occasionally worked with the ballyhoo—the rides and side shows. During the winter, Mabel played piano for the vaudeville acts. Throughout the year, she performed serious piano pieces in the shows. She even kept a special little book, the 1899 *A Graded Course of Studies and Pieces for the Piano-Forte*, filled with tunes appropriate for various occasions. She used the book often, for it is filled with her handwritten notes and symbols, such as a star next to tunes that she liked best.

Performers returned to Wayne in early spring for rehearsals in the city hall.⁴² In 1918, for instance, dramatic rehearsals began on April 24, and band and orchestra practices on May 1. The season opened in Wayne on May 8.⁴³

For the 1914 summer season, management decided to cut down on the number of out-of-state showings, probably to reduce expenses. The company opened in Wayne and stayed primarily in northern and eastern portions of the state, adding locations such as Oakland, Newman Grove, and Leigh. The company played for the Brown County Fair at Ainsworth, September 15-19 (Figure 10). The five-day event featured a family-friendly ballyhoo. The public could take a spin on a merry-go-round or Ferris wheel, or take part in various athletics, or watch an aerial bar performance or flying machine exhibition. For those more inclined to the arts and dramatics, there were band concerts or vaudeville shows. After Ainsworth, the company slowly made its way to southeastern Nebraska and northwestern Missouri. In October, after an appearance in Falls City, the troupe's train crossed the state line and closed the season in Concordia, Missouri.⁴⁴

The company's management continued to modify their business to better fit its niche and maximize profits. The troupe traveled to twenty-

one communities in 1915 season, adding a few bookings to its circuit, but again staying mostly in northeastern Nebraska. Chadron, about 350 miles west of Wayne, was the farthest point of travel. The concluding show was again back home in Wayne.⁴⁵

In its first few years, the Walter Savidge Amusement Company proved to be a success. What had started out as a one-boxcar show needed eight boxcars in 1916 to haul equipment and more than 100 employees. The business was able to make new purchases, including an "African ostrich farm, oriental reptile museum, and [numerous exotic] birds," to add to its already well-liked attractions. During the afternoon and evenings, the company offered concerts by the Savidge Challenge Band and free acts on a community's streets. People could visit the many sideshows or take a whirl on a number of rides. In the evenings, they could also attend theatrical presentations by the Savidge Dramatic Players.⁴⁶

During the 1910s and 1920s, the Savidge Dramatic Players seemed to be the most popular attraction of the entire show (Figures 11 and 12). The company took its dramatics seriously. Because the public had loved her when she toured with the show five years prior, in 1916 the company again hired the popular Katherin Dale to be its lead actress. Al C. Wilson was stage director. Fritz Adams, May Wilson, O. T. Prather, Dick Elliott, Marvin Lendrum, Edwin Henderson, Merie Harbuick, and Anna Nelson played in the dramas. The actors put on numerous plays, including *The Belle of Richmond*, *On the Border*, *The Girl of the Mountains*, and *The Prince*

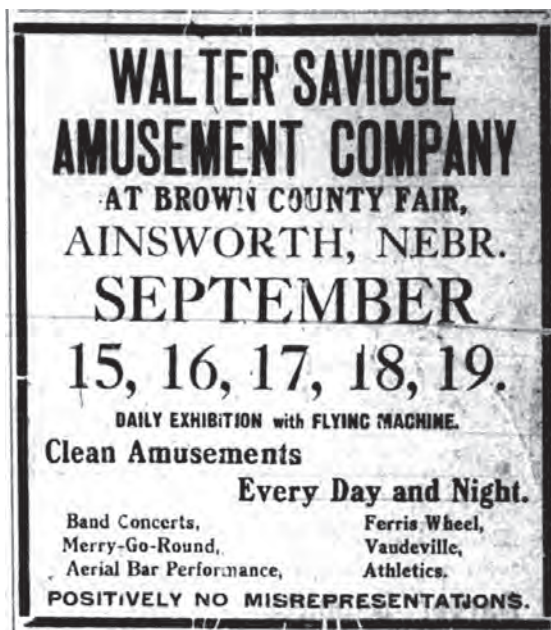


Figure 10. Source: *The Long Pine Journal*, September 4, 1914, 8.

Figure 11. Source:
The Long Pine Journal,
June 2, 1916, 4.

Long Pine Summer Carnival
June 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17

WALTER SAVIDGE AMUSEMENT CO.
INCLUDING THE SAVIDGE DRAMATIC PLAYERS

A FEW OF OUR PLAYS

GRAUSTARK <small>From the Novel by George Barr McCutcheon. Dramatized by Grace Hayward.</small>	Call of the Cumberlands <small>From the Novel by Charles Neville Buck. Stage Version by Hugo Koch.</small>	That Printer of Udell's <small>From Novel by H. Bell Wright. Dramatized by Mr. Wright and Elsbury W. Reynolds.</small>
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Vaudeville of the Better Class Between the Acts

Visit The African Ostrich Farm

Take a Ride on the Merry-Go-Round

Feature Free Acts Afternoon and Evening

See the Oriental Reptile Museum

Visit the Clouds-on the Ferris Wheel

Free Band Concerts Morning, Noon and Night

Figure 12. Source:
The Long Pine Journal,
May 20, 1920, 4.

AT Long Pine, Nebraska
ONE WEEK COMMENCING
Monday, May 24th

WALTER SAVIDGE AMUSEMENT CO.

Featuring The Walter Savidge Players
Presenting the Latest New York and Chicago Successes
REPERTOIRE

MONDAY NIGHT "PAL O' MINE" BY JOSEPH NIEL	THURSDAY NIGHT "The Unkissed Bride" BY CHAS. DEMAREST
TUESDAY NIGHT The Girl He Left Behind BY RALPH KITTING	FRIDAY NIGHT "Civilian Clothes" BY THOMPSON BUCHANAN
WEDNESDAY NIGHT A Woman's Way BY THOMPSON BUCHANAN	SATURDAY NIGHT "A Thief in the Night" BY EDWIN BLOCK

Midway Attractions
MOX—THE MAN WHO KNOWS
THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP
THE ROYAL MIDGETS
5-IN-ONE-SHOW-5

Take a Ride on the Merry Go Round

Spin Around on The Ferris Wheel

Band Concerts and 2 Free Acts DAILY

of *Liars*. Each production had its own scenery background, painted by L. R. McNeal.⁴⁷

The company continued to grow, until it took a "20 car private Pullman train" to carry its "125 employees, concession stands, tents and equipment."⁴⁸ The company must have been profitable, for the trademark red-and-yellow train alone cost \$65,000.⁴⁹ Since the cortege served as the employees' temporary home, numerous cars were set up as living suites. Many of them contained glamorous amenities such as silver basins connected to hot and cold running water, and mahogany sleeping berths surrounded by mirrors.⁵⁰

The ballyhoo's rides and sideshows were located outside the big tent. Because it was so big, the company "owned its own light plant and maintained a 14-man orchestra" (Figure 13). Though today carnival rides tend to be run-down, in the 1910s the Savidge Brothers Amusement Company, and later the Walter Savidge Amusement Company, paid high prices to have new rides. These included the Eli Wheel (Figure 14), a Ferris-like wheel made by the Eli Company, merry-go-rounds, and revolving swings (Figure 15).⁵¹

Like other carnivals of the time, the Savidge Brothers Amusement Company and its successor showcased numerous "oddities." The novelties featured varied each year. Snake charmers, trick horses (Figure 16), and wild animals like Madagascar pygmy birds (Figure 17) were common.⁵² One year, a group called the Sallardo Trio combined drama and peculiarity into a feature called "Oddities in Jungleland" (Figure 18).

The company also had ballyhoo "freak" shows. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the western world, it was common for sideshows to feature persons with abnormal

physical conditions. Because such people were rarities who frequently did not live very long, the public, fascinated by their conditions, considered them freaks of nature (Figure 19). At the time, people with such physical conditions had trouble finding long-term substantial jobs, so many chose to take on work in traveling shows, where they would be appreciated and almost celebrated for their condition.

Though the exact features varied year to year, people with abnormalities were always featured in the ballyhoo as part of the Savidge “freak” shows. Nearly every performer had his or her own stand. There were Siamese twins. Armless Owens was “a chap who ate with his feet.”⁵³ The only thing different about the George Thompson family was that George, the husband and father, was, at thirty-two inches, the shortest member (Figure 20). A popular attraction reflective of the times was Ma-Ho, the man-ape advertised as “Darwin’s Original” (Figure 21).⁵⁴ Here supposedly was the missing evolutionary link between apes and human beings. Most likely Ma-Ho was simply a man who had the rare condition hypertrichosis, which causes the entire body to be covered with long, thick hair.

Weighing 480 pounds, Baby May (Figure 22) was billed as the country’s heaviest woman with the smallest stature.⁵⁵ If you wanted to visit her, a friendly looking gal, all you had to do was go to her stand and walk up the stairs to the stage where she sat in a plush chair. You could stare at her, examining as you walked all around her, and then come back down the stairs on the other side. In addition to her size, people found Baby May fascinating because of her linguistic skills. You could visit with her and ask her to speak in any of seven languages.

By contemporary standards, these attractions exploited people who lived with “abnormal” physical conditions. When interviewed for the *Wayne Herald* in 1967, Mabel Savidge argued that the company did not exploit such persons, adding that the performers took it well and viewed being a part of the traveling show as an honest career which made them good money.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, there are no records that express the performers’ thoughts.

Regardless of contemporary standards of political correctness and sensitivity, the Walter Savidge Amusement Company was a business, profiting only by meeting the demands of its market. The company did so from the late 1910s through the early 1930s. Two major reasons for its success were Mabel’s accounting skills and Walter’s standards.

With so many employees and expenses, Mabel kept ledgers to manage finances. She tracked business correspondence and financial transactions such as employee salary records. In addition to their wages, employees earned a bonus if they stayed with the show for the entire season. The yellowed, worn pages of each season’s ledger contain signatures of employees, verifying that they had received their wages in full.⁵⁷ Many of the ledgers also contain loose receipts and statements. The company frequently paid for some of its employees’ clothing; the 1916 ledger, for example, contains an itemized statement for Ivan Totten’s garments. Unfortunately the handwriting of the name of the person, or clothing company, to which the charges were made is illegible. It is also unclear what kind of work Ivan did. Nevertheless, among other purchases, in November 1916 Ivan charged a pair of “sox” for \$0.35, overalls at \$0.95, a cap for \$1.00, a pair of pants worth \$1.00, a suit valued at \$15.00, and three sweaters—one at \$1.50, the second at \$4.00, and the other at \$5.00.⁵⁸

Working off the company’s conservative, family-friendly atmosphere, in 1916 Mabel and Walter Savidge introduced their only child, Walter Jr., to show business when he was three weeks old.⁵⁹ But with their new responsibility the couple couldn’t go on living as before. Walter and Mabel ceased their winter travels in exchange for quiet time at home in Wayne.⁶⁰

Walter Jr. was not the only child who traveled with the company. Many entertainers brought their children along. Some even allowed their sons and daughters to be involved in the entertaining. A Mr. and Mrs. Henderson let their son, Lyle, perform. After several years of working for the company, young Lyle went to Hollywood, taking his mother’s maiden name and working hundreds of acting jobs as Lyle Talbot from 1931 to 1987.⁶¹ As one of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) founders, he acted in numerous movies, such as *A Shriek in the Night* (1933) (Figure 23), *Shirley Temple in Our Little Girl* (1935), and *Untamed Women* (1952).⁶² He appeared in television shows, like *Hopalong Cassidy*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *The Lucy Show*. A spot in a 1987 episode of *Newhart* was his last gig.⁶³ Incidentally, other future entertainers, such as movie actors Fritz Adams and Dick Elliot, also got their professional start working for the Walter Savidge Amusement Company.⁶⁴

People of all ages enjoyed the company’s entertainments. Like Walter during his own childhood, children and young adults were enticed

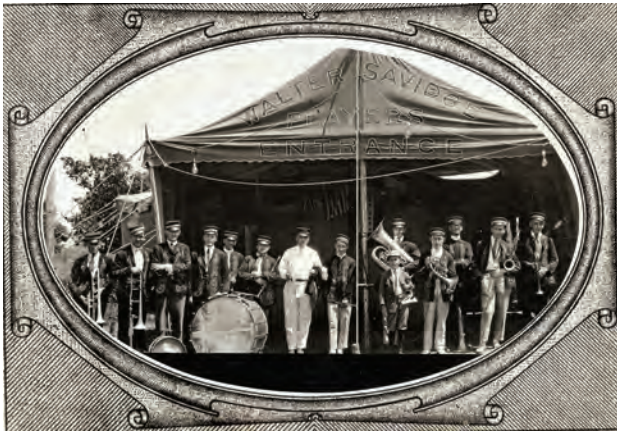


Figure 13. The Savidge Players Orchestra, 1912 or after.
NSHS RG1667-2-1



Figure 15. New and expensive rides, including, left to right, a Eli Wheel, revolving swings, and merry-go-round. Date and location unknown.
NSHS RG1667-3-3

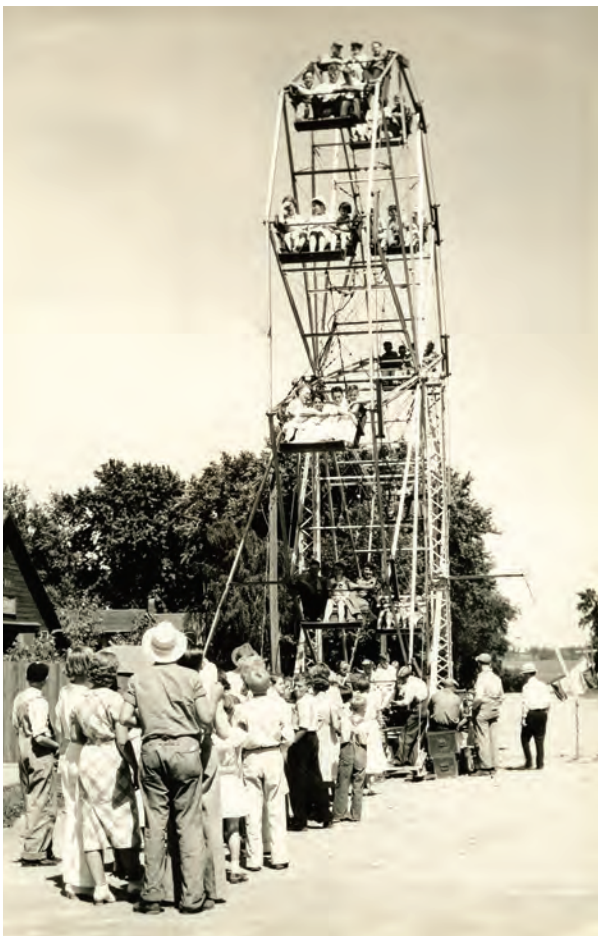


Figure 14. Waiting in line for a ride on the Eli Wheel. Date and location unknown. NSHS RG1667- 3-1



Figure 16. King, the trick horse, and his trainer, M. C. Freed, 1918.
NSHS RG1667-1-6



Figure 17. Banner for the Madagascar Pygmies. NSHS RG 1667-1-11



Figure 18. A clown and his “giraffe” in the Sallardo Trio’s “Oddities in Jungleland.” NSHS RG1667-1-14



Figure 19. Rides and shows as part of the ballyhoo while at Sturgis, South Dakota, from July 26-31, 1926. NSHS RG 1667-1-11



Figure 20. George Thompson and son. Date and location unknown. NSHS RG 1667-6-1



Figure 21. Ballyhoo sideshow for Ma-Ho, the Man Ape. NSHS RG 1667-1-10



Figure 22. Baby May featured as a sideshow in the Walter Savidge Amusement Company. NSHS RG1667-7-2

by the adventure and romance of traveling shows. Children really did dream of running away to join the circus. As a result, some authors wrote fictitious children's books with moral lessons that taught the negative realities of circus life. James Otis's 1881 *Toby Tyler*, also known as *Ten Weeks With a Circus*, chronicles the story of a boy who discovers the misery of trading his carefree childhood for the drudgery of working for a corrupt traveling show.⁶⁵

Walter occasionally received letters from parents granting permission for their child to work for the company. On a small, lined page ripped from a complimentary Ellwood Fence Company notebook,

Mr. and Mrs. H. P. Hendricks wrote perpendicular to the lines, scribbling a signed, undated, note to the company giving their permission for their son, Earl or Carl, to join the show.⁶⁶ It is unclear whether or not such a document was legally binding, and no documentation indicates how Walter responded.

The Walter Savidge Amusement Company did not always know good times. Accidents were bound to happen. In the summer of 1916, for example, C.R. Rightfield of Omaha was working on the company's Ferris wheel in Creighton when he suffered injuries to his foot "and person." The company eventually

paid him \$15.00 in damages. In a December 2, 1916, letter written on letterhead from Omaha's Millard Hotel, Righfield acknowledged that he had received the cash settlement and that he would "in no way hold Walter Savidge Libel for Damages which may accrue [sic]." ⁶⁷

One of the worst experiences happened in Neligh in the 1930s, during a sudden strong wind and rain that destroyed the large tent and most of the ballyhoo. A newspaper reported that "a fearful ostrich joined a scrambling crowd," and the wind threw the bass drummer into the nearby river, but no one was badly hurt.⁶⁸ Mabel assisted some of the female patrons who had been inside the tent watching the play. She took about twenty women to the train where she gave them dry clothing.⁶⁹ Interest in the traveling show dwindled in the late 1930s, most likely due to newer types of entertainment such as radio and motion pictures. Transportation changed. The company left the trademark yellow-and-red train on the tracks and began using trucks to move the show. Walter sold the train piece by piece over several years. In 1941, after thirty-five years of "traveling the circuit," the Savidges finally sold their business and retired to their home in Wayne (Figure 23).⁷⁰ Their exact reasons are unknown; they were growing older and may have simply been tired of living on the road.

Health may have been a factor. Walter suffered from gall bladder disease, acid reflux, and Parkinson's Disease (PD). In order to treat his gall bladder condition and acid reflux, his doctor gave him a detailed description of the foods that he could and could not eat. Walter was to "drink plenty of water on arising, between meals, and on retiring," but he shouldn't "drink with meals," or force himself to drink the water. He was to eat plenty of fruits of vegetables, but avoid eating "too many potatoes" and not eat them at the same meal when he ate bread. When he started to feel better, Walter could eat items like sour milk, mutton, and gelatin deserts. Above all, Walter should avoid overeating.⁷¹


Though this special diet may have helped with Walter's gall bladder and acid reflux troubles, it could not fight his PD. Multiple attempts at treating the disease did not do any good. For the last ten months of his life, the once vibrant showman lay ailing in his bed.⁷² Eight years after retiring, Walter Savidge died in Wayne on September 20, 1949, at the age of sixty-three.⁷³

Mabel lived for forty more years. Her memories of the carnival days were not always pleasant. When asked later if she enjoyed the work, she



Figure 23. Walter and Mabel Savidge at their home at 214 West Second Street in Wayne. Date unknown. NSHS RG1667-6-5

replied, "No, not really." She tired of the "hectic" lifestyle when the couple was "always on the go." She did, however, find the work "interesting." Though Mabel had been essential to the company's success, she did not feel as if she was a major part of it. Typical of the gender role mentality of her generation, Mabel viewed the business as her husband's; she had simply dedicated her life to his ambitions. Given the chance, she said in 1967, she would not do it all over again.⁷⁴

During the 1970s and 1980s, when she was too frail to look after herself, Mabel stayed at the Care Center, a nursing home in Wayne. She died in 1989 at age 104, taking with her countless memories of the heyday of the traveling show industry in rural Nebraska. 

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NOTES

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⁵ Newspaper clipping, "Famed Showman, 67, Died Tuesday Night: Walter Savidge Retired in 1941," unknown newspaper (most likely *The Wayne Herald*) in RG1667.AM, Walter Savidge Amusement Co. (Wayne, Neb.), Series 3: Miscellaneous, Box 2, Folder 1, NSHS.

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¹³ McDermott, "Savidge Amusement Called Wayne Home Years Goneby."

¹⁴ Savidge, *Wayne County Anecdotes and Historical Notes*, 15.

¹⁵ McDermott, "Savidge Amusement Called Wayne Home Years Goneby."

¹⁶ Savidge, *Wayne County Anecdotes and Historical Notes*, 15.

¹⁷ McDermott, "Savidge Amusement Called Wayne Home Years Goneby."

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¹⁹ "Long Pine Summer Carnival," *The Long Pine Journal*, June 2, 1916, 1; McDermott, "Savidge Amusement Called Wayne Home Years Goneby."

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²⁸ Ibid.

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