By Bobby Poston

Some called him “Diamond Billy,” others “Horse King of the World,” and still others “Animal King of the World.” But to the town of Lancaster, Mo., he was Colonel William Preston Hall. And to the generations to follow, he grew to be known as “quite a legend” and “quite a memory.” When he first started into the brokering of horses, little did he know that he would make the peaceful town of Lancaster world famous, for this is where W.P. Hall’s circus career all started.

Russell Wheeler helped provide invaluable information in the completion of the history of the W.P. Hall Circus. Also the Schuyler County Historical Society and Duane Montgomery contributed information to this article.

Young Businessman

Billy P. Hall was born near Downing, Mo., on Feb. 29, 1864. When he was 12 years old, his parents died, so this forced him to work for a farmer at $1 a month. Duane told us that Billy hauled mine props from up around Martinstown into Lancaster as another source of income. “One time Billy was coming from Martinstown with a load and his old wagon broke a wheel. By putting his crafty mind to work, he got out, cut a pole, and chained it to the front of the wagon, and extended it back in the place of the wheel. This served as a drag to get him into Lancaster,” Duane said.

Hall saved his money, and with it, bought Nigger, a coal-black horse. At the age of 15 he went to Lancaster, to the Stretch Livery Barn, and asked if he could work in the barn to board Nigger.

By the time he was 18, Hall was buying and selling horses steadily, and it was at this time he got his first break. Russell told us, “A man by the name of Meng, from Philadelphia, was in Lancaster, and seeing Billy was a natural expert at horse buying, approached him with this deal: ‘If you will buy good horses and ship them back to us in Philadelphia we will pay you good.’ ”

Horse Sense

There are tricks to every business, and Hall knew all of them. When he would take a load of horses to the auction in Lancaster and a horse would fail to bring his set price, what would he do? It sure wasn’t give up. No sir. He would get some of his crew together, send them to his barn with this particular horse, clip its tail and mane a little shorter, and run it back through the auction block. And it usually worked.

One of the ways Billy got the animals he wanted was to go out and buy directly from the farmers. He would drive down dirt roads and if he saw a horse he liked, he would stop, get out and examine the animal, and if it was what he wanted, try and find the owner, so he could set up a deal. John Poston remembered meeting Billy on one of these trips.

John said, “I was just a young boy when Billy came up to the house. We lived southeast of Adair, Mo. Billy had managed to get his car stuck, and how he did that I’ll never know, because it was in July, and it was mighty dry. Anyway, he wanted me to bring one of our horses down and

Russell Wheeler used to lead horses to the stockyard for Hall. Since he spent a lot of time around Hall’s office and barns in the early 1920s, he grew to know him quite well.
pull his car to the main road. Well, I was too small to put the harness on the horse, and my dad he was in the fields farming, and Billy, well he wouldn't be bothered with helping me, so it was up to me.

“All of a sudden Billy came up with the ingenious idea of taking a rope and tying it to a knot in the horse’s tail. So, thinking he knew what he was talking about, I took a rope and tied it to the horse’s tail. I must have pulled that cock-eyed car a half a mile. But at the end of the line, Hall gave me 25 cents for my efforts. Let me tell you that was the first money I had had for a long time, but I would have traded it all, in replacement for the thrashing I got when my dad heard what had taken place.”

Hall's First Sale Barns

In 1895 Hall opened a sale barn in Richmond, Va., with his brother, Lou Hall, managing it. Here he dealt for a year and returned to Lancaster to open another sale barn. It was at this time that the European Market was open to Billy so he bought a sale barn in Capetown, South Africa, to make his dealings more convenient. Here again Lou Hall stayed in Africa and served as his brother's connection.

When the Boer War broke out in 1899, the English called on Hall and set up a deal with him to supply them with horses, which Hall did until the war’s end in 1902. The war was between the English and South African Republic. With the huge amount of horses needed, naturally it made Hall a rich man. Back in Missouri, he acquired the name of Colonel Billy.

It is hard to imagine how any one man with no formal education could handle such a consistent business. His wife taught him how to read and sign his name to business contracts. He kept no formal business records because, although his reading ability was limited, his mind was sharp as a needle. Russell said, “He had a photographic memory.”

Once a fine gentlemen came down from Bloomfield, Iowa, with a load of horses and wanted to sell them to Billy. One of the horses had a flaw in his left side, so Billy didn’t want that one. About three years later this gentleman from Bloomfield sold the horse to a man in Springfield, Mo. In turn the man from Springfield brought this horse, along with some others for sale to Colonel Hall. Immediately he recognized it and said, “I’ve seen this horse before, and didn’t want him, and I don’t want him now.”

The Ottumwa Daily Review stated, “In Corydon, Iowa, Billy Hall bought from the farmers as they came to offer their horses, one and two at a time, 326 head in six hours.”

Animal Lover

Hall truly loved the animals he dealt with. He may have been a hurried man, having no time to wait for someone to get his horses together to sell, but there was always a special place in Hall’s life for God’s animals. Every morning he could be seen strolling down the main street of Lancaster with all the stray dogs in town tagging at his heels. They knew if they followed him down to the meat market, they would get a free meal. This showed just how much he loved animals. One thing is for sure, you never wanted to be mean to any animal if Hall was around, because he wouldn’t have anything to do with you if you were.
What really got Hall interested in the circus business was when he was in Europe buying horses. The European circuses were very detailed and this left a great impression on Billy. So he thought, why not bring this type of entertainment back to the United States? It wasn’t until several years later, however, that Billy compiled a circus under his name.

**The Circus**

In 1904 Hall’s latent circus dreams started to materialize. On Sept. 3 that year, Hall purchased the Nickle Plate Circus, known as the W.H. Harris Circus. Then on Sept. 16 he purchased the Walter Main Circus. He combined the accessories from both and formed them into the W.P. Hall Circus.

With his silk hat as his trademark, Hall’s Circus opened May 6, 1905, in Lancaster. It was on the road until August 1905 when it was brought back to Lancaster and disbanded. This was the only time a circus was on the road under the name of W.P. Hall. The rest of the equipment and animals were sold to other circuses. His circus career on the road was over, but now he was to go back into business of supplying equipment for other circuses.

Hall’s Sale Barn in Cape Town, South Africa (above), was operated by his brother Lou. By 1895 Hall was active in the European market, shipping hundreds of horses and mules to Hamburg, Germany, and London, England. In 1900 he shipped an average of four carloads each day. Below, Hall used beautiful circus wagons to parade his performers every morning.
Hall's method for selling merchandise was a well-planned operation. If a circus needed elephants, he would sell them to this particular circus on time. But if they defaulted in paying for the animals, not only did he take back his elephants, but he repossessed the whole circus. And since a contract was signed at each deal, everything was legal. This was how Hall came to acquire so many circuses and his famed wealth.

Hall's office was in one of the old Yankee Robinson show cars. This car had a section at the back set up so he and his buddies could spend some of their time doing what they liked to do: gamble. In the front were his office quarters. He had an oak stove, two rockers and one long bench down the side. This bench is where the loafers sat. By the door was the phone. He quoted prices right over the phone, using no price guides, just his remarkable memory. Hall had a railroad siding at the west end of Lancaster. This was to harbor his coaches and box cars. His barns were built with two levels. The ground level housed wagons, tools, harnesses, etc., and the basement held the wild animals, as well as serving as a training arena.

When the World's Fair came to St. Louis in 1904, Hall was again called on to supply horses for it. This was to provide a re-enactment of the Boer War as one of the fair's attractions.

**Elephant Tales**

Of all the animals acquired, the elephants he bought impressed him the most. He bought his first two elephants, Duke & Mary, in 1904. By the time he was at the peak of his elephant dealings, he had acquired one of the largest single herds of elephants in the United States. In 1908 Hall imported 36 head of elephants from overseas. The inexperience of hauling elephants was sure to take its toll; by the time the shipment reached Lancaster only five survived. The rest had died of mishandling.

In all the years Hall was in the circus business, only two
times did elephants die while under his ownership. One had to be shot, and the other got sick and laid down. Once it got down, it could not be raised, even with the workers' help, so it, too, died. The carcasses were buried in the grazing fields, under enormous manure piles.

The last load of elephants he bought was eight head from a fellow in Los Angeles. Little did Hall know that he and his crew would face a tremendous challenge at unloading this last load. Russell's brother, Guy, along with Bert McClain and Hall, was helping unload the elephants in Lancaster. Guy wanted to put a set of hobbles on the lead elephant so he would set a slow pace for the rest of the elephants.

But Bert said, "Oh, no that won't be necessary." As soon as the first male elephant came out of the car, however, it started to stampede. This elephant was mad. Billy tried everything possible to secure the elephant, but it was useless. Finally, they had to shoot it near Exline, Iowa.

**For Sale: One Circus, Complete**

In May 1932, Billy decided to turn some of his holdings into cash. Since the Great Depression had a firm grip on the economy, everyone was in need of money. He ran a billboard reading: "For Sale: elephants, cat animals, bears, camels, railroad cars, wagons, cages, canvas, seats, etc. Will sell cheaply for cash. W.P. Hall, Lancaster, Missouri."

On June 30, 1932, Billy died of cancer at the age of 68. He had seen his circus dreams blossom, and now they had withered and were over.

But from 1932 to 1938, Bert McClain, along with Mrs. Hall, attempted to sell the remaining merchandise. By 1938 the W.P. Hall Circus was completely sold off. But the impression Billy left on Lancaster and the rest of the world by bringing laughter, with every circus he brought to town, would not be forgotten.

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Hall was active in the European market in the late 1890s, and specialized in horses and mules. From 1895 to 1900, Hall made more than 30 trips to Europe with the animals. It was on these trips that Hall developed his interest in the circus business.

Top photo, the W. P. Hall home in Lancaster is now a museum owned by the Schuyler County Historical Society. Left, elephants pulling fancy carts full of fancy ladies were also a common sight in northeast Missouri. Hall decided to turn some of his holdings into cash when the Great Depression hit, so he put all of his animals and circus equipment up for sale. He died shortly after, and relatives continued to sell the remaining merchandise for the next six years.