

## A GRANT COUNTY CIRCUS

BY Dennis A. Wilson, February 28, 2012

The circus has a long history in America, and Wisconsin was a great place to start. Thirty-eight circuses started right here in Wisconsin. The first of those was the Mabie Bros. "Grand Olympic Arena and U. S. Circus", which moved from Brewster New York to Delavan, Wisconsin in 1847. One member of that circus was in fact Frederick William Randall Chadwick, billed as the "Randall the Scotch Giant". He stood 7 feet 3 1/2 inches and weighed 450 pounds. An immensely strong man, he and his wife Jane (who was the same height as Randall), moved to The Belmont area and are buried in the Belmont cemetery.



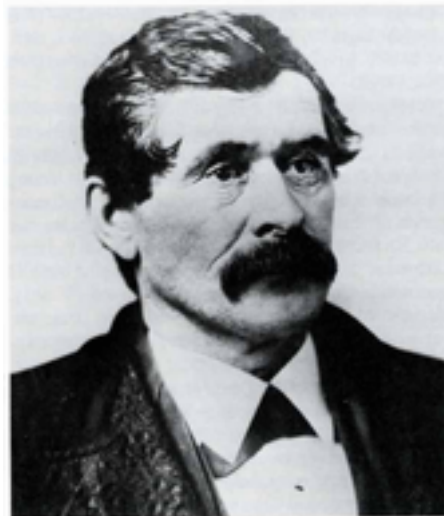
This picture, a daguerrotype, is the only one known to exist of Wisconsin's "Scotch Giants," Jane Gray Chadwick and her husband, Frederick W. R. Chadwick. Both were more than seven feet tall and lived in Lafayette County when they weren't traveling for circuses.

Only one circus is known to have started in Grant County. It happened in the unlikely of places, the quiet little village of Jamestown. In 1863, the Civil War was at its zenith. The war had not been easy on many circuses. Some performers volunteered as soldiers. Some northern circuses found themselves trapped in the south when war broke out. Mistrusted (most circus

performers were northerners), forbidden to perform, with boats and livestock confiscated for the Southern war effort, they had to make it home in whatever manner possible. Some of the greatest circus performers at the time came from Wisconsin. One of the best known performers was Dan Castello of Racine. He was known for his skills as a clown, acrobat, and horse rider. He was the master of many skills. Today he is remembered as the first Ringmaster of what became the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey circus.

In 1863 a wealthy and ambitious local farmer and lead mine owner, Matthew Van Vleck, who had also served as Fairplay's postmaster decided to put together a troop of circus veterans and start a circus himself. This involved great expense, so he must have been a man of considerable wealth. It was a great coup signing Castello on as a partner. The circus would be known as the "**Castello and Van Vleck Mammoth Show.**" The Dubuque Democratic Herald of May 20, 1863 related some of the cost in a story about the new circus: "*L. D. Randall & Co. have lately finished making four set of double harness for Costello & Van Vleck's Circus Band. The Harness exceed in workmanship any we have yet seen. They are plated with heavy silver, ornaments and finished in the best manner.*" It further related the following: "*The horses are very fine and well trained. The performers were selected from among the very best in the country, so that this is a star company. The pavilion is new and the seats are elegantly carpeted and scrupulously clean.*"

Circuses were not a new fad in 1863. Lancaster had seen its first circus in 1848, and the Mabie brothers Circus had visited Platteville on Saturday, June 20<sup>th</sup> 1847, featuring Randall the Scotch Giant performing "his gigantic act on two matched Hanoverian cream studs." To some of the performers it was a way to travel, gain notoriety and hopefully wealth. The promise of the circus often did not work out. Many circuses failed. Performers were often poorly paid. The cost of traveling with performers and the required menagerie of exotic animals, horses, wagons, and tents required a considerable outlay of money. The Costello and Van Vleck Mammoth Show put on its first performance on May 2, 1863 at Fairplay, only a few miles from Van Vleck's hometown.



Dan Castello

**CASTELLO'S & VAN VLECK'S  
MAMMOTH CIRCUS.**



**With New Scenery, New Out-  
fit, and a Fine and Well-  
Selected Company,**

Will Exhibit  
**IN DUBUQUE**

**WEDNESDAY AND THURSDAY,  
MAY 20th AND 21st,**

In the Afternoon and Evening, at 2 and  
7 o'clock P. M.

Our New Tent, splendidly Lighted and  
Seated with Cushion Seats, is capa-  
ble of holding 2,000 persons.

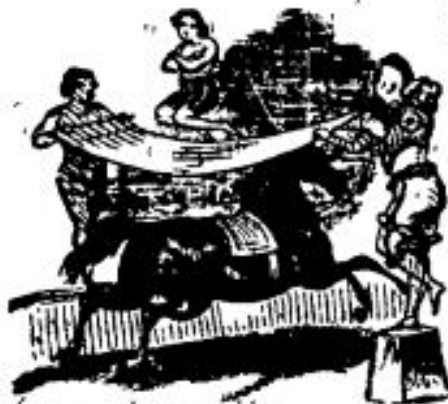
**DAN CASTELLO,**

With His Wonderful

**EDUCATED BULL,**

And the Charming

**TRICK HORSE MONITOR.**



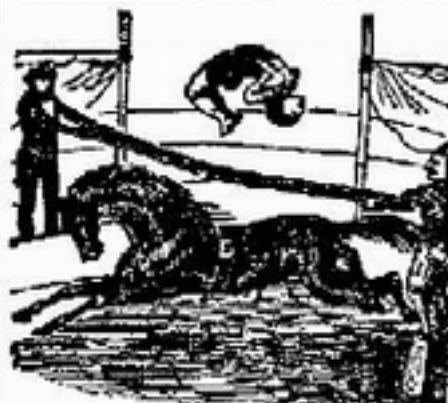
Will Look at the Talent.

**DAN CASTELLO;  
MRS. DAN CASTELLO;  
MADAME DENNY,  
JOHN GLENROY,  
BURROWS AND KELLY,  
JOE AND JOHN TINKHAM,  
MR. BURGESS,  
WM. J. SMITH.**

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**CASTELLO & VAN VLECK'S  
MAMMOTH SHOW!**



Castello & Van Vleck, Proprietors.  
JOHN BRADLEY, Treasurer  
GEORGE DAY, Master of Arena  
JOHN FISHER, Leader of Orchestra

**Model Troupe of the Season.**

THE Managers of this Superb Establishment, with  
a desire to cater successfully to an ever generous  
public, have spared neither pains nor expense in fix-  
ing it up. All their Droppings and Paraphernalia are

**New, Gorgeous and Beautiful!**

Their company has been selected with the greatest  
care from the

**Best Artists of America!**

among which will be found interspersed the  
**BRIGHTEST LUMINARIES OF EUROPE,**  
Their Ring Stock consists

**A STUD OF BLOODED HORSES,**

**The Exhibition of the Age!**

WILL BE GIVEN AT

**JANESVILLE.**

On Thursday, June 18th, 1883.

Admission 25 cents; Reserved Seats 50 cents.

**THE GRAND PROCESSION**

will enter town at 10 o'clock on the morning of the  
performance, and after parading through the principal  
streets, headed by FIEDLER'S CORNET BAND, will  
proceed to the site of the

**Mammoth Water-Proof Pavillion.**

The following list of performers, who appear at each  
exhibition, will convey some idea of the extent and  
magnificence of the entertainments

**DAN CASTELLO, TOM POLAND,  
JOHN GLENROY, TOM BURGESS,  
O. B. BURROWS, M. McQUEEN,  
M. J. KELLY, R. VAN VALKENBURG,  
W. A. SMITH, A. SULLIVAN,  
JOSEPH TINKHAM, C. LESLIE,**

complete the list of male artists, while

**Madame Frank and Corrie**

the beautiful and gifted Female Equestriennes will  
lead the Female Corps.

Still another novel feature is added to this Colossal  
Entertainment by the performance of the

**EDUCATED BULL, DON JUAN,**

and the wonderful

**TRAINED HORSE, MONITOR.**

The Manager has endeavored, in the organization of  
this establishment, to exclude all the stale and stereo-  
typed acts which have heretofore characterized Euro-  
pean Entertainments, and feels assured that the per-  
formance of a generous public will accord to him the  
honor of having the most original, choice, novel and  
extensive traveling exhibition of the age.

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The story of the Castello and Van Vleck Circus is told in the book *“Ins and Outs of Circus Life, or, Forty-Two Years Travel of John H. Glenroy, Bareback Rider, Through United States, Canada, South America and Cuba”* narrated by John H. Glenroy and compiled by Stephen Stanley Stanford in 1885. Glenroy joined the Castello and Van Vleck circus in 1863. He was famous in the circus world for being the first person ever to turn a backward somersault on the bareback of a horse before an audience. This was in 1846 when he was 18 years old and performing for the Welch and Mann's Circus at Chepatchet, R. I. He wrote of Castello and Van Vleck's Mammoth Show years later:

*“In March of 1863, my engagement with Thayer and Noyes expiring, I went on to New York and finding nothing there, I went to Philadelphia where John O'Brien engaged me and another rider named Charles Read to break horses for him. Our engagement with O'Brien was for one month and at the expiration of that I received a letter from Castello and Van Vleck offering me an engagement with them to open at Fairplay, Wisconsin. After considerable correspondence between us on the question of salary, it having been finally settled to the satisfaction of all parties, I left Philadelphia and travelled to Fairplay by way of New York, Girard and Chicago. On my arrival therein the latter part of April 1863, I found the following people already engaged, and the circus ready to start out under the name of "Castello and Van Vleck's Mammoth Circus.”*

*“Dan Castello, clown. Frances Castello, rider. Joseph Tinkham, hurdle rider. George M. Kelly and Charles Burroughs, acrobats. Thomas Poland, ringmaster. William Smith, two horse rider. Thomas Burgess, clown. Natt McCollom, banjoist and negro minstrel. Richard Hammon, acrobat. John Burns, acrobat.*

*“During this season I rode (besides my somersault act) a two horse act with Smith in the ring.*

*“The manager of our circus I discovered to be an old friend of mine, he having been with me as groom when I went to South America in 1845. His name was Richard Van Volkenburg and he now keeps a hotel in Oswego, where he is greatly respected. He always was and still is highly thought of by the members of the circus profession.*

*“On the first of May we gave a dress rehearsal and one week later we commenced our summer tour by opening in Dubuque, Iowa; and then continuing by showing in the places in Iowa: Hazel Green and Mineral Point, Wisconsin; then crossing into Illinois, we showed in Freeport, Peketonika, Rockford, Belvidere, Elgin, and Chicago. From there to Wisconsin showing in: Kenosha, Waukegan, Racine, Milwaukee, Waukeshaw, (at this place, while we were showing there the remains of Colonel Sidney Bean, who had been killed in the war, arrived, (and Castello, belonging to the Masonic order, of which Bean had also been a member) he sent the band down and they escorted the remains to the home of Bean's relatives, playing funeral airs along the march; then to Eagle, Stoughton, Madison, Janesville, Portage, Ripon, Waupon, Fond du Lac, Oshkosh, La Crosse, Watertown and Tremplo.*

*“Then crossing to Minnesota we opened at Winona, and continuing our tour we passed through and showed in Minneiska, Wabasha, Lake City, Red Wing, Hastings, Hudson, Prescott,*

*Stillwater, St. Paul, St. Anthony, Minneapolis, Shakopee, Northfield, Faribault, Owatonna, Waseca, Rochester and Chatfield. Then driving thirty miles we began our tour of Iowa the second time by opening in Waukon, then McGregor, Arcadian, Waterloo, Independence, Iowa City, Tipton, Monticello, Davenport, Muscatine, Wapello, Washington, Eddyville, Oskaloosa, Ottumwa, Keosauqua and Keokuk. From Keokuk we crossed to Warsaw, then to Quincy, Carthage and Alton, all in the state, of Illinois. From Alton we drove into St. Louis where Van Vleck going into partnership with McGinley and De Haven, Castello and I left as I did not wish to travel in any company that De Haven was interested in. ( George W. De Haven is referred to by Stuart Thayer as “that undertaker of wobbly concerns) I received from Van Vleck all that was due to me and although he offered me an increase of fifteen dollars a week to stay with them, I would not stay and that closed for me and for Castello and Van Vleck one of the most successful tours that I or they had ever had.”*

In the book **“Olympians of the Sawdust Circle - A Biographical Dictionary of the Nineteenth Century American Circus”** by William L. Slout, the following short biography of Matthew Van Vleck is given:

*“VAN VLECK, MATTHEW. (1820-June 20, 1873) General manager, Castello & Van Vleck, 1863, which had been traveling by boat along the Ohio River; the show changed hands in St. Louis, Missouri, with the new owners being Van Vleck, Ben Maginley and George W. DeHaven, the latter assuming the management. Their first engagement was for a week in St. Louis beginning October 6. Died in Cuba, NY.”*

It is not known when Van Vleck left Grant County. Perhaps when he combined with McGinley and DeHaven he sold his holdings in Wisconsin and never returned. That seems doubtful, though because the 1860 census shows his Jamestown household consisting of 14 individuals not including him. If anyone knows more than this I would like to have that information.

You can read more about Wisconsin’s circuses in the book **“THE BIGGEST, THE SMALLEST, THE LONGEST, THE SHORTEST – A Chronicle of the American Circus from its Heartland”** by Dean Jensen

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Sources:

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2. Dean Jensen, *The Biggest, The Smallest, The Longest, The shortest – A Chronicle of the American Circus from its Heartland*. Copyright 1975
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5. Articles from The Dubuque Democratic Herald, May 2, 1863 (page 4) and May 10, 1863 (page 4)

6. Circus Ad from the Janesville Daily Gazette, June 13, 1863
7. Circus Ad from the Dubuque Democratic Herald May 16, 1863
8. William L. Stout, *Olympians of the Sawdust Circle: A biographical dictionary of the nineteenth century American circus* Copyright 2005 at <http://www.circushistory.org/Olympians/OlympiansU.htm>
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12. *Ins and Outs of Circus Life, or, Forty-Two Years Travel of John H. Glenroy, Bareback Rider, Through United States, Canada, South America and Cuba*, Narrated by John H. Glenroy and compiled by Stephen Stanley Stanford, Boston, MA: M. M. Wing & Co., 1885. (Chapter 8)
13. Article on *Mabie Circus in Platteville June 1847 – including Randall the Scotch Giant*  
*From: Independent American and General Advertiser | Platteville, Wisconsin | Friday, June 18, 1847 | Page 3*