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Historic circus train cars park in eastern Levy County



Daryl Kirby and his wife Tracy Kirby talk to visitors as a Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus car is lifted off of the rail tracks for placement at Kirby Family Farm.

Story and Photos

By Terry Witt, Senior Reporter © Feb. 26, 2018 at 8:08 a.m.

LEVY COUNTY -- The age of a child telling a parent that he or she was going to run away and join the circus is gone, or is it?



One of 20 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus cars passes over the crossing at Levy County Road 316 on its way to Kirby Family Farm.

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Two massive cranes were used to lift the 80,000-pound circus cars off the CSX Railroad track and onto the Kirby Family Farm track.

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Chad Ridge, who once lived aboard one of the Ringling Bros. train cars uses his cell phone to video the offloading of train cars as Daryl Kirby takes part in conversations about the cars.



This is what the scene looked like before two large cranes began lifting the rail cars off the track. A final meeting of workers took place at trackside to make sure everyone was ready to move forward safely.

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A ghost train rolled into Levy County near Williston on Saturday (Feb.24) carrying only the memories of The Greatest Show on Earth.

The 20 Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus train cars, which once served as traveling homes for performers, workers and administrative staff as the circus toured the United States, are slated to be retired at Kirby Family Farm.

The circus cars are scheduled to become part of the Kirby Family Farm attraction. Plans include allowing children to stay overnight in the 1950s and 1960s era cars.

Kirby Family Farm was founded as an educational outlet in 2011 by Daryl and Tracy Kirby on 174 acres of land. The centerpiece of the farm has been a restored 1800s locomotive that gives children an opportunity to learn about a bygone era.

The circus cars are noted to serve the same educational purpose as the locomotive at this not-for-profit venture.

The Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus disbanded last year for economic reasons. The cars are slated to serve as an educational exhibit for children who have never seen how circus people lived.

When the circus was active, employees lived on the train all year long. The train cars ranged in size from 12 to 14 rooms for rank and file workers; down to eight rooms, four rooms and two-room train cars for top management.

There also was a concession car.

Special cars were made for elephants and horses, said Chad Ridge who lived on a train car for his entire career with the circus. He was in charge of transportation and served as a circus clown as well.

He loved his home aboard the circuit train.

“Amazing. Best sleep you’ll ever get,” he said. “Each one of the rooms tells a story.”

His onboard apartment was small but contained a bed, a 40-inch flat screen television, a stove and flat iron plates for cooking.

He said the circus was closed by its owner, Feld Entertainment, because “the business model wasn’t working.”

The closing of the circus put about 200 people out of work. Some of the workers had never known anything but the circus. Some had beaten drug and alcohol problems by joining the circus as employees, according to Ridge. It was enormously difficult for the rank and file workers to leave their homes behind, he said.

When the circus visited a town for shows, the circus people (employees) would return to their traveling homes at night. They would identify their cars by the numbers beside the doorway.

“You had working people; for 20 years, this was their home,” he said.

The performers, in contrast to the working guys, were under contract for a set number of years.

Performers would come and go, Ridge said, but the working guys who could load and unload a train the size of a city in a single day, stayed with the circus until it closed its doors. They were hurt the most by the closing of the circus.

The circus would carry as many as 20 elephants in the train cars in its heyday, but over the years the number of elephants decreased to 10. The elephants were sent to caretaker farms after the circus closed.

Daryl Kirby won’t say exactly how he managed to acquire the circus cars except to say, “I’m very thankful to Feld Entertainment for working with us to acquire these cars.”

Kirby said 2,000 feet of track had to be added for the circus cars. The train cars will remain

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stationary at Kirby Family Farms. They won't roll around the track like the locomotive Kirby Family Farms is known for.

The extra track was donated primarily by U.S. Sugar and by Herzog Rail.

Asked how he discovered the circus cars were for sale, Kirby said his family's fair is like a little brother in the rail community. Word travels fast in the railroad family. He received several calls from people telling him the cars were available.

His original goal was to acquire one rail car, but the bid price was too steep for him. Then the offer came to strike a deal. He grabbed it.

Sims Crane out of Ocala donated the use of its 240-ton crane and 160-ton crane to offload the circus cars from the CSX Railroad track behind Kirby Family Farm. The cranes lowered the train cars into place on the track at Kirby Farms. Sims employees donated their time, Kirby said.

"They were extremely generous," Kirby said.

Kirby likened the 80-foot long railroad cars, which weigh 80,000 pounds each, to "gigantic RVs."

There has been one death on the Kirby Family Farm due to an incident between a train car and a man. A 24-year-old Ocala man was run over by a train on the evening of Oct. 10, 2017 at Kirby Family Farm in the Williston area, according to the Florida Highway Patrol.

Anthony Osburn-Day, 24, of Ocala was attempting to board a moving train car, the FHP said.

The crash investigator is FHP Trooper Glen Ganus and the homicide investigator is FHP Cpl. Jason Roberts, according to a press release from FHP Sgt. Anthony Palese back in October.

Troopers said the farm was preparing for Halloween-related events and the workers and volunteers were having trouble with the engine on the restored locomotive.

They were testing it when the accident occurred, the FHP said. Osburn-Day was a volunteer, the FHP said.

In other Levy County historic train news, an antique train engine remains parked at an exhibit on the west side of U.S. Highway 19 in the Gulf Hammock area near to an abandoned and derelict convenience store.