

He spent his life under the circus 'Big Top'

By KATHLEEN MORAN

Carl Romig, who loved and lived the circus, died in his Troy home Nov. 7. He was 86.

Romig and his wife of 62 years, Catherine Elizabeth, had lived a relatively quiet life in their modest home since going into semi-retirement in 1949. But it wasn't always so.

The couple lived a life of daring and excitement in their younger days, traveling with the Ringling Brothers Circus and later with their own circus act, called Romig and Rooney. Romig was noted for his trick horseback riding while his wife was a tightrope walker and a member of the bareback riding Rooneys.

Romig's love of horses began in his youth when helped break horses in a lively stable back east. His son, Irvin, fondly recalled him as the Pennsylvania Dutch Cowboy. "You know, they don't have to come from Texas," the senior Romig was known to tell his friends.

Carl and Elizabeth met in 1915 when traveling across the country with the Ringling Brothers. Two years later they married. Those were the days when the circus was grand, Romig said in an interview with the Troy Eclectic two years ago.

"THE CIRCUS business is gone," he said. "It's over. If the Ringling Brothers could come out of their graves and see what's going on, they'd say 'Put me back in.'"

Romig bemoaned the fact that the circus has become all glitter and

geared for adults. The daring feats and emphasis on children is gone, he would complain.

Romig defied danger with his wild west role in which he balanced himself on two horses as they raced around the ring. "They'd be running like mad and he'd be standin' on top," recalled his son, who owes his career as Ricky the Clown to his parents' interest in the circus.

The Romig and Rooney show entertained many a penniless family during the depression with their western act, Mrs. Romig's tightwire performance, a dog act, trapeze show and whatever other stunts they could muster. The famous couple performed in many theaters in the Detroit area, including the Redford Theater, which is still in use.

Though they were performers at heart, the Romigs complemented their income with a small horse farm. They rented horses to riders and Romig would break horses for customers.

Among his list of credits was training of the first horse named Silver for the Lone Ranger's act.

Romig thought he cheated himself out of a chance to become a famous movie cowboy. A handsome man with a talent for training and riding horses, he was offered a chance to try out for a movie. He turned it down, not understanding what the "moving pictures" were. It was Buck Jones who said yes and who rose to fame as a motion picture cowboy.

"HE HAD A PRETTY good life," recalled the younger Romig. "They never lived like millionaires, but they always

had food or help for a friend.

"He was a goodhearted fellow. Many times the other performers would be left down south somewhere when the circus closed and with no money to get home. That was when you could get arrested and put on the chain gang down south if you were caught hitchhiking.

"My dad would let them crawl in the horse trailer and ride up north. And he'd always get them a little stew."

Romig was proud of his abilities as a trainer. "One time I had to break a horse that the owners wanted to use on a stage. No one could break him, he wouldn't back up a step. So the owner hired me and when I went out to break him, there were a lot of well-to-do people watching.

"I put a saddle and rein on him and he backed up just like that," he said, snapping his fingers. "They weren't handling the horse right. They said he wouldn't walk backwards, but he would. Maybe not for them, but for me. I could have made that horse walk backwards all the way to Chicago."

Irv Romig recalled Sundays with his parents when the men would rope goats. "You know about calf roping? Well, goats are a lot faster. If you could catch a goat, you were really good."

And the elder Romig was really good.



Carl Romig loved the old circus, but in recent years he bemoaned the fact that the circus offered too much "glitter and too little daring entertainment. Romig, who died at the age of 86 last week,

and his wife, Catherine Elizabeth, formed the nationally known circus act Romig and Rooney and for many years entertained residents of the Detroit area. (1977 photo by Charlie Kidd)

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