

## Who Was That Clown?

By Joan Newcomb



To celebrate the centennial of the birth of John Ringling the United States Postal Service issued the American circus stamp, one of 17 commemorative stamps for 1966. ( Scott number 1309; 5c denomination; circus clown; Designer, Edward Klauck Todhunter; Engraver, C.A. Brooks; Giori Press Printed; 131,270,000 issued)

The presentation of the first day issue was held on May 2, 1966 in Delavan, WI, home of the Clown Hall of Fame. The illustration chosen to characterize Ringling's circus was the iconic clown face. It featured the highly recognizable down face with the cone head, tiny hat, fluffy tufts of hair, high arching eyebrows, and the over-sized smiling mouth.

Who was that clown? He was Lou Jacobs, a master clown who performed with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey for 60 years from 1925 to 1985. Comedian Red Skelton called him, "The greatest clown ever."

Jacobs was born into a traveling circus family in Germany. He started performing when he was seven years old. He wrote, "As a boy in Germany, I learned it all — barrel jumping, acrobatics and making like the human pretzel." He emigrated from his native Germany to the United States in 1923 and in 1925 signed with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. The love of laughter from the audience led him to comedy and to the life of a clown.

Jacobs achieved celebrity status not only under the Big Tent but also with cameo roles in two films, DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth* and Fellini's classic *The Clowns*. For the filming of DeMille's epic circus film, Jacobs was engaged to tutor Jimmy Stewart in the tools of the clowning trade.

Over the years, many accolades and awards were bestowed on Jacobs. He received the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Lifetime Achievement Award; his star was unveiled in Sarasota's Circus Ring of Fame; he was inducted into the Circus Hall of Fame in Indiana and the Clown Hall of Fame in Wisconsin; and he was honored at the International Circus Festival of Monte Carlo by Prince Ranier and Princess Grace. And notably, it was his image that was chosen to honor his profession under the Big Tent on the 5 cent U.S. postage stamp. That iconic happy face of Lou Jacobs has been featured prominently on posters, billboards, magazine covers, in television commercials, — and even on a United States postage stamp.