

Kidnaping of Royal Flea Broke Up the First Grand Flea Circus

Time Amusement Promoter Tells Story of Rise and Fall of Original Troupe of Trained Insects, All Imported from Germany
By Sailors "At Great Expense"

By JOHN A. ELLERT

ing a hull in the conversation, at headquarters the other afternoon, Kohler, ex-circus man, widely as "of Doc Kohler", suddenly d and said:

dy! Wish I was back with my circus. That circus sure was a fine. I'd be in the business yet hadn't been for a pestilence which out my bunch of trained fleas. I think that old German professor claimed I stole his royal flea had to do with their sudden

a circus—acrobatic fleas—fleas el blood! Lordy, Doc, don't you you're going rather strong," in-ously exclaimed Captain Henry

er.

ot a bit of it. I traveled all over untry with that flea circus," re-Kohler.

I us the story," put in Fireman and.

I be sure and tell us beforehand t is a story," uncharitably re-d Captain Hammer.

here's the unique and interest-ard spun by Doc Kohler, who the story true in every respect claims that he can verify every word:

"Back in the good old days," began Kohler, "before I gave up traveling around with a circus I happened down in New Orleans. In the back parlor of a saloon one night there were a number of drunken German sailors. They kidded each other about importing fleas from Germany. An Amer-

ican sailor asked to see one and after digging around on his skin, one fellow picked off a tiny specimen. While showing it to the American jackie, the man made the remark that over in Germany fleas were trained to do all sorts of stunts.

Hah, a Circus of Fleas

"That gave me an idea. A flea circus ought to go great in America and especially during the Mardi Gras season for which preparations were then being made. From the German sailor I learned the proper way to train a human flea. I outlined my idea to him and he fell for it. Together, we made a collection of about fifty fleas, all of which were obtained from sailors who just crossed the ocean. Now let me tell you the strange thing about it. Fleas are no good and can't be trained unless they come from Berlin. We tried others—and they just wouldn't perform.

"How did we train the fleas? Simplicity itself! Fleas jump by nature and the first thing to do is to break them of this habit and teach them to walk. With the aid of powerful magnifying glasses we put the fleas through a glass tube. That prevents them from jumping and by giving them daily lessons they are soon broken of jumping. I know that sounds fishy but it's so, just the same.

"It took us just four months to train our collection of fleas, but let me tell you fellows something, we had the best trained collection of fleas in the world, although the old German professor who started up in opposition to us at the Mardi Gras claim-

at to be the originator of the flea circus.

A Flea School

"Say, listen! You ought to have seen that German sailor and myself teaching those fleas to draw small sulkeys, go through a ball room scene wearing tiny paper costumes and juggle balls. I naturally expected you dubs around here to laugh at that but some time I'm going to bring you some clippings of New Orleans papers to prove this story. Papers down there played the flea circus up big. They gave us front page stories every day for over a week.

"From my sailor partner I learned the whole anatomy of a flea. For instance I soon learned to tell a male from a female by the absence of three or four tiny hairs on the back of the female's head.

"We had a New Orleans jeweler make us several small sulkeys out of gold and platinum and we used platinum because of its extreme lightness and durability, for harness. The worst part of our job was in feeding the little insects. They had to be fed at regular intervals. No we didn't feed them on bear meat as my witty friend, Captain Davis, just remarked, but placed them on our arms for five minutes at a time. We kept our stock in raw lamb's wool and used tweezers in catching hold of them.

"Well we had everything in ship-shape by the time the Mardi Gras opened. My sailor partner, acted as trainer and I delivered a scientific lecture on trained fleas. We had a regular barker from one of Barnum's side shows and that man sure drew the crowds. He gave a spiel something like this:

This Way, Ladies'n Gentlemen

"Lad-ees and gen-tell-men. On the inside of this tent we have one of the most remarkable exhibitions it has ever been my good fortune to advertise. We have with us Prof. Kohler's little army of trained fleas. Think of it, people! Trained fleas! They dance for you, juggle a ball, perform on bars, walk a rope and draw lit-tell carts.

"Now people, don't walk into this tent in the expectation of seeing a little Eva, who dances all the daring

dances in a daring costume. We haven't any lit-el Eva who has blown up two Turkish harems as I hear my worthy competitor down the next street shouting this minute. Don't come here expecting to see anything sensational for you will be disappointed.

"Instead you will attend one of the most amazing shows in the world—an educational treat—and you will witness a performance of trained fleas, a collection of which drove Richard B. Vanderbilt insane. The next performance is just beginning, people, so step up and pay your small dime.

A Royal Insect

"Such," continued Kohler, "was the

way our attraction was advertised and it sure brought results. But to get back to my story. A man with long flowing hair and whose face was all fenced in with lace curtains and who advertised himself as Prof. Rudolph Meyers, the originator of the flea circus, put one over us by advertising to have the only trained flea of royal blood in captivity. He called the flea Prince Henry and alleged it had been secured at an enormous cost from the royal prince. We wanted that flea, myself and sailor partner, and this partner of mine one night bribed one of the Professor's attendants and stole the royal flea. The professor immediately had me arrested for the theft.

"In court the next day the judge asked the Prof. how he could identify his royal flea. He said because it was the only one that could juggle a ball. The flea was brought into the court room and did juggle a ball but the judge considered the case too thin and discharged me.

"A short time later I woke up one morning and found our famous collection of fleas flat on their backs with their feet turned heavenward. Some sort of a pestilence had broken out among them during the night and each one succumbed. I never did find out what ailed them but I still believe that old German professor could clear up the

case. In disgust we quit the circus and divided our profits, which were not small. I then got up a new attraction and imported three w from the wilds of Africa, which case happened to be from the a New Orleans negro settlement and became connected with the shows. However, that's another and too long to tell. I don't you fellows would believe some experiences I ran into with r nibels," concluded Kohler, not incredulous smiles and glances members of the fire department composed his audience.

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