

Ken Sherburne (1933-2009): Fellow performer, friend, and a link back to a golden age of variety

By **R.W. Bacon**

On the first week of March 2009 I received the news that my friend, retired juggler/unicyclist/globe artist Ken Sherburne, died on Feb. 27 in a hospital near his home in Altamonte Springs, Florida. He had suffered a stroke the previous August. He was 76, and had a fabulous career performing at every kind of venue across the hemisphere for over 50 years.

And for many fine performers, that would be enough for a standard showbiz death notice: Happy audiences. Loving applause. Wild adventures. Adequate cash flow. A few extra bows. And done.

But to me, Ken Sherburne is worthy of a bit more ink. In hundreds of clubs and thousands of circuses from the 1940s to the 21st century, Ken may have been the “anonymous daredevil” on the 8-foot unicycle, but to those in the business, he was the man of a million friends and a million kindnesses. And like so many well-traveled performers, he was also a man of a million stories. He was a sage-like link back to an era of flourishing post-WWII variety, and by extension through his own encounters with veteran performers, he became a link to the earlier days of vaudeville. The paragraphs that follow aim to tell the basics of Ken’s life and career, and then aim to expand the profile with some personal recollections.

Born in 1933, Ken grew up in Salem, N.H., where his father was a veterinarian (“a chicken doctor,” as Ken liked to say). As a young teenager he became interested in juggling, unicycling, and the circus – feeding his interest by watching the stage shows at nearby Canobie Lake Park, where he had a



Above is an agent’s promo photo of juggler/unicyclist/globe artist **Ken Sherburne** in the early 1960s, about age 30.

summer maintenance job. It was there he met the veteran juggler Bill Moran, who had been a big-time vaudevillian in the early-20th-century as half of “Moran & Wisner,” a duo that specialized in hat juggling for 38 years, beginning in 1906.

Moran, who was in his late 60s at the time, nurtured Ken’s interest and eventually hired him as a partner in a two-person act. In between Ken’s studies at University of New Hampshire, the pair worked fairs and nightclubs in New England and Canada. The partnership ended when Ken was drafted into the U.S. Army during the Korean War. (He was known as “the juggling medic.”)

When Ken resumed his career, he rose in the ranks of variety artists, with travels taking him to the farthest reaches of North & South America for 50 weeks per year, and to engagements as a supporting act to the biggest names in showbusiness ... from Louis Armstrong to Meat Loaf and everyone in between. Decades of circus & nightclub tours, cruise-ship bookings, and extended engagements were leavened with TV appearances, Las Vegas dates, Radio City Music Hall shows, and the theatre production of “Carnival.” Since his act presented no language barrier, he worked circuses and

clubs throughout South America – and Cuba both before and after the revolution. His consistency and reliability earned him the trust of established agents and producers. Ken was a surprisingly mellifluous announcer when the occasion arose, and in later years was sometimes pressed into service to twist a balloon or two for a family audience.

Even as the decades passed and Ken was no longer a youth, his fast-paced five-ring juggling on the high-unicycle – and the flaming torches and battle-axes on the giant globe – all driven by his brassy musical arrangements – provided enough “wow factor” for all but the most jaded in the audience. (By Ken’s own admission, his skills, creativity, or choreography were never in the elite class of jugglers like Francis Brunn or Enrico Rastelli, but at the same time Ken took pride in performing a number of difficult “old-school” moves seldom seen today. And of course Brunn & Rastelli could not rock the unicycle in place on the face of a dime!)

A few years ago Ken sold his house in Salem, N.H., which had been his “home-office” in recent decades when not on the road, and moved to Florida, where he was comfortably-situated among his “family” of retired showbusiness and circus performers.

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At left is Ken Sherburne’s first mentor, **Bill Moran**, a big-time vaudevillian in the early 20th century as half of “Moran & Wisner,” a comedy duo that specialized in straw hat juggling from 1906 to Al Wisner’s retirement in 1944. In Moran’s later years, he performed at Canobie Lake Park in Salem, N.H., just a few miles from his hometown of Lawrence, Mass.



Above is **Ken Sherburne** in an informal 1980s promotional photo with his 6-foot unicycle. (The 8-footer wouldn’t fit!).

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A lifelong bachelor, Ken is survived by his brother, Stuart Sherburne of East Boothbay, Maine, two nephews, and countless showbusiness friends.

That wraps up the overview of Ken's career. Now I have the pleasure of adding details that make Ken an unforgettable friend – and valuable link to an earlier period in the history of juggling and variety performance.

I first met Ken at a 1970s circus engagement very early in my performance career. Ken came to watch the show – he was on crutches, recuperating from a broken ankle. I knew who he was, for I had heard about and seen photos of his act. (He was established as a “big deal,” while we were still working our way up in the business.) Of course he was impeccably dressed in a dark suit, befitting a 40-something professional juggling artist at liberty. (Later I would learn that Ken's habitual “dressing for success” was part of his completed operations even on the dustiest circus lot.)

That day my wife L.J. and I were doing our synchronized club-juggling and passing act, plus I was doing my solo multi-level rola-bola with combination stunts. After the show, Ken was gracious, friendly, and complimentary. He was really there to see his lady friends with the contortion act, but as jugglers, we had plenty in common to talk about. Starting on this day, our lively conversation would last for over 30 years.

As a variety artist, one does not expect to work frequently on the bill with others of the same specialty. So jugglers will become friends with all the wire-walkers and hand-balancers, etc., but seldom cross paths with other pro jugglers. When it happens, it is often like a family reunion. A few times per year, from the 1970s through the 1990s, we worked with Ken at opposite ends of a circus arena, show grounds, or convention hall. When our travels did intersect, any downtime in between shows, warm-ups, or practice was filled with stories of travel adventures, descriptions of performers we had seen, commentary on various agents, and demonstration of arcane juggling moves. Ken was well-acquainted with one of my cherished mentors, the Danish juggler Albert Sahlstrom (1920-1990) – they had worked shows together in the 1960s, and we all had a fine reunion in the 1980s.

One irony was that for many years Ken's home in Salem, N.H. was only 15 miles from me in Newburyport, Mass., yet most often we met while on the road far from home. Throughout our showbusiness travels there was a constant: L.J. and I could arrive at a

show in East Overshoe, and as soon as fellow performers learned we were from New England, they would ask, “How's Kenny?! You *must* know Ken Sherburne!” Everywhere we went, *everybody* loved Ken Sherburne. Even those who met him just once had a story about Ken – a memory of his kindness or generosity, gifts for their children, his humility, a lighthearted practical joke, or maybe just one of his funny, absent-minded offstage bumbles.

In the early 1980s, when I began serious research for my first two books on vaudeville juggling specialties, Ken took a special interest, and he proved to be a gold-mine of information. At 15 years my senior, he had a head-start learning from the “old masters” in the late 1940s. Not only had he worked with Bill Moran, but he also counted among his mentors juggling greats such as Bobby May (1907-1981) (whom he spoke of as “like my father”), Howard Nichols (1894-1977), and the Three Swifts. Ken was a prolific writer of hand-written letters, and always seemed to be excitedly waving a reply from some retired juggler or burlesque dancer. (Often these replies were “thank you” letters for Ken's generosity in time of need ... or for just remembering.) To a historian and interpreter of early 20th-century vaudeville and circus like me, Ken was an open conduit back to earlier generations of juggling artists.

An uproariously entertaining bonus was that Ken was a keen observer and superb, animated storyteller, complete with a repertoire of voices, dialects, and characterizations guaranteed to amuse everyone backstage. And like a number of veteran jugglers, Ken could pantomime all the moves

of every act he ever saw – a valuable talent in the era before video and YouTube.

Ken moderated his travels a bit in the 1990s, so I made more frequent visits to his home in Salem, N.H., often with my young son with me. We would do a little juggling, watch the birds at his cluster of feeders, go through his collection of old promo material, or just gab. Ever the carefree bachelor, nevertheless he always had some kind of treat for my son, usually ice cream.

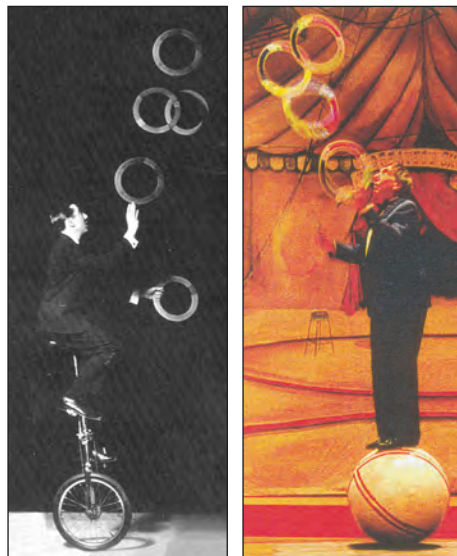
After Ken sold his house and acreage in New Hampshire and retired to Florida, we kept in touch by short notes and long phone calls. Every time we spoke I told him of my idea to visit him in Florida and record his stories of old jugglers for posterity. When I told him of my graduate school studies and my plans to develop an illustrated lecture/performance on early 20th-century vaudeville, he followed up by sending me a packet of assorted old promo material from his collection. This was just a few months before he suffered a debilitating stroke in 2008. Today the *Vaudeville Retrospective* museum exhibition displays a photo of Ken Sherburne next to my own now-retired 6-foot unicycle.

Sadly we do not have Ken's own recorded voice to deliver the following stories, but here are outlines of some of my favorites:

- **Montreal in the 1950s.** In the early 1950s there were about 30 jugglers working six nights per week in floorshows at Montreal nightclubs. On the seventh night, all the jugglers got together to socialize, drinking beer around a long conference table. Ken's stories of this period were populated with a “who's who” of post-WWII juggling greats. The unofficial grand potentate of this group was legendary hoop-roller Howard Nichols.

- **1950s burlesque.** When Ken was starting out, burlesque nightclubs still featured legitimate variety acts, and Ken's fast-paced, flashy act suited the environment. He had a million stories of this era and great affection for its performers. Many of his warmest lifelong friendships were with burlesque dancers he met during those years. Ken never married, but probably came the closest ever to matrimony with “The Irish Lassie with the Classy Chassis.”

- **Revolution in Venezuela.** During a circus engagement in Caracas in the late 1960s, political unrest and a military crackdown disrupted life in the city. The American performers, lodged at an elegant downtown hotel, felt especially at risk. Ken and others decided to play-it-safe – they checked out of the hotel and hauled all their luggage and props across the street into a verdant tropical park. They spent several long days and nights under leafy cover in the park,



At left is Ken Sherburne juggling five rings on a 5-foot unicycle in the late 1950s. At right is Ken Sherburne juggling five rings on the rolling globe in the 1980s, in a promotional piece for an extravaganza entitled “Le Cirque Bohemien.”

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staying on the move to avoid authorities until the crisis passed. (How they slipped out of the country is another wild story.)

• **Philadelphia.** In the early 1970s Ken's base of operations was Philadelphia, where he was working almost exclusively for one particular agent. One night this agent was invited to a luxury box at the old Spectrum to watch the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team in the Stanley Cup Finals. The agent extended a rare perk, and invited a couple of his favorite acts to come along. Ken was one of them. He enjoyed the spectacle, the championship game, ... and more than a few beers. Then the agent, trying to impress his host, announced to everyone in the box that one of his acts would be glad to go down to the ice before the start of the third period and juggle on the Zamboni ice-resurfacing machine. Ken was mortified, and in no condition to juggle on a moving Zamboni. His mistake was having his clubs with him. He felt he had no choice. So up he went on the hood of the Zamboni, and as it wheeled around the arena, he stood firm in the chilly breeze, juggling three weighty Harry Lind clubs (... the clubs given to him by Bobby May) without dropping ... or falling off. The crowd had never seen such a sight, and cheered loudly. The cheering continued through the final period, and the Flyers won.

• **The Roy Radin Vaudeville Revue.** Ken was a staple of this nationally-touring production for seven years, 1973-79. This was a "bus-and-truck" theatre show comprised of

Of interest to jugglers ...

In the circus setting, Ken Sherburne was often under the spotlight for three acts: juggling, unicycles (regular, 6-foot, & 8-foot), and rolling globe. Each act was performed to brassy, hard-driving showbiz music. In later years, sometimes the progression of tricks were almost identical as he raced through each 5-8-minute act, and only the tuxedos were different – chosen from his collection of hundreds. His usual finish on the globe was torch juggling; on the high-unicycle, 5 rings. Here is an incomplete list of other skills:

- **On the floor:** 3 & 4 club routine with kick-ups, body-throws, & balance-catches; backcrosses with 4 clubs; 3-silk-hat juggling.
- **On the unicycle:** Singles & doubles with 4 Harry Lind clubs; hat manipulation & juggling.
- **On the high-unicycles:** 3-silk-hat juggling; rocking on one foot while catching hat on other foot in mid-juggle; 3 battle-axes, 4 & 5 rings.
- **On the rolling globe:** 3 & 4 tennis racquets; backcrosses with 4 torches; 4 & 5 rings.
- **With Bill Moran:** Club-passing & steals; boomerang straw hat juggling.
- **An outstanding unicyclist:** Ken had superior control while rocking in place, and the ability to work in extremely confined spaces – like at rock concerts, hemmed in by cables & monitors.

10 acts, running about two hours. Each year Roy Radin booked an aging vaudeville favorite as the headliner, added new musical features, but retained several variety acts like Ken, as well as a music director and orchestra. Headliners included Milton Berle, George Jessel, Henny Youngman, George Gobel, Jackie Vernon, and even Tiny Tim. Ken shared many of his observations of working with some of the most talented and eccentric performers in the business. Ken also told the hair-raising story of Roy Radin himself, the impresario who spiraled down from the top into drug addiction and was the victim of the 1983 "Cotton Club Murder."

• **Donald O'Connor.** Of lasting impact was Ken's close friendship with legendary Hollywood song-and-dance man and Radin show tour-mate Donald O'Connor (1925-2003). Both had been heavy drinkers during their off-hours for many years, but both quit drinking completely and for good about the same time in the 1970s, a triumph they shared in their letters. They both enjoyed trading the "happy hours" for many more happy years of health and high-energy shows.

I could tell dozens of stories of my own about Ken, but instead I'll share just this one:

During my own career I was always looking to broaden my repertoire. In my research I became interested in "boomerang straw hats," and in the mid-1990s decided to work on the skill and design a routine. The skill is akin to tossing frisbees way out over the heads of the audience in such a way that they come back to your hand. With proper technique, it is possible to get four or five hats sailing through the air at once. So I purchased a stack of cheap sombreros, lined

up some hard-driving Mexican bullfight music, and began to build the routine, a progression from one to five hats. The only problem was that I didn't know what I was doing. The hats wouldn't behave for me.

I knew that I would see Ken at a coming fair engagement, so I took my hats with me. Maybe Ken, who would be working as an announcer, would share tips with me from his late mentor, straw hat juggler Bill Moran.

In between shows that week, I told Ken my dilemma. He said he would be happy to show me what he knew, and said he would make a special trip home that night and be back the next day with some hats.

The next day he returned with a bulging, tattered department store bag. In the bag were a half-dozen tightly-woven, round-crowned straw hats, each with hand-sewn bands and ribbons. Ken implored me to try the hats, and showed me just the right elbow angle to launch them so they would come back to my hand. After we batted these hats around the backstage area for awhile, I asked Ken where he got the hats. "Oh," said Ken casually, "These are Bill Moran's hats."

My jaw dropped. I scurried to pick up the hats and brush off the leaves and pine needles. I was juggling Bill Moran's hats! This was like playing baseball with Babe Ruth's bat, or playing jazz on Louis Armstrong's trumpet. Ken told me that Moran himself had sewn the hatband and reinforcing ribbon.

For the rest of the week, in between shows I practiced with *my own* hats, still flabbergasted that Ken still had the old master's props and brought them to the fairgrounds.

A few weeks later I got together with Ken in his backyard one morning to show him the progress that would eventually lead to a new crowd-pleasing routine. Most memorable about this visit was when Ken went into his house to make tea – and emerged elegantly in top-hat, tail-coat, bow-tie, shorts, and silly grin, serving tea on the picnic table in an ornate teapot and dainty little teacups. I guess he thought my progress deserved some kind of celebration. What a character. Anytime I want a laugh, all I have to do is conjure up this scene.



A final word. Ken had his own showbiz vocabulary, picked up while lurking around the offices of the old-time, cigar-chomping, invective-hurling agents. There was one word Ken always used to describe our act. He would meet L.J. coming off the stage and repeat it with gusto. Now it's my turn to sling the verbiage back to Ken, in appraising his lifetime of sharing so much friendship, kindness, and talent: "Sennnnn...sational!" ■



Above is my favorite photo of Ken Sherburne – he's doing his best to hold my squirming 8-month-old son, Gardiner, in 1990. We were working a circus date, and L.J. captured this unlikely scene between shows in front of the bear cage.