

# SUNDAYPLUS



## John Ringling’s will was tangled in turmoil

Final years of Sarasota’s grand developer, entrepreneur full of strife, family drama



**Jeff LaHurd** Columnist | Special to Sarasota Herald-Tribune | USA TODAY NETWORK

Imagine waking up tomorrow, and seeing on the front page of the Sarasota Herald the notice that John Ringling’s over-the-top manse, Ca’d’Zan was going to be sold on the courthouse steps to satisfy a judgment. • Shocking would best describe it. But on Dec. 7, 1936, that is precisely what was served up to the citizens of Sarasota. • It wouldn’t happen. Ringling had died five days earlier, and his death prevented the sale. On Dec. 2, Sarasota had received the news that the Circus King had passed away at his New York City apartment. He had been ill for quite some time. The banner headline of the Sarasota Herald blared “JOHN RINGLING DIES IN NEW YORK.” • He was 70 years old. With him at his passing were his sister, Ida North, her sons John and Henry North, his ever-present nurse, Ina Sanders, his physician, and longtime friend Frank Hennessy. • His final years had been grueling to the man whose grand developments, world-class museum and art school, circus winter quarters and storybook mansion helped put Sarasota on the map. **Continued on next page**

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He toiled mightily to lay the foundation for his adopted city to enjoy a reputation as the cultural center of the Gulf Coast. What should have been the great man's golden years were fraught with betrayals, marital strife, court actions, economic setbacks, and illness.

Every facet of his later years seemed to fall under a dark cloud. Perhaps saddest of all, control of the circus, the foundation of his and his brother's hard-won success was wrested from him by Sam Gumpertz, a former close friend and business associate who did not even want him on the circus grounds. (As Ringling biographer David Weeks put it, Gumpertz and the Charles Ringling family "had the grace" to avoid the funeral.)

He and Owen Burns, who headed up many of Ringling's grandiose projects as well as his own, spent a lot of time in bitter litigation. His former private secretary of many years, Richard Fuchs, turned on him with a vengeance, and penned a long diatribe laying out all of Ringling's personal faults and questionable business dealings.

Beleaguered Ringling was also cash strapped (It was reported that he had \$311 available) and many of his assets were mortgaged to the hilt.

He came to distrust those he once held dear, particularly nephew John Ringling North, whom Ringling believed sold him short on a business transaction when he was in desperate need of all the cash he could gather.

John and Mable Ringling had no children, and John and Henry Ringling North, whose father had died, were their surrogate sons. Mr. John's brother, Charles, passed in 1926, and Charles' wife, Edith, who was never close to John because of his condescending attitude toward her, became his adversary over control of the circus.

Ida, the only sister in the Ringling clan, was dear to him, and during the lean years of the Great Depression they offered each other assistance.

Ringling's final will was drawn up in New York City on May 19, 1934. The document was highly anticipated by many: eager locals whom he owed small amounts for services rendered, staff. Family members and the State of Florida were waiting in the wings for their slice of the pie.

According to Weeks, in his book "Ringling, The Florida Years 1911-1936," the claims stretched from a paltry \$3.25 owed to the Sarasota Herald, up the ladder to \$13 million to the Bureau of Internal Revenue.

As Ringling family dynamics were frequently contentious, often reported in the press, some locals were just interested in seeing what the great man left and to whom. (To assuage their curiosity, the entirety of the will and its codicil was printed in the Sarasota Herald on May 5, 1937.)

Ringling's second wife, Emily, whose antics Ringling testified at his protracted divorce action were killing him, probably was not expecting very much and he did not disappoint her. The third provision stated: "To my wife, Emily Hague (sic) Ringling, I give and bequeath the sum of One Dollar (\$1.00) only."

After stipulating that his debts and funeral expenses be paid as soon as possible after his passing, the second provision called for the museum, his home and its contents be given to the State of Florida, noting that if "they failed to accept, it shall go to the City of Sarasota." He also ordered that the museum must always be called the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art "without power in anyone to change such name."

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**The tangled web of John Ringling's convoluted financial affairs, hounding creditors, bitter family rivalries, competing state and local governments, and a scorned former wife took ten years to wind its way through probate. (It was said that at one time or another every lawyer in Sarasota was involved in some facet of the document.)**



TOP: John Ringling's mansion narrowly avoided being sold on the courthouse steps to cover his debt.

CENTER: John Ringling North signing an autograph. He became alienated from his Uncle John, and was cut out of the will, but carried on as an executor.

LOWER: John Ringling's will left the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art to the State of Florida with the stipulation that the museum must always be called the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art "without power in anyone to change such name."

ON COVER: John Ringling suffered much during his final years.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY JEFF LAHURD; ILLUSTRATION BY ALEXANDRA GRAFF/USA TODAY NETWORK; AND GETTY IMAGES

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Of the remainder of his estate, half was left to the trustees whom he named as John and Henry North and Randolph Wadsworth, husband of his niece, Salomé. The other half was willed to Ida.

But between May of 1934 and November of 1935 Mr. John had a dramatic change of heart. Whatever affection he once felt toward John North was replaced by antipathy based on his belief that North had swindled him in a business deal. The resentment spread to his sister and Henry.

According to Weeks, quoting Eugene Garey Ringling's New York Attorney, "He was unquestionably angry and resentful toward John North and feared him."

Consequently, Ringling was determined that John and Henry be stricken from his will and Ida's bequest be limited to \$5,000 per year. A codicil to that effect was quickly – too quickly – drawn up.

As he was leaving his apartment in New York, bound by train to sunny Sarasota the one place he might find surcease, he summoned Garey. As Weeks describes the scene, Ringling was set to be chauffeured to the train station with nurse Sanders when his attorney arrived.

As Garey had never seen the last will, he advised Ringling against hastily drawing up the codicil. Weeks quoted the attorney, "I urged that he return with the will ... and then we would draft the codicil."

But as per usual, Mr. John would have his own way, and the document was written in longhand then and there.

Garey was unaware that the Norths had been named executors of the estate and trustees of the museum. As such they were given "full power and authority in their discretion" to handle his real estate and investments.

The hurriedly drawn codicil stated, "For reasons good and sufficient to me I have determined that neither of such nephews shall receive anything whatsoever in any form, shape or manner from my estate."

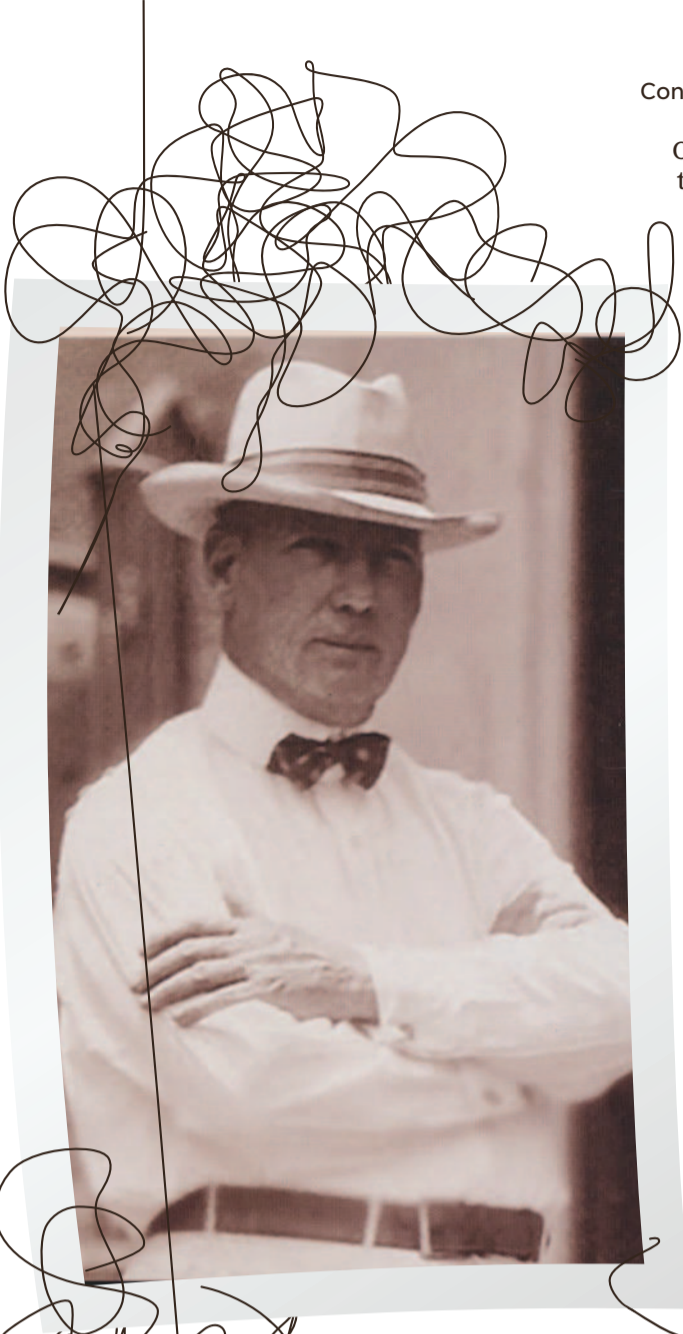
Thus, satisfied he had taken his revenge on his nephews, it was off to Ca' d'Zan for some much-needed rest and recuperation.

The tangled web of John Ringling's convoluted financial affairs, hounding creditors, bitter family rivalries, competing state and local governments, and a scorned former wife took ten years to wind its way through probate. (It was said that at one time or another every lawyer in Sarasota was involved in some facet of the document.)

While Mr. John's wish to disinherit the Norths did not pan out, it was through the diligent effort of John North that the circus continued in the Ringling family, and that the museum and mansion remains now and forever a gift to the people of Florida and its legions of visitors.

As Weeks put it, "In time, the executors and their attorneys succeeded. Ultimately, they benefited personally; but the greatest benefit occurred, as Ringling had intended, to the generations of museum visitors who experienced the Ringling bequest."

Jeff LaHurd was raised in Sarasota and is an award-winning author/historian.



ABOVE: Sarasota developer Owen Burns, the point man for many of Ringling's major projects, ended up being involved in court actions against him. RIGHT: To his second wife, Emily, John Ringling left \$1.

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