

Physical Description (indicate basic design and construction and general condition at present time)

There are two structures remaining on the site. One is a small octagonal masonry building with metal roof supported by aluminum trusses in a tension ring/compression ring configuration. This was the famous animal trainer Gunther Gebel-Williams (GG-W) "Big Cat" training ring. The metal roofing is heavily deteriorated and is in the process of being removed for safety and will be replaced.

The other structure is the 60,000 square foot arena building built in 1960 by John Ringling North and Art Consello, it was the Winter Quarters for Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey (RBBB) for over 30 years with original seating for 5,000 spectators. Construction consists of a main arena rehearsal hall with a staging area on the east end and a second floor office area at the west end. The steel roof trusses are supported by steel columns on a 24 inch to 18 inch concrete foundation. The roof is plywood with a fibrous covering. The walls are masonry block to four feet with plywood sheeting to the roof line. Due to lack of maintenance for over 15 years, the roof is in very poor condition and some elements have rotted away leaving open holes. This has lead to decay of the plywood siding and the second level flooring. However, the steel support structure has been assessed by engineers as being sound. The roof and all wood will be removed for safety, leaving the steel frame work in place available for future restoration. The arena rehearsal hall and grand stand were originally designed as an open structure and used that way until sides were added later. The arena can be used this way again until it is restored.

Why is the property significant?

At the conclusion of their 1959 season, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus moved their winter home from Sarasota to their new Venice Florida quarters. The 60,000 square foot Circus Arena was constructed on site at 1401 Ringling Drive in Venice, the same used by the Sparks Bros. circus in 1947. It has seating for an audience of 4500 to 5000, with space for a workshop, costume sewing and Clown Alley. On November 29, 1960 the circus train rolled into Venice.

From 1962 to 1992, RBBB developed, practiced and presented its world premiere of "The Greatest Show on Earth" at the Venice Circus Arena each year. From this arena they would send out the Red, Blue and Gold Teams around the world to perform circus for "boys and girls of all ages"! The 1963 Desilu Productions filmed a television series called "The Greatest Show on Earth" at the Venice arena with Jack Palance as circus boss and actress Tuesday Weld as a star aerialist. A host of great circus stars and acts made their American debuts in Venice Florida, including Gunther Gebel-Williams, animal trainer: Tito Gaona, trapeze artist; Michu, the world's smallest human; and the mighty elephant King Tusk.

Because the cost associated with transporting and erecting tents had become prohibitive, the Venice Arena is said to have saved the RBBB Circus by providing an arena type event center like the ones they would perform in around the world. It also provided a much needed economic boost to the city. Deterioration of the rail spur between Sarasota and Venice over the years forced the circus to move it quarters to Tampa after 1992, thus ending many years of the circus presence in Sarasota County. The Clown College, created in the Venice Arena in 1968, continued in the arena until 1996.