

JOHN PUGH'S LUCKY BREAK!

The show business admonition, "Break a Leg!" proved sound advice for John Pugh. Appearing with the Cole Bros. Circus in 1964 as a featured performer, John fractured his leg while executing the multiple-twisting somersault that provided the highlight of his trampoline routine. At first it seemed the injury would sideline his circus career, but the owner of the circus had other things in mind for his protege. "You're a good acrobat," Frank McClosky told John, "but I think you'd make an even better Manager. I'd like you to remain with the show and give it a try." John stayed. No one would have predicted that one day John would own Cole Bros. Circus.

John grew up in England during World War II, living on the family farm on the outskirts of London. A respected show business entrepreneur throughout Great Britain and the European continent, John's father, "Digger" Pugh produced theatrical and variety shows, and managed the careers of numerous entertainers. Digger, whose business thrived after the war, feared that his young son might think that a show business career guaranteed easy money. In the Pugh tradition, he expected his son to excel at school, do household chores that included tending the garden, and--in his spare time--earn an act. John displayed natural athletic abilities, so he elected to train as a gymnast, demonstrating his talents at the age of eight in his first professional stage performance.

After completing his formal education, John worked under the tutelage of his father to gain experience in every facet of show business. John performed at the London Palladium where he shared the stage with comedian Benny Hill. When the script of the movie "Cleopatra" called for elephants, John took charge of the Chipperfield Circus' herd on location, first in England with Elizabeth Taylor and Stephen Boyd as Marc Antony, then in Rome, where a relatively unknown--at the time--stage actor, Richard Burton, had

replaced Boyd. John did stunt work at Pinewood Film Studios in England and Italy, and spent time as Stage Manager at ATV Television in London.

After working and traveling extensively through Europe, the Orient and North Africa, John felt ready for a change of pace. As a child of ten, John had spent a year on tour with Cole Bros. Circus. Fond memories of that 1948 season, and a fervent desire to return to the United States prompted him to contact the Cole Bros. Circus to book his act. The rest, as they say, is circus history.

When John Pugh decided to buy Cole Bros. Circus in 1982, economic times were rough, particularly for the entertainment industry. With the country in a recession, people didn't have much money left to spend on entertainment. Former circus owner Jerry Collins, had just donated the Cole Bros. Circus to his alma mater, Florida State University, hoping that the University would operate the Circus and preserve its proud tradition of appearing under the Big Top. But the University Foundation realized that it would take specialized skills to operate the Circus successfully, so the Foundation put the Circus up for sale. John Pugh headed the newly formed corporation, Cole Brothers Circus, Inc. which purchased the show in February of 1982.

After seventeen years as General Manager of the Circus, Pugh thoroughly knew every aspect of the Beatty-Cole operation. He understood that in order for the show to survive, let alone prosper, he would have to implement cost-cutting measures, along with new marketing strategies while maintaining and even improving the quality of the performance. In truth, Cole Bros. Circus meant more to John than just a job. He had met and married his lovely wife, Brigitte, on the show. Over the years he had worked with many of the same staff members, and knew that they, too, had invested much of themselves in the show. He felt a responsibility to these people, to their families, and to the American circus fans who looked forward to the annual appearance of the last of the great-tented three-ring circuses. John vowed to make the Cole Bros. Circus survive and prosper, and he kept that promise.

When Cole Bros. Circus comes to town, John Pugh might be the first person you see on the showgrounds. On Tent-Raising morning, he's the first person up, usually before dawn, making sure that everything at the Circus is done the right way. It's obvious that he believes in "active" ownership! Around the Circus, he wears many hats. At the corporate level, he's President, Chairman of the Board, and CEO. On site he's the

logistics expert who can fit the entire Circus--football field-sized Big Top, sixty vehicles, wild animals, and all--into an area that looks impossibly small. John designed the radically different Big Top, directs circus production numbers, engineers new seating plans, patiently arbitrates occasional artistic disputes, and serves as the weather prognosticator who almost instinctively knows when the wind is about to change direction and usher in a storm. When John makes his rounds of the lot, his engaging smile and infectious sense of humor accompany him. It's apparent that the show people not only respect him, but also feel a real sense of "family" within the Cole show.

Today, Cole Bros. Circus thrives, with a sparkling two-hour, three ring performance held under the innovative crimson and gold Big Top John designed. A caravan of gaily-painted diesel tractor-trailers brings the Circus to 110 cities during its annual eight-month trek across the nation. John Pugh pledged to make the Circus a success, and did so; and he has committed his resources to guarantee that the real three-ring Circus will remain under the Big Top to continue delighting children of all ages for years to come.

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