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John Lowlow (1841-1910)

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JOHN LOWLOW

1841-1910

Submitted by Horace D.H. Smith

To: Dr. Roger K. Warlick as partial
fulfilment of the History 500 Requirement

March 2, 1982

JOHN LOWLOW
FAMOUS CIRCUS CLOWN

John Lowlow was born in Savannah, Georgia, on August 6, 1841. In 1856, he ran away with John Robinson's Circus. For the next half century he would travel with the circus. He became one of America's most famous clowns during his life time. He died on October 18, 1910, in Cincinnati, Ohio, and is buried in Cleveland, Ohio.

JOHN LOWLOW

1841-1910

John Lowlow was born in Savannah, Georgia, on August 6, 1841, the son of John Lowlow and Isabella (McKinzie) Lowlow.¹ John's mother seems to have died while he was young, and his father probably died during the epidemic of 1854, leaving John an orphan.² Dominick O'Byrne was appointed his guardian.³

Johnny seems to have known at an early age that he wanted to be a circus clown. An article, "The Fame Of A Clown," Savannah Morning News, 8 November 1895, page 3, col. 1, tells how Johnny Lowlow began his circus life on Liberty Square. The article stated, it's forty odd years since the well-known circus athlete and humorist John Lowlow amazed his old companions in this city with his marvelous acrobatic feats in a juvenile circus at the corner of Montgomery, President, and York streets.

The boys' show was good in its way. It had a trick pony, hired from a colored man, a band, consisting of an accordion, a triangle, a drum, and possibly some other noise-producing instruments, and the usual paraphernulla more or less appropriate to a ring show. The star performer was John Lowlow. Lowlow was a graceful somersaulter and could do about everything that circus riders essayed to do in those days. He was the wonder of his associates and many

a penny was by them spent in sweet oil and hartshorn in their efforts to make themselves supple as lie. It was supposed that vigorous rubbing with that mixture would loosen the muscles, but it generally produced more sore than agility. Johnny Lowlow stood without a rival as one who could stand on his head as well as he could on his feet. He was evidently born to fill a long-felt want in a circus.⁴

The boy circus on Liberty Square came to an inglorious end, like many similiar undertakings managed by men or boys; everyone wanted to run the business and disaster followed. In other words, "too many cooks spoiled the broth."⁵

The season or year following the closing of the career of the boy's circus, "Robinson's Great American Circus" arrived in Savannah and opened in the old circus lot at the corner of Zubly and Ann streets.⁶

One night the circus, after a most successful week's performance like the often referred to Arab "folded its tent," and left Savannah, Johnny bade goodbye to his friends, and they were many, and casting a long look, as it were upon his humble home in Yamacraw, then numbered among its residents as good people as any other part of Savannah, cast his bark on the sea of life. It was the beginning of a celebrated career. Lowlow's frank and manly ways and his undoubted ability as an acrobat soon made for him warm friends in the Robinsons, father and sons, then the leading men in their

profession, and he rose rapidly in their employment. It was not a great while before he was known throughout the land as one of the great humorists of the saw dust ring.⁷

When Johnny left Savannah in 1856, he did not know that it would be eleven years before he would return to Savannah.⁸ On November 6, 1901 Johnny said, "I remember a time I came back to Savannah, in 1867. I had been away eleven years and changes enough had occurred in that time. I had on all the finery with which some years of prosperity had permitted me to adorn myself, and I was out on the streets of my old home city, in search of the friends of former years. In the market I saw Aunt Charlotte, an old negro woman, who once had nursed me."⁹

"She was selling gingerbread, as she had been when I had last seen her. It was the same old scene. The same market, the same old stalls, the same flies—for all I knew the same gingerbread she had in her basket on the day I bade farewell. Two or three of her companions in the same business sat around and I stood watching them, intending in a few minutes to tell her who I was. But suddenly she looked up and saw me.

" ' Fo God,' she said, 'if dere ain't dat damned Johnny Lowlow. Kiver up yo' gingerbread, chile or he'll steal ebery cake you got in depile.' "¹⁰

Lowlow's stories were inexhaustible. He told how he and his companions would follow the carts of the country men who brought their produce to Savannah and unslipping the pin, would suffer

the contents of the carts to run out upon the ground, an easy prey for himself and his allies.¹¹

In the eleven years that Johnny Lowlow was away from Savannah he earned the reputation as being the great champion clown of America. His far famed jester was highly spoken of by all Virginia exchanges and state contemporaries. So tempting were the offers made to Lowlow by other circuses, that it was only by the guarantee of an enormous salary that Mr. Robinson secured him for his circus.¹² Lowlow's next visit to Savannah would be in November 1871.¹³ During January 1872, Lowlow was re-engaged with the John Robinson's Circus for another year.¹⁴

When the circus returned to Savannah in December 1872, the clowns were better than good; as for Johnny Lowlow, he was witty, fresh, quick, and his side slaps were excellent.¹⁵ John Robinson's circus came to Savannah next in September 1875. Robinson had increased the proportions of his show nearly fifty-two thousand dollars, and he employed the highest order of talent in the arenic department, among whom was Mr. Lowlow.¹⁶ When the Robinson's circus returned to Savannah in January 1876, the street parade was one of the best ever seen in Savannah until that time.¹⁷

By the time that Robinson's circus returned to Savannah in October 1880, Mr. Lowlow was the manager. Time had given Mr. Lowlow fame and fortune, and though, as some would say, only a circus clown, his chosen profession, he had risen to eminence, not attainable in any calling in life except by energy, industry

and sobriety, all of which qualities he had the reputation of possessing.¹⁸

Even though he was the manager he still performed as a clown. Lowlow and his funny partners managed to keep things in good humor all the while. This part of the circus could not be improved upon, Lowlow was a man of the people, a great favorite, and seemed particularly proud of the fact that was a "Yamacraw Boy," which of course, received the approval of the audience. This was probably the first circus to perform under electric lights in Savannah.¹⁹

In October 1887, the Morning News received a letter from Mr. Lowlow, announcing that he proposed making a tour of the larger Southern cities that winter with the best circus every seen in that part of the country. This was Lowlow's first trip as proprietor and manager.²⁰

On October 27, 1889, Robinson's circus arrived in Savannah. Mr. Lowlow, who was managing the circus for Mr. Robinson, came with the great show. Mr. Lowlow had quite an extended drive over the city and through the surrounding country, and was gratified at the growth the city was making.²¹

The next time that Lowlow seems to have come to Savannah was in November 1895. By then he was with the Sell's Great Show. On November 8, 1895, Johnny Lowlow in the clown attire spoke reminiscently before the audience of Sell's circus. He regretted that so many of his boyhood friends were dead and he spoke with tenderness of their exploits on the streets of Yamacraw. On this visit Lowlow gave the best account of his life.²²

Johnny Lowlow was back with Robinson's circus when it returned to Savannah in November 1901. He had for forty-five years been a circus clown, thirty-six consecutively with John Robinson's Shows. Now his job was telling the people about the attractions of Robinson's show. He thought he knew all about the circus business, and probably he did.²³

The show bills that announced that Robinson's show was on the way to Calhoun, Georgia, in November 1902 announced the great clown; Johnny Lowlow, was with the circus, but didn't say in what capacity. The public supposed, however, that he would appear in his old-time role.²⁴

Before the performance, one showman was asked if Lowlow, for a fact, was with them and if he would perform that afternoon. He assured that Lowlow was along but, instead of serving fun he was serving something far more necessary—GRUB.

"Yonder is his place of business," said the showman, pointing to a big covered wagon, blue painted and marked in large letters "Glencairn."

The older people of Savannah were sad to read on October 27, 1910, that John Lowlow, greatest of clowns, was dead. Lowlow was a Yamacraw boy, born in Savannah. He lived there until the lure of the lights and spangles and painted performers carried him into another world in which he was to rise to the top rung in his day. He was with Robinson's shows until about 1907. He was with a furniture concern in Cincinnati, Ohio for about three years

before he died.²⁶

John Lowlow died at his residence, 520 East 4th street, Cincinnati, Ohio, on October 18, 1910. He was buried in Cleveland on October 20, 1910.²⁷ He was married, but he seems to have married someplace other than Chatham County Georgia.²⁸ Johnny Lowlow spent his life making others happy.

052364

FEB 23 1912

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS CERTIFICATE IS AN EXACT COPY OF THE ORIGINAL CERTIFICATE WHICH IS REGISTERED AND PRESERVED IN THE DIVISION OF VITAL STATISTICS OF THE OHIO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, WITNESS MY SIGNATURE AND THE SEAL OF THE DEPARTMENT.

John H. Ackerman, MD
DIRECTOR OF HEALTH

Form V. S. No. 11-590M-3-1-97

STATE OF OHIO
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS
CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

PLACE OF DEATH
County of Hamilton
Township of _____ Registration District No. 235
or _____ File No. 55470
Village of _____ Primary Registration District No. 6029
or _____ Registered No. 5387
City of Cincinnati (No. 520 East 4th St. _____ Ward) (If death occurred in a Hospital or institution give its NAME instead of street and number.)
FULL NAME John Lowlow
(If death occurs away from USUAL RESIDENCE give facts called for under "Special Information.")

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

SEX Male COLOR OR RACE White
DATE OF BIRTH Aug 6 1891
(Month) (Day) (Year)
AGE 19 years, 2 months, 17 days
SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, OR DIVORCED Married
BIRTHPLACE (State or Foreign Country) Savannah Georgia
OCCUPATION Retired
NAME OF FATHER John Lowlow
BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (State or Foreign Country) England
MAIDEN NAME OF MOTHER Isabella Mc Kingie
BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (State or Foreign Country) Scotland

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

DATE OF DEATH Oct 18 1910
(Month) (Day) (Year)
I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from Sept. 19th 1910 to Oct. 18th 1910
that I last saw him alive on Oct. 18th 1910
and that death occurred, on the date stated above, at 11:30
P. M. The CAUSE OF DEATH was as follows
Gangrene (Duration) 30 Days
Contributory 4 Trauma
(Signed) Chas. Oregon (MD) M. D.
Oct. 19 1910 (Address) 224 Dodder St

THE ABOVE STATED PERSONAL PARTICULARS ARE TRUE TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF
(Informant) W. E. Lowlow
(Address) 520 East 4th

SPECIAL INFORMATION only for Hospitals, Institutions, Transients, or Recent Residents.
Former or Usual Residence _____ How long at _____
Place of Death _____ Days
Where was disease contracted, if not at place of death? _____

Filed OCT 19 1910
Luella Evans
Registrar.

PLACE OF BURIAL or REMOVAL Cleveland, O DATE OF BURIAL Oct 20 1910
UNDERTAKER W. A. Matthews Sons Co ADDRESS 3929 Eastern Ave

NOTES

1. John Lowlow's death certificate gives his father's name as John Lowlow, but there is some doubt that Lowlow was his last name. The name Lowlow does not appear in any of Savannah's newspapers of the 1840's or 1850's and cannot be found in any records. In an article in the Savannah Morning News, November 16, 1902 page 13, columns 5-7 stated, Col. Estill requested the Morning News to state his friend, Mr. Lowlow (that was his name; he changed it because the circus people, the newspapers, and public insisted on spelling it Lowlow). This would indicate that he changed his name to Lowlow sometime between 1856 when left Savannah and 1867 when he returned to Savannah. Because he was called Lowlow in the Savannah Morning News, November 13, 1867, page 3, column 1.
2. "Johnny Lowlow's Last Visit Here Was 45 Years Ago," Savannah Morning News, November 8, 1940. p. 18, col. 3.
3. "Tales Of A Veteran Clown Johnny Lowlow's Reminiscences Of His Boyhood," Savannah Morning News, November 7, 1901, p. 6 col. 5-6. Gives the name of his guardian as Diminick O'Byrne. They are two Dominick O'Byrnes that lived in Savannah during the 1840's and 1850's. Dominick O'Byrne Sr. died in 1850, and his son Dominick O'Byrne Jr. was probably Johnny's guardian.
4. "The Fame of A Clown" Savannah Morning News, November 8, 1895, p. 3, col. 1.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Savannah Morning News, November 7, 1901, p. 6, col. 5-6.
9. This is probably why some people believe that John was a negro, but his death certificate gives his color or race as white.
10. Savannah Morning News, November 7, 1901, p. 6 col. 5-6.
11. Ibid.
12. "John, Robinson's Circus and Egyptian Carvan," Savannah Morning News, November 3, 1867, p. 3, col 1.

13. Savannah Morning News, November 10, 1871, p. 3, col. 1, and November 11, 1871, p. 3, col. 2.
14. Savannah Morning News, January 6, 1872, p. 3, col 4.
15. Savannah Morning News, December 7, 1872, p. 3, col. 2.
16. Savannah Morning News, September 15, 1875, p. 3, col. 5.
17. Savannah Morning News, January 19, 1876, p. 3, col. 3.
18. "On His Native Health," Savannah Morning News, October 15, 1880, p. 3, col. 3.
19. "Sawdust And Tinsel," Savannah Morning News, October 15, 1880, p. 3, col. 2.
20. Savannah Morning News, October 17, 1887, p. 8, col. 2, states that Lowlow was the proproetor, but he was probably only the manager.
21. Savannah Morning News, October 28, 1889, p. 8, col. 5.
22. Savannah Morning News, November 8, 1895, p. 3, col. 1, and Savannah Morning News, November 8, 1940, p. 18, col. 3.
23. Savannah Morning News, November 7, 1901, p. 6, col. 5-6.
24. "John Lowlow, The Clown," by Jonh M. Harkins. Savannah Morning News, November 16, 1902, p. 13, col. 5-7.
25. Ibid.
26. "John Lowlow, Greatest Of Clowns, Is Dead," Savannah Morning News, October 27, 1910, p. 12, col. 1.
27. Death certificate, John Lowlow on file at the State of Ohio Department of Health, Columbus Ohio.
28. A check of records at Georgia Historical Society does not show where anyone by the name of Lowlow was married in Chatham County during his life time.

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- Chatham County, Georgia MARRIGES 1805-1877, 4 volumes, Compiled by Mabel F. La Mar. 1939. At Georgia Historical Society.
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- Estate Records File. Court of Ordinary, Chatham County Court House. File No. 42, O'Byrne, Dominick O.
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26 February 1982

Horace D. H. Smith
 Route 1, Box 34N, Lot 15
 Hinesville, Georgia 31313

Dear Mr. Smith:

We were unable to find an obituary for John Lowlow. However, the Cincinnati Enquirer on Oct. 19 and Oct. 20, 1910 carried death notices. The print in these notices and the quality of our copy make it impossible to copy them on our copiers. Therefore, we enclose below the exact wording of these two death notices. We hope this information is helpful to you.

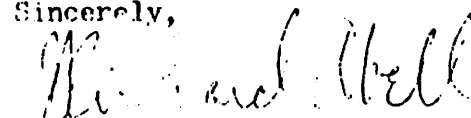
Lowlow. John Lowlow at his residence, 529 East Fourth Street at 11:30 p.m. Tuesday, October 18, aged 69 years. Due notice of funeral will be given.

Cincinnati Enquirer, Oct. 19, 1910, page 5, column 1

Same as above to which is added: Funeral at 1:00 o'clock Thursday, October 20 from his late residence, 520 East Fourth street. Burial at Cleveland, Ohio.

Cincinnati Enquirer, Oct. 20, 1910 page 7, column 1

Sincerely,



J. Richard Abell, Head
 History and Literature Dept.

In reply, please refer to: 20 DMON 1982