

Chapter 1

The Huling Brothers

Never Before, Never Again

Sharkey was minutes away from making history. He had made it to Broadway: opening night at the Shubert Theater. Only the raising of a curtain separated him from his destiny.

In the wings was his trainer, Mark Huling. The fifty-six-year-old, short-statured trainer (not overly short, just “below average” short) beamed with pride. And with good reason. Less than two years prior, he was a retired seal trainer and owner of a nightclub in Upstate New York. He had since sold his club, returned to seal training, and presented seals at the New York World’s Fair. Now he was in the heart of the most celebrated theater district in the world to watch his young animal prodigy, Sharkey, take the stage.

Stardom lay ahead, for on this early spring night, sandwiched between the start of World War II and the attack on Pearl Harbor, Shubert patrons witnessed the unprecedented inclusion of a trained seal in a Broadway musical comedy. Glowing notices about Sharkey would appear the next morning in practically every newspaper in New York City, putting him on the fast track to becoming the world’s most famous seal. For the next seventeen years, Sharkey appeared with the biggest names in show business, names like Bob Hope, Ella Fitzgerald, and the Three Stooges. He entertained the president of the United States, shared the bill with sports legends like

Jackie Robinson, performed with soloists from the Metropolitan Opera, and headlined the country's most prestigious theaters.

That a trained seal could be part of pop culture for so long resulted from circumstances never seen before, and never to be seen again. First, society was both old-fashioned enough to enjoy his skills and modern enough to spread his fame; television, in particular, provided exposure previously unattainable, minus the overexposure trappings of today's digital world. Second, Sharkey was unusually intelligent, with exceptional physical ability and a gifted stage presence. Third, he received his instruction from a world-renowned seal trainer, Mark Huling.

For decades, Mark and two of his brothers had developed a seal-training tradition that set them apart, for not only did they teach seals feats others couldn't achieve; more importantly, they taught seals feats others couldn't even imagine. Put aside for a moment the image of a seal with a beach ball on its nose. Imagine instead, seals that tap dance, sing with an orchestra, ride horses, and perform sketch comedy routines. Such is a glimpse into the world of Huling seals.

Though Mark was initially eclipsed by his two brothers' greater rise to fame, and though tragedy had seemingly cut his seal-training career short, fate would ultimately prove otherwise, eventually leaving him with a legacy unsurpassed in the annals of seal training, led by the unlikely arrival of Sharkey.

And so it began in 1940 on an early spring evening on Broadway. The Huling brothers' collective seal wisdom now set the table for Sharkey, who stood in the wings of the Shubert, poised to make history. His performance that night would ignite a remarkable career-long chain of events. But also necessary were the chain of events leading to his Broadway debut. So before we raise the opening curtain on Sharkey, the story really begins with Mark and his two seal-training brothers, and their foray into show business.

We Didn't Know Any Better

For twenty-three-year-old Mark Huling, his day trip to Buffalo began like many others, with a three-mile horse-and-carriage ride from the family farm to a ferry dock. Joined by his brothers Frank and Ray, they took their half-mile ferry across the Niagara River on a small barge, pulled by a tugboat. Once ashore, they headed toward Buffalo, ten miles away, the eighth largest

city in the country. The young men were in search of work—never mind the economic woes of that year’s Panic of 1907.

En route, they visited a family acquaintance, where they encountered the welcoming barks of a bunch of seals. The explanation was simple: the family friend was Captain Thomas Webb, the first bona fide seal trainer in the United States.¹

“Seal” in this case means “sea lion.” Sea lions are more social, more physically mobile on land, and better suited for training. At the time, the animal exhibition world often used the terms *seal* and *sea lion* interchangeably, as will be done here.

Webb, originally from Buffalo, had been given a set of seals fifteen years prior by a man dabbling in the nouveau realm of seal training. Webb pioneered a host of training techniques and then crisscrossed the country with his groundbreaking seal act, presenting at theaters, fairs, and with leading circuses. He had also traveled abroad, performing before royalty, and established himself as North America’s premier seal trainer before settling back near Buffalo, in Tonawanda, where he set up a shop, “Captain Webb’s Educated Seals and Sea Lions.”

Webb offered jobs to the three Huling brothers that day. In fairy-tale fashion, they accepted. And just like that, they became assistant seal trainers. Years later, when asked why, Mark said, “We were so very young, we didn’t know any better.”²

Goodbye Farm, Hello Show Business

Frank Huling took to seal training with unusual prowess. At thirty-one, he was the oldest of the three brothers. A self-described rolling stone, he had previously held several jobs, making little money or headway at any, all of which changed when he began working with seals. “I could see great possibilities in the animals and was determined to see what I could do with them,” he said.³

Within a year, Frank was appointed manager of Webb’s operation.⁴ Shortly after, Frank and his brother Mark went on their first big trip. With seals and props, they left for Berlin, Germany, performing at Circus Busch with Harry Houdini.

Ray Huling made his first trip abroad months later. An agent contacted Captain Webb looking to send acts to Venezuela, assuring him “there was

a wad in it,” stating the Venezuelan government had made the request.⁵ Thirty-three performers set sail from Manhattan in a whirl of excitement, including Ray and Webb’s seals, jugglers, trapeze artists, acrobats, other circus types, and a promoter fronting \$4,000 of his own money. They played a Caracas bullring that filled with spectators, save for the fact that “duels in three prominent families kept the highest priced boxes available. . . . The occupants to be, however, had paid in advance, and so there was no loss except the loss of life.”

After eighteen days of sold-out performances, absent any pay from the Venezuelan government, word came that “the bubonic plague was also playing Caracas.” Authorities told the performers they could either leave town within two hours or stay for a six-month quarantine. Neither option included being paid. They left town.

The troupe traveled twenty miles to La Guairá. They tried to board a steamship but were denied when the captain heard they had left a plague-infected district. And so they trudged to nearby Macuto, waited a week for a boat, and set sail for Barbados. But on the way, an outbreak of yellow fever hit Barbados, forcing the troupe to debark early for Trinidad. Within hours, the bubonic plague hit Trinidad, quarantining them from further travel. After the quarantine, cash reserves were insufficient to get home. The promoter thought it best to do shows in Trinidad to raise the needed money, so he arranged for a large circus tent, which arrived two weeks later, just in time for an eight-day tropical rainstorm. The promoter at last capitulated. “I can lose no more because I have no more money left to lose.”

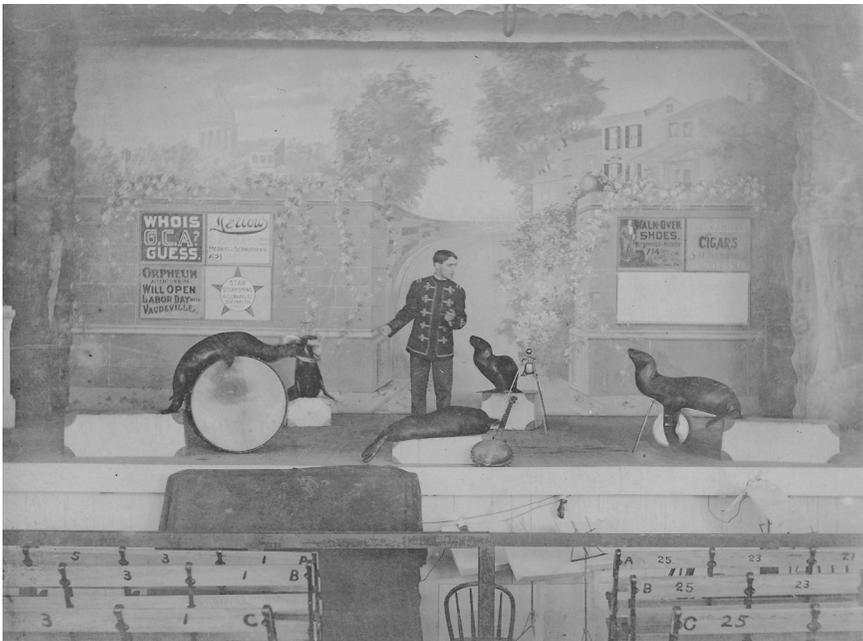
After the storm, the troupe did four shows, which yielded a sizable profit, though not enough to make it home. Ray and a few others kicked in the rest from their own wallets. The weary lot boarded a ship and was greeted eight days later by the Statue of Liberty. Ray traveled 400 more miles to Tonawanda, hopped a ferry, and headed to the family farm. For the twenty-two-year-old seal trainer, sleeping in his own bed must have never felt better.

No sooner did Ray return home than his brother Mark was having difficulties of his own. Captain Webb sent him 150 miles south of Tonawanda to perform at a summer fair. Mark awoke one morning to find a seal had escaped. News raced across town. One paper termed the fugitive a “savagely beast.” Citizens panicked. Many stayed indoors fearing attack. Mark searched the city in vain. Authorities placed a bloodhound on the trail that

nosed his way to a clump of woods about a mile from the city and found the seal—asleep, safe, and unharmed.⁶

Ray suffered a similar fate while supervising Webb's quarters. A prized seal dove into the backyard creek and swam into the nearby Erie Canal. A motorboat company came to the rescue, but the seal evaded the pursuing boats for quite some time before being retaken. The news made front-page headlines: "Exciting Chase for Sea Lion, Escaped from Training Quarters by Climbing through Window, Up and Down the Canal, Hundreds of Spectators Saw Swimming Exhibition the Likes of which Had Never Been Seen Before."⁷

Indeed, Mark and Ray both attended the School of Hard Knocks. They journeyed near and far, presenting seals in novelty shows that ran continuously from noon until night, at times in obscure dives, some just a tiny stage and a few rows of bench seating. Harpo Marx, recalling his early years as a traveling entertainer during this same period, wrote, "If you should ever hear an old-time vaudevillian talk about 'the wonderful, golden days of one-night stands,' buy him another drink, but don't believe a word he's saying."⁸



Postcard of Mark rehearsing with a seal band, ca. 1910. Courtesy of Luc Sante.

But while shady stage managers, vermin-infested motel rooms, rowdy crowds, and the like may have made life less than wonderful, opportunities were plentiful. An ever-growing middle class spurred unprecedented demand for family amusement. Silent movies and radio were still in their infancy, leaving live entertainment to fill the void. In the words of one performer, “People were starving for stimulus!”⁹ Later asked how he honed his craft during his formative years, Mark said, “By dint of hard work and perseverance.”¹⁰

Frank, meanwhile, stayed in Europe. So popular was his seal act that he attained celebrity. He kept a letter received from Mademoiselle Mangel, the French president of the Society for the Protection of Animals, who wrote, “I have much pleasure in announcing that owing to the way you present and treat your animals, your act is really a treat to watch. I have never seen animals better trained than those, and they seem to have a great affection for you.”¹¹

“That’s one of the points I insist on, kindness,” Frank said. “They have a keen brain but they seem to be all the while using it to kind of take a rise out of you, but if you treat them kindly, you can get along with them all right.”¹² Frank was more than getting along with them. He taught the seals to play billiards, jump rope, and discharge firearms. “There is scarcely any work these beasts cannot be trained to do,” he said, adding that his standout performer “hasn’t reached his limit. It is only a question of inventing something new. . . . When you realize they can do juggling tricks impossible for men, you can form an idea of how many other things they can do.” Frank and the seals bonded. “They grow very attached to you,” he noted. Upon returning a seal to the ocean on the hunch he desired to go back to his native haunts, the seal swam until a speck on the horizon, only to later return and reunite with his trainer. Another time, Frank recalled joining up with one of his seals after a long absence. “When he caught sight of me, he nearly died of joy.”¹³ Kindness, respect, imagination, bonding: They were the pillars of Frank’s training philosophy, which he would impart to his brothers.

Back home, Frank’s brothers Mark and Ray continued to assist Captain Webb, who had a long history of enlisting young locals, green in the area of animal training, to be his assistants, serendipitously turning Tonawanda into the seal-training capital of the world. Tonawanda’s four training quarters—Webb’s, two others run by prior Webb assistants, and another run

by three nephews of Webb—supplied over two-thirds of all performing seals worldwide, about seventy-five new trainees a year. Trainers practiced with seals on their front lawns, though most locals no longer bothered to watch, having seen it so often.

Frank returned from Europe, having been gone two years. His seal-training skills now rivaled if not exceeded those of Captain Webb. For the next two years, Webb and Frank toured with the Forepaugh & Sells Brothers Circus, the third largest circus in the country, exceeded only by the Ringling Brothers Circus and the Barnum & Bailey Circus; all three of which were owned by the Ringling family, and all three of which toured separately.

Webb and Frank were Forepaugh & Sells Brothers's highest-paid act. During the 1911 season, each earned \$250 a week, about \$6,000 a week in today's dollars.¹⁴ But the Ringlings subsequently dropped Forepaugh & Sells Brothers and focused on their namesake circus, "Ringling Brothers, World's Greatest Shows."

Four locomotives and eighty-six railcars strong, when Ringling Brothers rolled into town, factories closed, schools let out, and masses flocked to see the circus joyfully parade through city streets. Spectacular shows followed, presented in a tented enclave awash with a ground cover of sawdust, and concessions of buttered popcorn and pink lemonade. Traveling rail circuses were the pop mega-events of their day, none bigger than the circus established twenty-eight years earlier by Al, Otto, Alf, Charles, and John Ringling.

Following the disbandment of Forepaugh & Sells Brothers, the Ringlings offered Frank a contract to be a star attraction in the upcoming season with "Ringling Brothers, World's Greatest Shows."

It was the break of a lifetime.

Ringling Brothers

Helped by a loan from their father, the Huling brothers bought out Captain Webb. Frank and Mark immediately went to work for Ringling Brothers, who promoted the seals with the usual circus fanfare: "The most remarkable examples of animal education ever. Vastly more accomplished in their performances than any human circus actor that ever breathed. Trained seal acts of the past should not be thought of in connection with these new ones."¹⁵

Ringling Brothers's 1912 season opened at the Chicago Coliseum. Two seal troupes performed on platforms between the three rings. Frank

presented on one, Mark presented on the other. *Variety* wrote, “The Huling animals pulled a hit [and] made their exit to big applause.”¹⁶ After Chicago, the circus stopped at 150 cities, performing under the Ringling Brothers big top, a tent capable of accommodating 12,000 spectators, the largest piece of canvas ever raised.

During the winter break, the three Hulings moved to Atlantic City. The seaside vacation spot awoke next spring, brimming with tourists and honky-tonk attractions. Ray stayed and worked a seal act opposite a Punch and Judy show at the Million Dollar Pier.

Frank and Mark returned to Ringling Brothers, which again opened in Chicago. Al Ringling was ringmaster, a ballet spectacle reenacted Joan of Arc at the Coronation of Charles VII, and sixteen larger-than-life circus acts put on a presentation. All of society came out opening night. “Nothing but congratulations can be bestowed on the Messrs. Ringling for the show that has just made its bow to the Windy City,” a critic reported. He wrote of the Huling seals, “The animals gave a marvelous performance, and were highly appreciated.”¹⁷

After season’s end, the brothers sought work, customary for circus performers during the off months. Frank toured Europe; Mark and Ray worked theaters across the United States. The Hulings were back next spring with Ringling Brothers, which started again at the Chicago Coliseum before going under canvas. That same year, the three brothers looked to set up a home base for their seals. They decided on Kingston, New York.¹⁸

Located in the Hudson Valley, ninety miles north of Manhattan, Kingston had already served as the headquarters for a popular traveling circus and would serve as the headquarters for the Huling seal training facility for years to come. Much like Webb’s facility in Tonawanda, the Huling property had one key attribute—access to water for the seals, needed to regularly recharge their water tanks. The Huling’s lot was next to the Esopus Creek. They erected a two-story wooden building for the animals. The first seals arrived October 1914.



Frank Huling soon found more fame. Wirth Brothers, owners of the oldest and largest circus in Australia, had seen Frank performing at the Blackpool Tower Circus in England and offered him a contract. On September 15,

1915, Frank and six seals set sail from the west coast. Thirty-two days later, they arrived in Melbourne.

Wirth Brothers' sensation that year was to be family member May Wirth, renowned for doing forward and backward somersaults on a galloping horse. Her return to Australia followed four years abroad, where she had been a top draw with Barnum & Bailey.

But much to everyone's surprise, most notably poor May, it was another equestrian rider and his comrades who received the highest praise. Night after night, Frank's star seal, Mascot, juggled while riding a pony. Another seal walked a tightrope while balancing a table lamp atop a pole on his nose. The court jester seal induced laughter with his humanlike gestures and bubbly personality. Others whipped around rubber balls to one another, resulting in newspaper accounts of speed and accuracy that read more like reviews of the Harlem Globetrotters.

Frank supervised with stoic perfect posture; his slender five-foot-nine frame housed in a regal captain's uniform. For the music finale, three seals played horns, a fourth played cymbals attached to his flippers, and a fifth pounded time with a mallet, his body draped over a bass drum marked Huling's Sea Lion Band. "The fifth makes the bass drum resound through the arena with reverberations no human would dare to provoke," Frank said. "I believe the sound of the drum appeals to him, and he seems to take great pleasure in it."¹⁹

A Melbourne journalist wrote, "Nothing in Wirth's Circus programme this year has so caught popular interest as the wonderful performances of Captain Huling's seals. They simply eclipse all anticipation of what might be expected." The circus next crossed the Bass Strait to Tasmania, where a critic wrote of the seals, "One can hardly believe that anything has been more amazing."²⁰

Onward the act went. Newspapers declared the seals "the most wonderful act ever in New Zealand." Postcards made it to market, one showing Mascot riding a pony, another showing the tight-rope seal. Returning to Australia, beset and delayed by rough seas, the circus played for eight weeks at the grand opening of the Sydney Hippodrome. Critics professed the seals "The Sensation of Sydney."²¹

The circus toured Australia for months more. Accolades followed the seals wherever they went. The most imaginative praise, by far, came from a high-ranking government official who said, "If I told Queensland people

what I saw those seals do, they would call me the biggest liar since Ananias.”²² (Ananias, according to apostles of Jesus, died suddenly after lying to the Holy Spirit.)

Frank stayed in Australia. He fell in love; they married. The newlyweds had a postshow wedding reception on the Sydney Hippodrome stage. During the show, his wife sat in a VIP box. “The bride like all brides was the subject of general admiration,” reported the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*. “The clowns of course had a good deal to say about weddings and married life. . . . The seals themselves seemed to realize the importance of the occasion and by their acting signified the appreciation of their master’s choice.” Another paper predicted that the wedding couple “will live happily ever after—unless Mrs. Huling demands the glossy coat belonging to one of the seals.”²³

Not forgotten is May Wirth, today considered the greatest circus bareback horse rider of all time. At age seventy-five, long after her career was over, Wirth spoke of the seals upstaging her that year in Australia. She chuckled, “And oh, that got my nanny goat.”²⁴



Frank Huling in Otago, New Zealand, 1915. Courtesy of the *Otago Witness*.



Frank Huling in Sydney, Australia, 1916. National Library of Australia. nla.obj-393104284.

Back in the United States, Frank's brother Ray was busy innovating. Instead of presenting a troupe of seals, as was typical, he presented a single seal; a seal comedian. Among the seal's gags was using the latest in technological marvels by ordering food over a telephone. He also got laughs by repeatedly blowing out a match with which Ray was trying to light his pipe, and by doing a ventriloquist bit. Ray's solo comic seal was an instant success (a concept later used by Ray's brother Mark in his training of Sharkey), and so Ray set his sights on vaudeville.

Vaudeville was in its prime. It had blossomed in the late 1800s as a means of entertaining the burgeoning post-Civil War middle class. Shows were "polite and non-vulgar," consisting of singers, dancers, comedians, jugglers, novelties, and the like. Programs often included about eight acts, each running about fifteen minutes. Contemporary vaudeville expert Trav S.D. writes, "Vaudeville utterly dominated American popular culture during its formative years."²⁵

B. F. Keith established a franchise of vaudeville theaters and sent acts from one theater to the next, providing a steady stream of talent to cities and towns. The successful business model bred other circuits, most notably, Orpheum. If you played the Keith circuit, you were playing the “Keith time”; if you played the Orpheum circuit, it was the “Orpheum time.” The Keith and Orpheum Theaters in major cities were the envy of every vaudevillian. The pay was better, the crowds were bigger, and the tickets were reserved seating. Equally important, it was only two shows a day, versus smaller theaters, which staged three or four shows a day, if not more. To use a vaudeville expression still popular today, playing two-a-day Keith and Orpheum Theaters in major cities was the “big time.” Everything else was “small time.”

Ray and his clown seal made it to the big time. “Rarely does it occur that a member of the animal kingdom, whose principal function in life has been principally to supply downy wrap to the most fastidious, rise to the coveted position of vaudeville star, yet such exists in Huling’s Clown Seal. He possesses a pronounced sense of humor [and] he combines comedy and dexterity in a manner that has elicited the most eulogistic praise from the critics of the larger cities,” a journalist wrote.²⁶

Soon after, the United States entered World War I. Frank returned from Australia and went back to Ringling Brothers. The three Huling brothers, Frank, Mark, and Ray, registered for the draft, but at ages forty-one, thirty-four, and thirty-two, none received the call to serve. Then came the flu pandemic of 1918. The deadly strain of influenza killed tens of millions, significantly more than the number killed in World War I. The government shut down public gatherings. Frank and Mark had a shortened season with Ringling Brothers. Ray and his clown seal made few theater appearances. The better news that year came in November, when Germany signed an armistice agreement ending the war.

Four months later, the Ringling family joined their two amusement assets on a trial basis, in part due to US government control of railroads during and right after the war, which, in 1918, limited the number of locomotives expected to be made available the next year to the family, only enough for one circus.

On March 29, 1919, the Ringlings’ trial production debuted at Madison Square Garden in what must have been an awkward reunion of sorts for the Huling seals and May Wirth, both of whom were featured

acts. Little could they know the experiment that began that day would last almost a hundred years before taking its final bow; an ensemble that went by the name “Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, The Greatest Show on Earth.”

Asleep in the Deep

Ask anyone who knows anything about vaudeville to name its most famous venue and you will invariably get the same response: The Palace Theater in Midtown Manhattan, Keith’s flagship, the most desired vaudeville booking in the country. Acts included the Marx Brothers, Ethel Waters, Al Jolson, and every other big timer from the era. Eight acts a week, 400 acts a year—room enough for just a sliver of the tens of thousands of traveling performers during the height of vaudeville.

On April 16, 1923, the Palace Theater presented “a delightful mixture of class and comedy” intended to “please the most jaded vaudeville palate.” A seal act opened, which *Variety* said, “went as big as any show starter that has played the Palace in ages. The animal is perfectly trained and directed by a superior showman in Ray G. Huling.”²⁷

That animal was Charlie.

Named after Charles Ringling, Charlie arrived in the early 1920s with abilities surpassing Ray’s original clown seal. He started in a Ringling Brothers seal troupe, then went solo and became the era’s most famous trained seal. If not for the arrival of Sharkey a generation later, he would have been the greatest ever. Although a skilled juggler and a gifted comedian, it was two other talents that brought Charlie his most recognition: his ability to sing and dance.

Charlie did an “Indian war dance” in costume, sounding war whoops. He also did the Charleston and the shimmy, a popular ragtime dance. And he was a tap dancer, made possible by specially constructed hard-sole shoes that fit over his front flippers. His *piece de resistance*, however, was a Hawaiian hula dance.

Palace Theater patrons watched as Ray approached Charlie with the setup. “Now, I want you to do a little dance for me.”²⁸

The orchestra broke into an up-tempo number. Charlie whirled into a 360 spin. His body undulated with the music in a flurry of rapid-fire posterior shakes, each accentuated by the grass skirt wrapped around his

waist. The music pulsed. Flippers flew in every direction, leaving and returning to the floor like a finely tuned four-cylinder engine. The orchestra segued into snake-charmer music, the tempo increasing, the melody rising in pitch and intensity. Charlie stayed in perfect rhythm: shaking, turning, and flapping, never missing a beat.

An orchestral ritardando provided the cue for Charlie's dramatic closing move. As the music slowed, he lay on his belly, chin to the floor, and gazed forward. Using his front flippers for support, he lifted his torso and back flippers, approximating a headstand. Gravity reversed the direction of his grass skirt, which fashionably draped over his head, providing a curtsy effect. Ray joined his partner and took a bow as the orchestra brass hit a triumphant *ta-da!*



As for singing, it was Charlie who came up with the idea. “To tell the truth,” Ray said, “I had no idea of teaching Charlie to sing. He was smart enough to think up new sounds himself, just to win my attention—and a few extra fish.”²⁹

Although his natural barks were in the tenor range, Charlie chose a bass register for singing. Over the course of two years, he learned notes and memorized melodies. His breakout moment came when a friend of Ray's accompanied him on cello.

“I was absolutely astounded to hear him try to pitch his notes in tune with those of the cello,” Ray said.³⁰

Charlie not only matched notes, he sang harmony. Working with his cellist tutor, he learned everything from folk tunes to opera. He took a particular liking to an old ballad called “Asleep in the Deep,” a song, curiously enough, about those who have drowned at sea. Ray commissioned an orchestral arrangement to feature Charlie in duet with a cellist. A review from the *Chicago Tribune* lends insight into an actual performance.

Charlie takes his cue like a veteran, and when the introductory notes die away in the orchestra pit, he lets the song roll out. The deep resonant strains of an accompanying cello serve but to enrich Charlie's basso tones. “*Loudly the bell in the old tower rings, telling the sailor the warning it brings,*” booms Charlie, the

seal: he appears to feel the weight of the warning and when he passes the dread news along, “*Sailor beware; sailor take care!*” he puts his heart into it, and shakes his flippers solemnly at the astonished audience. “*Danger is near thee, beware—*” Charlie’s voice drops down and down, and when the final “*Beware!*” comes rolling from his thunderous vocal cords he holds the note until the bow completes its journey across the low C string on the cello. He then takes a bow with all the aplomb of an operatic favorite, and eats a fish with the wink of an eye.³¹

Charlie bedazzled critics. Ray cheerily fielded their questions. Asked to comment on Charlie singing “Asleep in the Deep” in duet with a cellist, accompanied by an orchestra, in front of a theater audience, Ray replied, “I’ve heard it sung worse.”³²



Charlie’s song and dance skills landed him a gig in Manhattan at the 5,000-seat Keith Hippodrome, then the largest indoor theater in existence, described by the *New York Times* as “a sort of eighth wonder of the world.”³³ Contemporary vaudeville expert Trav S.D. considers it “the most fabulous theater ever built in the United States.”³⁴ The one-week extravaganza brought together Charlie, the Hippodrome Corps de Ballet, a dance troupe from Paris, and Florence Mills, a singer and dancer who epitomized the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. She had recently headlined the Palace, a first for a black entertainer.

Florence Mills was a trailblazer for African American entertainers, a woman who broke free from the era’s negative racial stereotypes embedded in blackface minstrelsy and the menial black roles often found in silent films, such as domestic servants. Enabled by the vaudeville stage, Mills sang and danced with grace and dignity. She was a revered celebrity who charmed audiences with her effervescent presence. She entertained racially mixed crowds and starred in the first all-black revue to command top Broadway prices. A newspaper at the time called her “an ambassador of good will from the blacks to the whites.”³⁵ Vaudeville was “the first major American institution to offer serious opportunity for advancement no matter a person’s race,” serving as “an agent of assimilation.”³⁶ Championing the way was Florence Mills.

For her week at the Hippodrome, Mills did a spot with tap dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, the highest-paid black entertainer of his day, billed as “The Dark Cloud of Joy.” Mills and Robinson joined in a dance finale, backed by an all-star, all-black hot jazz band directed by African American Broadway composer Will Vodery.

Florence Mills on the same stage with Bill Robinson, backed by an all-black orchestra, performing in the biggest indoor theater in the world, was a defining moment in the development of American show business. And there as witness to history was Charlie, a trained seal, whose act directly preceded Mills and Robinson. The show received national accolades. *Billboard* praised Charlie for his singing and tap dancing.³⁷

But it is a photo that provided the show’s most enduring legacy. Florence Mills posed with a fellow dance star, though it wasn’t with Bill Robinson. Florence and Charlie posed on the Hippodrome stage: Florence in costume, doing a dance step; Charlie next to her, upside down, wearing a hat, doing his closing dance move. A captioned picture ran coast to coast: “Regardless of shape or size, the girls are all teaching the men the latest in dancing, the Charleston, and Miss Florence Mills of the Hippodrome, New York, who claims to be the originator of the dance, has as her latest pupil, Charlie, the most light-footed of tame seals.”³⁸

The photo has resurfaced in recent scholarly books, including *Black Heroes* and *Black Women in America*. A full-page image of Florence and Charlie can be found in the deluxe hardcover 2014 publication, *The Complete Encyclopedia of African American History*.

Unlucky Thirteen

In 1926, Frank Huling retired, regarded as among the world’s foremost authorities on sea lions. Ray Huling and Charlie toured, with Charlie now regarded as the most celebrated sea lion in show business.

Meanwhile, Mark Huling, in the shadows of his brothers, though no slouch, “known as the ‘seal king’ in circus channels,” trained one seal after another for Ringling Brothers and for others as far away as Japan. He also sent a troupe to the world’s fair in Philadelphia to celebrate the country’s 150th birthday. Press raved about Neptune, who “had learned feats of balancing and judgment which scientists cannot account for,” and Pico, who was “adept at juggling anything.”³⁹



Florence Mills and Charlie at the New York Hippodrome. Bettmann Archive via Getty Images.

In 1927, Ringling Brothers opened per usual at Madison Square Garden. Mark presented five troupes, twenty seals in all. *Variety* singled out “Huling’s champ seal,” a newcomer named Major. “With its tail resting on the side of a special saddle the sea lion did his tricks on the back of a circling horse. A novelty, perhaps the best yet, thought out for such animals.”⁴⁰ Major rode the horse while balancing on his nose a torch flaming at both ends, with long knives perched atop the torch. He also dressed the part, sporting a rhinestone-studded collar.

Mark went to London during the next off season to perform with the Bertram W. Mills Circus at Olympia, the most prestigious circus in England.

Along tagged Charlie. Although Ray was Charlie's main trainer, Mark had worked up a bit with Charlie playing "America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)." The song often served as a de facto national anthem before the 1931 adoption of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Circus agents in London papered the city with colorful lithographed posters, advertising the upcoming five-week spectacle: "Charlie the Musical Sea-Lion Presented by Captain Huling, and Twenty Other Sensational Novelties."⁴¹ Charlie was to play Britain's national anthem, "God Save the Queen," a melody of rather convenient choice, it being identical to "My Country, 'Tis of Thee."

Opening night drew thousands to the indoor arena. Attending dignitaries likely included proprietor Bertram Mills, joined by his right-hand men, the Earl of Lonsdale and Lord Daresbury. A concert band opened with a rousing version of John Philip Sousa's military march, "The Liberty Bell," better known today as the TV theme song from *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Acts performed in a center ring—acrobats, stilt walkers, a human cannonball, trapezists, and others—many from Ringling Brothers, including famed woman tiger trainer, Mabel Stark.⁴²

When it came time for Charlie, the concert band played a lively selection to set up the act. Mark and Charlie entered the ring. In the middle were tin horns mounted on a horizontal frame. Nearby was a music stand with sheet music. The band finished to respectful applause.

The circus barker addressed the audience. His stately voice reverberated over the arena loudspeakers. He paused between phrases; each pause elongated for effect.

"My Lords . . . ladies . . . and gentlemen."

The crowd hushed.

The barker proceeded with measured drama.

"Introducing the most wonderful achievement in sea lion training. (*Pause*) The sea lion (*pause*) will actually play the national anthem (*pause*) without any mechanical aid."

Charlie positioned himself near the horns. Mark belted out his instructions. "Blow on there. Hard. Real hard."

Charlie blew into the horns. He played the first four notes of the tune, then let loose a gargantuan *Burrrrrp!* that echoed through the air with grotesque hilarity.

Gales of laughter filled the arena. Charlie gave a smug look. Mark acted the stooge. The two played off each other like the seasoned pros they were. All the while, the crowd kept howling.

Charlie refocused on the horns. Mark commanded with amplified vigor. “Real hard this time. Blow it right in there.”

Charlie blew into the horns. Again, the first four notes. Again, a belch. Again, the crowd in hysterics.

Mark acted in frustration and moved the music stand closer. “Go on now. Blow on there, harder. *Real* hard.”

Charlie played the first four notes and spewed another enormous belch. The crowd laughed even louder.

Acting at his wits’ end, Mark outfitted Charlie with a pair of comically oversized glasses and gave another pep talk. “Come on now. Louder. Real hard. *Real* hard. Blow it right in there.”

With glasses in place and the music stand properly situated, Charlie played the first half of the melody to perfection. The crowd gave a round of applause. Charlie flawlessly played the remaining melody. The crowd gave an even bigger round of applause. Then the finale: Charlie replayed the melody at blinding speed, over twice as fast, each note receiving a



Mark, Charlie, and Charlie’s adoring fans; London. Bertram W. Mills Circus at Olympia press photo from the author’s collection.

crisp, staccato attack. The crowd listened in awe to his virtuosic rendition of “God Save the Queen.”⁴³

Mark later explained two ways of blowing a note, by the mouth and by the nose. “Inasmuch as a seal puts his mouth around a horn when he blows by the former method, for fast choruses we teach him merely to exhale through his nose as it is much swifter.”⁴⁴



Returning from London, Mark and several seals went straight to Florida. Biographer Richard Thomas, in his book *John Ringling, Circus Magnate and Art Patron*, reported on the happenings.

John Ringling decided that Mark Huling and his trained seals, a popular act of his circus, would be a profitable attraction on his St. Armand’s Key, across the causeway from Sarasota, that winter. He had a building erected in which they were to live and present their act and made arrangements for a supply of a certain type of fish they were supposed to like. The act moved into the building but the seals refused to eat the fish provided. John then wired a fish company to send out a boat immediately to catch a more expensive variety it was believed the seals could not resist. But when the fish arrived, they were also spurned. As his seals were unhappy at St. Armand’s and as he was afraid they would die of their self-imposed starvation, Huling packed up the troupe and returned, as quickly as possible, to Kingston, New York, his winter home.⁴⁵

John Ringling docked Mark \$500 (\$7,500 in today’s dollars) from his first paycheck the next circus season. Ringling said the building on St. Armand’s Key had cost him twice that, and Mark’s “refusal to put on a show there had caused him to lose that amount,” so he was charging him half. Mark finished his contracted season with Ringling Brothers, then gave his notice.⁴⁶

Ringling became embroiled in a dispute the next year with Madison Square Garden, refusing to accept their demand to preempt the circus on Friday nights for boxing matches, which were wildly popular at the time.