Emmett Kelly
The Greatest Clown on Earth

Donald McManus
Contents

Introduction ............................................. 4

Chapter 1: Early Years in Cabool, Missouri .............. 6

Chapter 2: Emmett the Young Artist ..................... 12

Chapter 3: Discovering Weary Willie ..................... 20

Chapter 4: The Big Time and a Big Fire .................. 28

Chapter 5: The Greatest Show on Earth .................. 36

Legacy: Emmett and Willie ............................. 44

Timeline .................................................. 45

Further Reading ......................................... 46

Index ....................................................... 48

Image Credits ............................................. 48
Introduction

“More than anything a circus means clowns: nameless faceless funnymen full of clever gags. But our story is about a different kind of clown. One that makes you laugh, but with a lump in your throat. His name is Emmett Kelly.”

These were the words used by future US president Ronald Reagan to introduce a movie
called *Clown* that was shown on television in 1955. Reagan was right when he said that most clowns were nameless and faceless, but there was a time when everyone in America knew the name Emmett Kelly. He was the most famous clown in the country from the 1930s through the 1950s, and even today people remember his clown character.

Weary Willie reminded people of the hard times that many Americans were struggling with during the Great Depression in the 1930s.

In my tramp clown character, folks who are down on their luck, have had disappointments and have maybe been pushed around by circumstances beyond their control laugh at themselves, and realizing that they have done this gives them a sort of spiritual second wind for going back into the battle.

Willie gave hope and laughter to thousands of children and adults for four decades.
Emmett Kelly was born on December 9, 1898, in the town of Sedan in southeastern Kansas. His father, Thomas Kelly, made a good living working for the Missouri-Pacific Railroad. Emmett’s mother, Molly, was the daughter of northern European immigrants and his father was an Irish immigrant. Thomas rarely talked about his life.
in Ireland, but he named Emmett after an Irish hero named Robert Emmett. Emmett’s father left Ireland to escape famine and political unrest and like many Irish immigrants, he found a good job with the westward-expanding railroad.

Almost one million people came from Ireland to the United States between 1851 and 1860. The Irish moved to the New World for

Robert Emmett (1778–1803) was an Irish political leader who led two failed rebellions against England in 1798 and 1803. He was captured by the British in 1803 and executed for treason. The Irish people considered him a national hero.
Chapter 3

Emmett Discovers Willie

Millions of people lost their jobs and many lost their homes when the stock market crashed in 1929. By 1933 the Great Depression, as this crisis came to be called, had taken hold all over America and it affected the circus along with everything else. Circuses were closing and it was harder than ever for performers to get good jobs. Emmett was lucky to have
a job during this era, but Eva broke her wrist when she fell from the trapeze and she had to give up working until it healed. A second son, Thomas, was born during this troubled time. The family was growing, but their income was getting smaller. Emmett had an opportunity to work for a season with the Cole Brothers circus, but they would hire him as a clown only. Emmett decided that if he had to give up the trapeze he would create a really new kind of clown.

Emmett’s invention of Weary Willie took place during a time in American history when tens of thousands of Americans were out of work. The Great

---

**The tramp in American culture**

Hobos, or tramps, were homeless people, usually men, who traveled around the countryside, often doing odd jobs in exchange for a meal. After the Civil War, many former soldiers became hobos. They were much feared as strangers who might be dangerous. This began to change in the early twentieth century as Charlie Chaplin and other actors used the hobo or tramp as a sympathetic character in their films and stage acts.
Emmett made his movie acting debut in 1951 in a strange mystery thriller named *The Fat Man*. The producers hoped to cash in on Emmett’s now-famous image as Weary Willie, but when Emmett read the script he discovered that his character was the murderer! Emmett refused to play the killer as Willie. He didn’t want to betray
his circus fans by turning Willie into a villain. After much arguing with the studio and the film’s director, Emmett got his way and the studio agreed to allow him to create a new clown face for the villain in the movie. He went back to his days as a white-faced clown to create an entirely new makeup and character.

Emmett planned to rejoin the circus once *The Fat Man* was finished shooting, but his agent
Emmett and Willie

Emmett Kelly’s subtle, gentle approach to circus clowning influenced an entire generation of performers who moved away from the large animal acts and “death-defying feats” of Barnum & Bailey’s to a smaller, more people-centered circus. A new vision for circus arose where animals were no longer called upon to perform or humans to risk their lives. The Cirque de Soleil, from Montreal, the Pickle Family Circus in San Francisco, the Big Apple Circus in New York City, and countless other clown-centered circuses in Europe owe a debt to Emmett’s humane vision of what the future of circus could be.
Timeline

1898: Emmett is born December 9 in Sedan, Kansas.
1906: The Kellys move to Cabool, Missouri, where Emmett's father buys farm.
1918: Emmett works painting Kewpie dolls and other props for the Western Show Property Exchange, which supplies equipment to carnivals, circuses, and side shows.
1922: Emmett debuts as trapeze artist with John Robinson Circus, doing a clown act on the side.
1923: Emmett meets and marries Eva Moore; they start a new act called The Aerial Kellys; their son Emmett Jr. is born
1934: Emmett and Eva’s second son, Thomas Patrick, is born. Emmett establishes Weary Willie as his clown persona in response to Depression era.
1935: Emmett joins the Cole Brothers Circus.
1940: Emmett appears in Broadway show *Keep Off the Grass*.
1941: Emmett joins Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus.
1944: More than 160 people die and more than 700 are injured when the Ringling Brothers big top burns in Hartford, Connecticut.
1951: Emmett makes movie debut starring in *The Fat Man* with Rock Hudson.
1952: Emmett is featured in the film *The Greatest Show on Earth*.
1955: Emmett marries Evi Gebhardt; they had two daughters, Monika and Stasia.
1955: The movie *Clown*, based on the life of Emmett Kelly, is released.
1956: Weary Willie becomes mascot for the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team.
1979: Emmett Kelly dies at his home in Florida.
1989: Emmett Kelly is inducted into the Clown Hall of Fame.
1994: Emmett Kelly is inducted into the Circus Hall of Fame.
1996: Emmett Kelly is inducted into the Hall of Famous Missourians.
For Further Reading

For Young Readers


Websites


Emmett Kelly as Weary Willie, clip of “sweeping up the spotlight” skit. vimeo.com/7098350.


**Sources**


*The Sedan Lance,* November 2, 1906.


Index

artist, Emmet Kelly as, 12–15
audience interaction, 24–27
early circuses, 13, 19, 29–31
family of Emmett Kelly, 6–7, 9, 12, 16, 21, 27, 42–43
Great Depression, 5, 20–22
Hartford Circus Fire, 34, 35
hobos, 21–23
Irish immigrants, 6–8
movies and TV, 5, 36–41
railroads, 6–7, 8–9, 10–11, 31–32
Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus, 28–29, 32, 34, 41, 44
trapeze, 15–17
traveling entertainers, 10-11
white-faced clowns, 17–19, 37

Image Credits

Original artwork by John Hare: pgs. 6, 12, 20, 28, and 36.
Images from Wikimedia: cover and p. 1, detail from poster, The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth, ca. 1889 (from Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC2-3802); p. 8, potato blight effects (USDA, Agricultural Research Service); p. 15, Kewpie doll (Lara, Flickr: Kewpie doll, 1 January 2009); p. 29, “Die Croupade,” from Die Reitkunst im Bilde by Ludwig Koch (Vienna: Campagne-Reitergesellschaft, 1923).

Courtesy of State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory: photos by Joseph Janney Steinmetz, Steinmetz Collection: cover and p. 1, Emmett Kelly holding a cabbage (JJS1347); p. 4, Emmett Kelly (JJS0688); p. 23, Emmett Kelly putting on make-up (JJS0681); p. 24, Emmett Kelly sharing cabbage with an audience member (JJS2091A); p. 25, Charlie Bell and Emmett Kelly (JJS2095); p. 26, Emmett Kelly rehearsing (JJS2024); p. 40, Emmett Kelly and Ray Wolfe with painting (JJS 0019); p. 43, Emmett Kelly in a bubble bath (JJS 1346).
Images by iStockphoto.com: background on pgs. 2, 8, 11, 19, 22, 27, 30, 35, 39, 42, 44 (#36701312); p. 18 (#28639082); p. 33 (#31240318).


Courtesy of Sandra Schulberg and KC Schulberg: p. 38, Emmett Kelly with other cast members on the set of Wind Across the Everglades (1958, Schulberg Productions).

Courtesy of Paramount Pictures: p. 39, Emmett Kelly and Jimmy Stewart in clown make-up, still shot from The Greatest Show on Earth (1952).

In the early 1900s, the circus was one of the most popular forms of entertainment in America, and one of the most popular circus acts was the clown. White-faced clowns in bright costumes made adults and children laugh with their silly antics. When the Great Depression caused many Americans to lose their jobs, Emmett Kelly decided to be a different type of clown—a sad-faced clown who reminded people of their struggles, but still made them laugh. His clown character, Weary Willie, inspired people to keep going during hard times. Because his clown character made people laugh and helped them with their troubles, Emmett Kelly became the most famous clown in the world.

Donald McManus has a PhD from University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in theater studies and is associate professor of theater studies and resident actor/director/dramaturg at Emory University. He is author of No Kidding: Clown as Protagonist in Twentieth-Century Theater (2003), which was selected as an Outstanding Academic Title in 2004. He is also a professional actor, director, musician, and clown.

John Hare is an illustrator, graphic designer, and artist. He lives in Gladstone, Missouri.