



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF BIRD MILLMAN (1890-1940) & "THE MILLMAN TRIO"

by

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*The above photo shows Bird suspended over New York's Wall Street in 1918. This performance and several others were part of the "Liberty Loan Drive," a campaign to sell war bonds for WWI.*

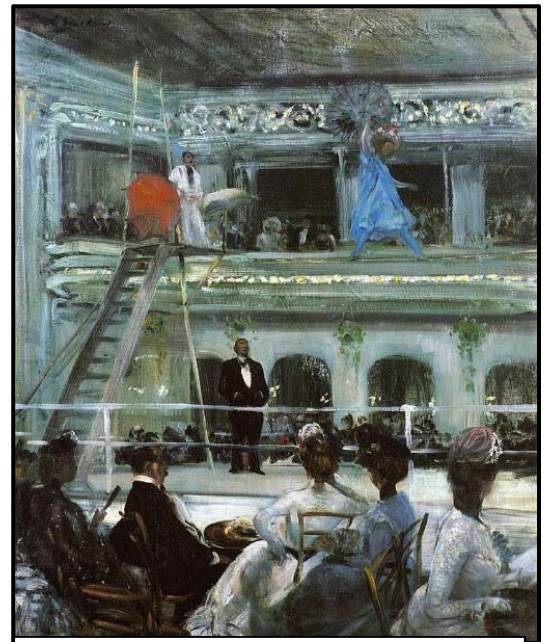
Bird Millman, born "Jennadean Engleman" in Cañon City, Colorado, has been hailed by many historians as the greatest female wire artiste who ever lived; certainly, in her lifetime, she achieved the height of fame. In the first two decades of the Twentieth Century, she was a headlining act in "Big Time" Vaudeville (or Variety), playing the Alhambra in London, *The Folies Bergères* in Paris, the Hippodrome in New York, and the supreme destination of all Vaudevillians, the Palace in New York.

Her biggest success, however, was with *The Barnum & Bailey Circus*, where she remained for several seasons after it merged with its rival to become *The Ringling Brothers & Barnum & Bailey Circus*. Her career with the circus, spanning the 1910s and the 1920s, coincided with the period now considered "The Golden Age of the American Circus."

During the circus's off-season, Bird appeared in some of New York's most lavish revues, including *The George White Scandals*, *The Greenwich Village Follies*, *Ziegfeld's Nine O'Clock Revue/ Midnight Frolic*, and even the revue by which *haut culture* in The United States was defined for over a decade, *The Ziegfeld Follies* (1916). In 1922, she appeared in the silent film, *The Deep Purple*.

Two of the most colorful, yet seemingly-contradictory, events in Bird's life were her command performance before the Royal Court of Kaiser Wilhelm II of The German Empire in 1906, and her later campaign to raise war bonds for WWI, which included performing at dizzying heights over Wall Street and Broadway in New York.

Before Bird was born, her parents, Dyke and Genevieve Engleman, also hailing from Cañon City, achieved moderate success in small circuses, where they were billed as "Millman and Millman." When Bird was a girl, the family of three resided for a time in Denver, Colorado, where Dyke is said to have opened the city's first phonograph store, (in the famous Equitable Building, on the corner of Curtis and



Hammerstein's Roof Garden by William J. Glackens, circa 1901, Oil on Canvas, Whitney Museum of Art. The subject of this painting is believed to be Bird

Seventeenth). With the addition of their young daughter, the family rekindled its success in small-time circus, this time billed as "The Millman Trio," the name by which the popular act broke directly into "Big Time" Vaudeville. Though the wire was always the mainstay of the act, Dyke was a juggler and a trapeze artist, Genevieve was known to hang suspended from her teeth, and Bird trained for a time as a trick rider on her pony, Daisy Bell. The talents of Mr. and Mrs. Millman were soon eclipsed, however, by that of their daughter, causing them to retire from performance.

Bird's first two marriages were brief and unsuccessful, the first occurring when she was only nineteen. Her third and happiest marriage was to Joseph Francis O'Day, a wealthy dye-stuffs manufacturer from Boston. Upon their marriage in 1924, Bird retired permanently from performance to live with Joseph in Boston. Soon after the market crash of 1929, however, her devastated Joseph passed away, leaving her in desperate financial and emotional straights. She spent the final years of her life with her mother and her uncle on a chicken ranch in Cañon City (near the corner of Cottonwood and Pear) before succumbing to cancer in 1940. A year later, her mother passed away.

Following Bird's life time, a handful of writers have shared a fascination with her. Editorial newspaper writers in Southern Colorado, including Michael U. Welch, Janet Sterling, and Raymond Beckner, have worked against the passage of time to remind people of the significance and the magnitude of Bird's fame.

Bird's intimate friend, Dixie Willson, the sister of Broadway composer, Meredith Willson, probably wrote the most about Bird as her contemporary. Gathering a year's worth of material from her 1922 season with *The Ringling Brothers & Barnum & Bailey Circus*, this vivacious woman wrote the nonfictitious work, *Where the World Folds Up at Night* (1922), which was printed in its entirety in several issues of *Good Housekeeping*. Dixie also wrote the fictitious works *Little Texas* (1925), a collaboration with Bird, and *Mystery in Spangles* (1950). Characters in the two latter works closely resemble personages in Bird's life.

The longest autobiographic source known to exist is a letter written by Bird to researcher Sverre Braathen; it is printed in the June /July 1940 issue of *The White Tops magazine*. True to her shy and quiet nature, Bird recounts only the subtle events that impressed upon her in her long career: the muddy, drizzly night that she was introduced to the circus lot, the boy who brought her ribbon candy, etc.



*This image of Bird appeared on a poster for the Barnum & Bailey Circus of 1918. Such singularity in circus promotion was reserved for the circus's greatest stars. Incidentally, Berta Beeson, a female impersonator who imitated Bird, appeared in a nearly identical poster several seasons later.*