Acrobatic Horse Rider

John Bill Rickets, a British circus professional who started his career with Charles Hughes at the Royal Circus in London, brought the full circus experience to America in 1792. Prior to Rickets’ circus, there were many equestrian performers and equestrian circuses, but Rickets was the first to bring a number of different acts together under one roof in North America. The equestrian show remained a part of Rickets circus, and like Astley, Rickets opened a riding school which featured acrobatic riding. Trick riding is still an important part of the modern circus, one of a few mainstay performances.

Rickets Amphitheatre opened in Philadelphia on April 3, 1793. The circus and riding school were at Twelfth and Market Streets, and featured the clown Mr. McDonald (John Durang), trick riding, and other acrobatic performances. Rickets also performed, executing a somersault over the heads of twenty men, and leaping “from two horses in full speed over a bar ten feet high.” Never one to flinch away from the theatrical, Rickets would ride his horse Complanter in full Roman gear, and at one point he staged the pantomime The Death of Captain Cook which featured elaborate battle scenes, ships arriving, war dances and the representation of a burning mountain.

His fame spread rapidly, drawing important figures like President George Washington who attended the show in 1793. Washington either sold or donated his white steed, Jack, who he had ridden during the Revolutionary War, to Rickets’ circus. Rickets eventually took the circus on the road in 1794, visiting many cities from Boston to Baltimore.

Rickets started another circus in 1797, this time in New York. The New York circus featured Jack, Washington’s white steed, now 28 years old, as a side show attraction. This circus traveled from Canada to Charleston, eventually putting down roots in Annapolis and then Eastern Maryland. The Philadelphia Amphitheatre burned down in 1799 and Rickets died only two years later, in 1801, lost at sea.

Rickets inspired a generation of trick riders in Boston. Al Johnson, who was active from 1827 through 1840, and James Robinson. In 1851, Robinson, then a 16 year old acrobatic rider completed a somersault while riding a horse bare back at the National Theatre, the second person in the world to do so.

“I turned somersaults, both forward and backward, over banners four and five feet wide; banners of that width are not attempted these days. I would stand well back on the horse, at the tail, with my back to his head, and throw a backward somersault. Hard, indeed, with the horse moving from you, but I do not remember ever missing one of these.”