“Clowns are the pegs on which the circus is hung.” - P. T. Barnum

The early clowns in the American Circus were intelligent masters of quips and riddles. They would sing comic songs, tell jokes, and would often make fun of the ringmaster, making a fool out of the man in charge. This character was very similar to the court fool or jester that we know so well from Shakespeare. The clown, as an individual, disappeared with the huge growth of the circus. Not only did the circus grow in the eye of the public but the physical space of the circus grew. As a result modern clowns often wear garish outfits and makeup. Their slapstick and miming performances are meant to please audiences in large spaces.

An early American circus clown, John Durang (1768-1822), who worked in Ricketts’ Circus, was the first American-born theatre professional. As Mr. McDonald in Ricketts’ circus, Durang took on the role of clown, although he is most famously known as the “hornpipe dancer.”

“Durang exercised nearly every ability that the stage offered or demanded, from dancer to actor, scene painter to puppeteer, choreographer to dancing master, arranger to translator, clown to acrobat, musician to manager, and more.”

As part of Rickett’s circus troop, Durang performed dressed as a Native American Indian, performed rope dancing, set off fireworks, put on dramatic shows, and also jumped through a ‘barrel of fire.’

Three famous and noteworthy Ringling Brothers clowns have performed in Boston often, Lou Jacobs, Felix Adler and Glen “Frosty” Little. Frank Bartlet Adler (1895-1960), or “Felix Adler”, known as the ‘King of Clowns’ and the ‘White House Clown,’ was inducted into the International Clown Hall of Fame in 1989. He worked with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus for twenty years, in which time he became well known for his act involving trick pigs.

Lou Jacobs (1903-1992), a German-American, performed with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus for sixty years, and was the first clown to be inducted into the International Clown hall of Fame (1989). Jacobs is a famous example of an Auguste Clown, one who is often the butt of the joke, or the victim of a prank. He is also known as the person to make the clown car popular.

Lou Jacobs mentee, Glen Little (1925-2010), or Frosty, worked with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey for over twenty years. He was awarded the ‘Master Clown’ title by the Ringling organization, one of only four clowns to be given the honor.