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WIRTH'S CIRCUS

Philip Peter Jacob Wirth (1864-1937) and his younger brother George (1867-1941) together with their elder brothers John and Harry, were itinerant musicians who formed 'Wirth's Band' and were engaged by Jones's National Circus and Ashton's Circus (the Ashton family were Freemasons).

In 1878, the four sons and their father started on their own touring New South Wales and Queensland as a 'Star Troupe of Varieties' in a second-hand Cobb and Co. coach and waggon.

John played the cornet, Harry the bass, Philip the trombone and George the tenor horn, each alternating with ring performances that included tumbling, horizontal bars, contortion, club-swinging and trapeze.

Wirth's Circus first visited Sydney in 1881 and, by 1882, had outgrown the coach and waggon and, from then on travelled by special train.

Crowds flocked to see the arrival and unloading of the circus train wherever it went including Adelaide and Perth despite the rail gauge changes.

The circus went to Noumea (1888), Tasmania (1889), New Zealand (1890) and South Africa (1893-4), toured South America, visited England (1897-8), and returned to Australia through South Africa and Asia. From then on it became an Australian institution with its own permanent building in Melbourne, and the Wirths established several customs, the best known of which was the presentation of a gold-mounted whip to the jockey who rode the winner of the Melbourne Cup.

They also had their own premises in Sydney, built for £40,000 by the Sydney Municipal Council and leased to the brothers. Wirth's *Hippodrome* opened in April 1916. Rebuilt in 1927, it became the Capitol Theatre.

Wirth's was the only circus allowed to operate in Australia during World War II. Trains were needed for more urgent matters, so the circus had to travel by road and its operations were limited by petrol rationing.

Wirths had competition, particularly from Bullen Brothers. (Stafford Bullen was a Freemason). Wirth's logistic system put it at a disadvantage because rivals could find out their destination and get to that place before them, using roads.

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