

# Warren Nelson's Big Top Chautauqua is Big and Blue and Thriving

by  
*Betty W. Stark*



The story of how Warren Nelson came to be master of Bayfield Wisconsin's "Carnegie Hall of Tent Shows" goes straight as an arrow back to his growing-up years in Fairmont, Minnesota. Way back to the county fairs and the Minnesota State Fair, and back to the hundreds of hours he roamed the midways while his dad sold Surge milking machines in the big canvas tents.

With a young boy's freewheeling curiosity, Warren poked around the corners of the carnies, falling in love with the exhilarating sights and sounds, inhaling the intensity and hoopla, and remembering, always, the smell of the canvas.

When the carnival inevitably pulled up stakes and moved on, Warren created his own midway, a clothesline-and-blanket extravaganza in the Nelson's backyard, setting up makeshift games and stage shows and using his persuasive skills to pull in every kid in the neighborhood.

Fast-forward to his college years in the late 60's when he led a musical group called The Tenth Story Window on a back-breaking tour of the U.S. and Canada. Playing the role of both booking agent and lead musician, he pummeled the group along a grueling road toward success.

Almost at the peak and about to embark on a world tour, Warren pulled the plug and headed to the loftier peaks of Colorado where he played solo gigs for \$15 a night. Things were happening too fast, and he needed time to think. There he met and fell in love with Betty Ferris.

"She saw the light in me," he remembers. And she encouraged him to take a precious year off to find himself.

“I read and read and read and wrote and wrote and wrote during that year. It was a tremendous gift”, Warren recalls, musing about how he devoured books of poetry and history, read authors he had never heard of, hung around bookstores, wrote songs and, simply, thought about life and the past and the richness of bygone eras.

In the spring of 1975, Warren entered into his journal an idea he called ‘A Thing’: "Combine your interest in poetry, live music, song writing, history, old pictures, story-telling and drama into a concert program about the history of Fairmont, Minnesota."

This nostalgic recollection of the long grass prairie and pioneer spirit, “A Martin County Hornpipe”, was created with Betty Ferris, and became the genesis of eight house shows that remain the heart and soul of Big Top Chautauqua.

Through the twists and turns of fate and faith, the Nelson-Ferris Concert Company migrated to Bayfield on the shores of Lake Superior, where in 1985 they wrote and produced "Souvenir Views" for neighboring Washburn’s centennial.

Among the onstage performers was Carolyn Sneed, now Big Top’s executive director, then a member of a local barbershop quartet and a connected member of the Washburn-Bayfield arts community. Warren shared his creative dreams with her, and she agreed to work with him to make the concept a reality.



A local benefactor recognized the unique abilities of Nelson and his talented band of performers (some had been with him since his college touring days). She was Mary Rice, a member of the Anderson Window Wall family and a dedicated supporter of the arts. To keep the talented group intact and performing in Bayfield, she offered to build them a permanent venue, perhaps a theater.

Warren said, “Make it a tent---a big one”, and it had to be canvas, not vinyl. Thus began the Big Top Chautauqua at the foot of Mt. Ashwabay Ski Hill, three miles south of Bayfield. Today, the 160-foot long, 70-foot wide, 28-foot tall, 900-seat Big Top attracts tens of thousands during a 15-week summer season that offers a breakneck agenda of over 70

productions, many of them featuring Warren Nelson's original songs as well as Warren himself and the Blue Canvas Orchestra and Singers.

Betty Ferris is in charge of the impressive visuals displayed on the Big Top's huge 16' x 24' screen during the house shows. Celebrating the history and places of Wisconsin and the Upper Great Lakes Region, they feature some of Warren's best songs and the musical assist of his talented troop.

Bearing names like "Riding the Wind" (a history of Bayfield and the Apostle Islands), "On The Velvet" (a nostalgic look at the Golden Age of Railroads), "Take It To The Lake" (a celebration of Lake Superior), "Keeper of the Light" (a tale of lighthouses and fierce storms on the treacherous waters of Lake Superior), the house shows are rich collections of original music, choreography and costuming, with healthy doses of history, humor and political commentary.



While the original house shows form the nucleus, big names have discovered the Big Top. Over the years, the Big Top has hosted Willie Nelson, Loretta Lynn, the late Johnny Cash, Arlo Guthrie, **Garrison Keillor**, Leo Kottke and plenty of other notable performers.

Laughing, Warren admits that Bayfield isn't a mainstream destination. He recalls that a New York agent recently said to him, "What the heck's going on up here? The tent is bigger than the town!"

Bayfield's off-season population is 686, but the place is awash with charm and draws visitors like moths to a flame, especially since 1997 when it was named "Best Little Town in the Midwest" by Chicago Tribune travel writer Alan Solomon.



Warren and most of the Blue Canvas Orchestra members live in the area and after the show they often head to Bayfield and Washburn watering holes. It's not at all uncommon for fans to follow them to Patsy's Bar in Washburn where an impromptu jam session might unfold between beer rounds.

"It's the intimacy of it all that keeps fans coming back. Good music, good story-telling, good fun in a unique setting", comments Carolyn, who agrees that many of the musicians would not have stayed around if it hadn't been for Warren, his dream, and his amazing ability to pull it all together night after night.



The big blue and white tent is raised in late May or early June each year, a volunteer ritual accompanied by much sweat and ceremony and wrapped up with an informal “cook the hamburgers, boil the fish, tap the

Leinies” party.

In early September, the Big Top players end the season with a long variety show called “Old Last Night”, followed by a bonfire and reminiscences of another wildly successful season. Then the tent comes down to be stored for the winter.

But it doesn’t end there. Warren and a trimmed-down troupe hit the road to bring Big Top talent to towns across the Midwest. And there’s always Tent Show Radio, now broadcasting on 54 stations in 11 states.

Calling himself “a man of the cloth”, Nelson talks reverently about his beautiful canvas tent and his talented musicians, performers and loyal fans, and the fact that the whole thing somehow magically came together way up on the shores of Lake Superior.

But he also admits it really goes back to the smell of canvas and a young boy’s dream.

Warren said, “As in all life, one thing just led to another.....”

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