

The Flying Nelsons

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For many years, Mount Clemens was the off-season home to a world-famous family of circus acrobats, known on the show circuit as "The Flying Nelsons." The Nelsons were actually the **Robert Hobson** family, which immigrated from England to the United States in 1868. Robert Hobson (1842-1915), the family patriarch, was a Londoner with a long family background in theater. He took the stage name Nelson in tribute to a beloved former partner. When he came to America he called his acrobatic act "Professor Nelson and Sons." In 1893, the troupe consisting of Hobson, his wife, **Emma** (1848-1925), sons **Arthur** (1863-1941) and **Robert, Jr.** (1863-1914), and other performers became known as "The Great Nelson Family." Eventually the act would come to be known as "The Flying Nelsons."

According to his own account, Robert Hobson adopted Mount Clemens as his family's permanent home in 1887, and never regretted it. The family home at 11 South Avenue had a specially-equipped basement that served as an acrobatic training center for the troupe and for up-and-coming younger members of the family. Robert Nelson, as he was popularly known in Mount Clemens, purchased an old theater on Cass Avenue in December, 1889, and operated it as the **Nelson Opera House**.

Son Arthur married **Sara Elizabeth Warren** (1880-1959), an Englishwoman, in 1896. The couple sneaked away from the big top at a circus stop in Wisconsin, got married, and returned to the ring in time for their main show that evening. Arthur and Sara had seven children, all of whom became performers in the family acrobatic troupe. They were: **Rosina Sarah** (1897-1980), **Oneida Wilson**

(1899-1937), **Hilda** (1900-1969), **Theol Lillian** (1904-1995), **Pauline Estrella** (1906-1994), **Carmencita Adelaide** (1908-1934), and **Paul Arthur Washington** (1913-). Robert Hobson's other son, Robert, Jr., was also a member of the Nelson troupe and had two children, **Arthur, Jr.** (1885-1919) and **Adele**.

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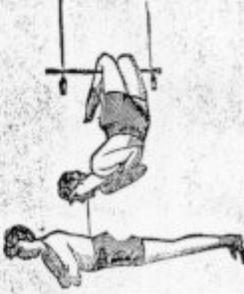
Our Congress of Arenic Stars,
The Champion of Champions. Premier Acrobats of the World.



The Wonderful, The Great
NELSON FAMILY,
7--IN NUMBER--7

Miss Belle Wilson,
The Accomplished and Dashing Bare Back Rider.

La Belle Adele,
The Favorite of the Arena,
in Her Ever Pleasing Performance on the
Running Globe.



30--Other Artists and
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Performances Afternoon and Night. Doors open at 1 and 7.
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THE PEOPLE'S SHOW 25c. AT PEOPLE'S PRICES.

An advertisement for the Nelson act which appeared in the Mount Clemens Monitor on August 3, 1894

The Nelsons were billed as "The World's Greatest Acrobats" in their day. They starred in every big-name circus in the U.S. from 1910 to 1935, including **Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey** and **Cole Brothers**. The troupe traveled to Europe, Cuba and South America. In 1928, the Nelsons added movie credits to their record when Hilda Nelson taught **Lon Chaney** to walk the wire in his movie

"Laugh, Clown, Laugh." Hilda also doubled **Loretta Young** in a wire-walking act in the same picture. The entire Nelson troupe was filmed in the MGM production *Circus Rookies*.

Each year, when the lights dimmed and the big top folded for the season, the Flying Nelsons came home to Mount Clemens. The children attended Mount Clemens schools and the family was active at **Grace Episcopal Church**. The senior Nelsons, Robert and Emma, retired from show business in 1911. Arthur and Sara continued with the younger generation of performers until 1935. Thereafter, some of the children continued with various circuses as individual performers. Daughter Rosina was inducted into the **Circus Hall of Fame** at Sarasota, Florida in 1969, in recognition of almost 40 years of circus performance. Daughter Estrella set a long-standing world record of 27 consecutive backflips in a circus act. Son Paul became equestrian director of the **Mills Brothers** circus.

The Robert Nelsons and the Arthur Nelsons, along with some of their children, were buried in **Clinton Grove Cemetery**, in the community they regarded as home. Some descendants of the Nelsons still reside in Mount Clemens.

For more information about The Flying Nelsons, we recommend:

- Selwa, Robert. "Big Top Pitched Under Family Tree," *Macomb Daily*, April 7, 1994, p.3A.
- Bishop, Bill. "Local Woman Once 'Big Top' Star: She Makes 'Hall of Fame,'" *Macomb Daily*, January 6, 1969.
- "Paul Nelson a Star in Mills Circus," *Mount Clemens Monitor-Leader*, May 16, 1951, p.4, col.5.
- Engelman, Eleanor. "'The Tumbling Nelsons' Leave Circus Arena to Plant Garden," *Mount Clemens Advertiser-Monitor*, May 28, 1937, p.1, col.2.
- Bailey, Gertrude. "Famous Nelson Family Back in City After Successful Trip Into Movies," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, May 18, 1928, p.1, col.5.
- "Nelson Family Off to Madison Square: Will Leave Soon to Begin Season With Famous Circus Company," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, March 4, 1926, p.1.
- "Miss Theol Nelson Makes Appearance in Earl Carol's Vanities," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, January 14, 1926, p.1.
- "A Veteran Showman," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, December 15, 1911, p.1.
- "The Wonderful Nelsons," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, July 31, 1891, p.4, col.3.