

Garden family circuses: A troubled history

Criminal charges. Animal cruelty. Customer complaints. Failed business ventures. Lawsuits.

Richard Garden, his sons Niles and Zachary, and businesses they've owned and operated, have a sordid history.

In 2016, the Garden family is operating circuses under the names King Cole Circus and Garden Bros. Circus.

Now defunct businesses operated by the Garden family include Piccadilly Circus, Toby Tyler Circus, Sterling & Reid Bros. Circus, Garden Family Shows, Circus Matrix, Wonder Zoo, Extravaganza Inc. and United Funding.

Incidents

October 2015: Toby Tyler Circus (Richard Garden) canceled several shows in Tennessee without notice. WSMV Ch. 4 interviewed one disappointed parent in McMinnville who explained, "There was nobody there, nothing. No circus, no nothing. You could see cars driving by looking for it. It wasn't there. We had a lot of our friends show up, and they had their daughters crying in their vehicles."

June 2014: Lawsuit filed against Niles Garden by Lamar Advertising for failure to pay \$3,500 bill.

June 2014: Piccadilly Circus (Zachary Garden) shows cancelled in three Massachusetts towns after the circus fails to provide information required to obtain permits. "The company did not announce the cancellations on its website or its social media accounts," reported a local newspaper.

April 2013: Zachary Garden cited by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for failing to provide veterinary treatment to a female sheep suffering from a fractured leg. The USDA inspector wrote, "A fractured leg is a painful condition. The licensee failed to seek prompt treatment for Bonnie leaving her to suffer." The inspector also found 17 goats, sheep and other animals crammed into a transport trailer that was too small. "The animals would have difficulty lying down and moving to the water receptacles," the inspector noted.

October 2012: Piccadilly Circus shows cancelled in Minnesota, North Dakota, Iowa and Colorado. Customers complained of learning about cancellations only upon arriving at the arena.

September 2012: Better Business Bureau of Fort Worth issued a warning about the Piccadilly Circus, noting that it had received "nearly two dozen complaints from consumers in several states about the entertainment company." Complaints included misleading advertising (circus acts not appearing as advertised) and misrepresentation about the cost of tickets. An article in the [Star-Telegram](#) added that "scathing reviews" on Ticketmaster's website supported the BBB's warning.

April 2010: Rory Martin, president of the Sarasota County Agricultural Fair Association, told [The Jackson Sun](#) that he won't let Richard Garden back on the county's property after receiving bad checks.

March 2010: Richard Garden arrested in Florida on fraud charges for issuing worthless checks.

December 2009: Niles Garden arrested in Florida on a felony charge of "scheme to defraud (\$50,000 or more)." According to the [Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#), the charge is related to attempts to swindle merchants and vendors in Sarasota and Tallahassee; the police report cited, "multiple events that were cancelled without notification."

"The Gardens have also had problems paying their bills over the years. Together they have been sued more than 40 times in Manatee and Sarasota counties, largely for nonpayment of bills. Many of the cases were dropped for 'lack of prosecution' after the Gardens simply folded the company being sued."

- [Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#), December 16, 2009

December 2009: "Cirque-A-Licious," a New Year's Eve party in Sarasota, Florida, promoted by Richard and Niles Garden, was canceled less than two weeks before the event.

August 2009: U.S. Postal Service filed a lawsuit against Niles Garden for failing to pay close to \$150,000 in bills.

"Over the last two decades, [Richard] Garden's businesses have been fined or barred from operating in at least six states. He faced criminal charges for a circus bleacher collapse that injured 70 people in New York, and his companies have been sued more than a dozen times in Sarasota County alone.... Garden's troubles started in 1984 when Massachusetts, New York, Vermont, Michigan, Maine and other states started pursuing his companies for deceptive practices."

- [Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#), April 9, 2009

April 2009: Garden Family Shows (Richard and Niles Garden) abruptly canceled an Ice Capades tour in Williams Lake, British Columbia, leaving a dozen performers without paychecks, and a hardware store in town out \$1,000 worth of materials that were never paid for.

February 2009: Niles Garden accused by Robarts Arena (Sarasota) of not paying \$5,100 rent for a failed home show (the show was shut down on the second morning of the three-day event).

June 2004: Attendees at a Toby Tyler Circus (Richard Garden) show in Jackson, Tennessee complained about misleading promotions (prices were higher than advertised, circus acts promoted on fliers were not part of the show).

August 2002: An animal handler with Sterling & Reid Bros. Circus was arrested for beating an elephant bloody during a performance in Norfolk, Virginia. The handler was later convicted on three counts of cruelty to animals.

"The [USDA] has issued more than 30 pages of violations to Sterling & Reid [Niles Garden] since 1999. And it fined the circus \$3,250 in 1999 for general problems. This summer ... a Sterling & Reid bear fell out of a moving truck onto a highway. It wasn't until 30 minutes later, when circus caravan drivers stopped for gas, that anyone discovered the bear was missing."
- [Sarasota Herald-Tribune](#), November 12, 2001

"The Sterling and Reid Brothers Circus...has weathered a slew of critical reports from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, from cases of physical abuse to consistently failing to provide veterinary plans and keeping exotic cats in cages too small for their natural movement.... Reports cites two instances of abuse—an arthritic tiger forced to perform in spite of a USDA citation against it, and cats being struck in the face."
- [Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#), July 18, 2001

April 1998: The San Bernardino Humane Society (California) confiscated eight ponies from a filthy Sterling & Reid Bros. Circus trailer and charged an animal trainer with cruelty to animals. The ponies were severely dehydrated and malnourished.

April 1997: "Circus goes unhappy under the big top," headline of an article in the [Bozeman Daily Chronicle](#) about a performance by the Sterling & Reid Bros. Circus. The newspaper reported, "Dozens of circus goers called the Bozeman Daily Chronicle Monday complaining about the show."

June 1988: Authorities in Fairfax and Prince George counties, Virginia, seized dozens of animals, including an elephant and a tiger, part of Richard Garden's traveling Wonder Zoo, who had been discovered crowded inside truck trailers without food, water or fresh air. Temperatures inside the trailers were more than 110 degrees. To avoid criminal charges, Garden relinquished custody of the animals. The U.S. Department of Agriculture charged Garden with violating federal animal welfare laws and he was fined \$12,000. In addition, Garden was prohibited for 15 years from exhibiting animals or doing other business that requires a license under the Animal Welfare Act.

April 1988: An appearance by the Wonder Zoo at a shopping mall in Gainesville, Florida sparked complaints about sick and dehydrated animals. A young elephant traveling with the zoo was sent to the University of Florida for care, but was later euthanized.

April 1988: The Attorney General of Pennsylvania filed a lawsuit accusing Extravaganza Inc. (Richard Garden) of raising money "through the use of misleading and deceptive solicitation pitches."

April 1988: New York Attorney General Robert Abrams asked the state Supreme Court to find Richard Garden in civil and criminal contempt for failing to pay court-ordered fines, restitution to charitable organizations and refunds for canceled performances. "Richard Garden flagrantly ignored a court order which my office obtained as part of its ongoing efforts to protect the public and the many worthy charities which are harmed by fraudulent operations such as the Toby Tyler Circus," said Abrams.

January 1988: The State of Maryland filed a lawsuit against Richard Garden alleging he had violated Maryland's charitable solicitation law.

July 1987: Richard Garden agreed to terms of a court order barring him from ever again doing business in New York state.

July 1987: 41 people were injured when bleachers collapsed at a Toby Tyler Circus performance near Green Bay, Wisconsin.

October 1986: The State of Wisconsin filed a lawsuit against Richard Garden alleging that the Toby Tyler Circus deceptively represented its ticket distribution practices.

September 1986: Toby Tyler Circus cancelled shows in Jackson, Tennessee leaving \$3,500 in debts.

June 1986: Bleachers collapsed at a Toby Tyler Circus performance in Greenport, New York. 68 people were injured. Richard Garden was arrested on numerous charges, including assault, reckless endangerment and criminal nuisance. He later pleaded guilty to six counts of assault and was fined \$6,000 and ordered to pay \$10,000 in restitution.

June 1984: Massachusetts Attorney General's office settled a civil case against Richard Garden's United Funding. The lawsuit accused the company of deceptive fundraising. United Funding was ordered to pay a \$50,000 fine and restitution.

1984: United Funding was permanently banned from the state of New York for violating fundraising laws.