



## Fred and Mary Kerslake Scrapbooks

1890-1923

4 vols. (1 linear foot)

Call no.: PH 079

### Collection overview

Kerslake's Pig Circus was one of the best known performing animal acts of the turn of the twentieth century, featuring a porcine troupe that did "everything but talk," from rolling barrels and jumping ropes to climbing ladders, playing see saw, and drawing carriages. Operated by Fred "Lil" Kerslake and his wife Mary, the act toured the United States, Mexico, Cuba, and Europe with major circuses such as Carl Hagenbeck, Walter L. Main, and Ringling Brothers, and continued under the care of their son Fred Kerslake, Jr., into the 1930s. Fred and Mary retired in 1930 and settled in Gill, Mass. Fred Kerslake died at home in Sept. 1949, with Mary following in 1954.

Assembled by the Kerslakes themselves, the four remarkable scrapbooks in this collection are packed with photographs and ephemera documenting their far flung travels between the 1890s and 1920s, along with their beloved pigs, donkeys, and horses. Interspersed in the volumes are photographs of clowns and other circus performers, brochures, fliers, and posters advertising Kerslake's Pigs and the circuses that employed them.

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## Background on Fred and Mary Kerslake

The early years of Fred Kerslake's life are shrouded in a mixture of obscurity and self-mythologizing. Born Seabourne Frederique Kerslake in Honiton, Devonshire, in the fall 1866, Fred was the third of at least nine children of Thomas and Jane Kerslake. As an infant, Fred's family emigrated to America, and settled in Salem, New York, where Thomas Kerslake purchased a hotel, however within a decade, the Kerslake's traded hostelry for farming.

Precisely how Kerslake became involved in pigs and performance is where the mystery and the history meet. His obituaries tended to agree that his porcine roots ran



*Fred Kerslake (right rear) and his pigs*

back to his father's farm in Salem. According to

*Billboard*, Kerslake entered show business "thru accidental discovery of his ability to train a litter of orphaned pigs, left in his care" while the *New York Times* shaded the story with a little tragedy, stating that he began training animals "after a sow died, leaving a litter of twenty-one." Writing for the New York History blog, Lawrence Gooley suggests that like any other small town boys of his day, Kerslake was enthralled by the circus and left home as a young man to become a wire-walker, traveling the New England states and eventually stopping off in Springfield, Mass.

Whatever the truth of the story, Kerslake ended up in Turners Falls, Mass., by 1889, where he met and married Mary Ann Jamieson on October 15. On the marriage certificate, Fred was listed as a "machinist" and Mary as a "finisher," suggesting that wire walking might have taken a back seat to millwork, at least temporarily. The couple had one child, Seabourne Frederick, Jr., born on March 30, 1893, who eventually joined the family act.

Still other versions of the porcine origin story assert that while Kerslake was staying with the Jamiesons, he and Mary saw an animal act at a circus in nearby Greenfield. When Fred commented that he could do better, Mary put her father up to providing three piglets and Fred went to work. To his good fortune, as the story goes, the early fruits of his efforts were witnessed by Samuel K. Hodgdon, the noted Vaudeville booking agent who just happened to be passing through town. With Hodgdon's assistance, Kerslake was soon booked as Prof. Kerslake's "Pig circus circus circus" at Austin and Stone's Dime Museum, the best-known entertainment spot in the heart of Boston's Scollay Square, just a few blocks from Faneuil Hall and the Quincy Markets.

The Kerslake show revolved around the comical antics of stubborn pigs performing human feats with as thin a veneer of educational respectability as possible. In 1892, Kerslake advertised his show as "demonstrating the possibility of educating the lower order of the brute creation" and he promised a lecture on the "evolution of the American pig from a ravenous barnyard rooter to a cultivated and respected member of the community." Mostly, though, he promised pigs: "Black pigs, white pigs, long pigs, short pigs, big pigs, little pigs, fat pigs, lean pigs." There were pigs upon pigs. "Pigs who do everything but talk. Pigs who roll barrels and jump rope. Pigs who up and down ladders. Pigs who play see-saw. Pigs who draw carriages." It was, according to the advertisement, "an exhibition of positive merit! An exhibition to be remembered!"

The success at Austin and Stone's Museum led to an ever-increasing string of bookings around the northeast, including regular appearances during the 1890s at venues such as Huber's Eighth Avenue Museum in New York City, where the talented pigs appeared on the bill with Juline the Serpent Queen, a spirit cabinet, the 'Soap King,' and Bob Roy, the Albino dislocator, not to mention the odd assortment of hypnotists, tattooed men, trained birds and dogs, and "Loretta, the champion lady club swinger of the world." With pigs in the spotlight and Fred as ringmaster, Mary was an indispensable partner, caring for the animals and helping out in training and performance as needed.

The great stars during Kerslake's early years were the trio Jerry, Peggy, and Pete, whose frolics met with rave reviews wherever they were seen. The "rural comedy" they performed was called a "positive novelty" and "the

funniest act on earth." Known by his nickname Lil, sometimes appending the title "Professor" or "Herr" and sometimes playing the Rube, Fred Kerslake expanded his act to include dogs, ponies, and donkeys. The *Boston Globe* remarked in 1895 that Kerslake "understands all animals thoroughly," although he had "devoted more time to pigs than other four-footeds" in recent years. The *Globe* lauded the difficulty of the act:

"Naturally a pig cannot perform some of the tricks which seem very common in other animals. I have never heard of a pig standing on his hind legs, because he is too bulky. I have tried to make pigs do this, but their composition is such that they cannot accomplish it successfully. In view of the fact that a pig cannot be easily driven, trainers teach their animals to pull wagons and carts... A clown pig is very difficult to obtain. In the first place he must be smart, and in the second place you have got to work with him. You get such a pig as that, and after you have thoroughly trained him he will continually introduce new features of his own."

Within a few years of his debut, Kerslake had attracted the attention of big-name circuses like Carl Hagenbeck and the Ringling Brothers. A stint with Hagenbeck led to signing as a premier act with Walter L. Main beginning in 1899, and for over three years, he traveled the breadth of the country, performing in over 150 cities and towns each year. When Hagenbeck returned to the States in 1903, Kerslake signed on as a key performer, reaching the apex of fame at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. The pigs were smash hits on the big stage, though *Billboard* reported that the pigs were not alone:

"While the act with the pigs is exceptional and first class, he has another that is still greater, that of his donkeys. . . His donkeys and pigs each wear pants, coats, and vests, and a more clever, interesting, amusing, and lasting performance is seldom seen."

The pigs' achievements at the Fair were so notable that Hagenbeck and his performers kept their act together on the road for the seasons of 1905 and 1906, though punctuated by a train wreck at Tiger Creek, Ark., on Oct. 25, 1906, and they then went on into Mexico. Soon thereafter, Kerslake toured Europe with Circus Blumenfeld and other outfits.

Throughout his travels, Kerslake kept a home base at his in-laws' house in Gill. He was listed with the Jamiesons in the federal census of 1900 as a "Traveling show man," and in 1910 he was reported in Gill -- still living with the Jamiesons -- as an "animal trainer" (occupation) working in "show livery" (industry). Certainly, his pigs were financially successful. Gooley reports they earned \$450 per week before the First World War, more than a year's wages for many working people at the time.

As the Kerslake's son, Fred, reached adulthood in 1913, he joined the act, and the show continued to evolve, as much on the Vaudeville circuit as the circus. In 1919, they performed a show at the Waldorf Theatre in Boston entitled "Grunts and grins," typical of the Vaudeville side of their operations. Fred soon formed a second troupe of educated pigs that toured independently, one troupe traveling with major circuses and the other performing at fairs and smaller venues. On his own merits, Fred, Jr., attracted the attention of Ringling Brothers, with whom he signed as a featured act in 1919.

Hanging up his trotters in 1930, Fred, Sr., settled in a substantial \$5000 house in Gill, Mass., listing his

occupation in the census as "none." He died there of arterial sclerosis on Sept. 29, 1949, aged 84, and was followed by Mary, the victim of a heart attack, on October 1, 1954. The couple are buried together in Aaron Clark Memorial Cemetery in nearby Turners Falls.

## Scope of collection

Assembled by Fred and Mary Kerslake between the 1890s and 1920s, the four scrapbooks in this collection are a remarkable record of the far flung travels of a renowned circus animal act, Kerslake's Pig Circus. Two of the volumes contain printing-out and developing-out photographs and real photo postcards that were used to promote the act along with an assortment of candid shots of the Kerslakes, their pigs, performing donkeys, and horses. Interspersed are compelling images of other circus performers, including clowns and acrobats, a series of images of wrecks of circus trains, and a handful of candid photographs of the Kerslakes themselves and their home.

The other two albums contain ephemera relating to Kerslake's Pigs and their famed employers Carl Hagenbeck, Ringling Brothers, and Walter T. Main. The brochures, fliers, and posters are accompanied by a handful of tickets and clippings. One of the volumes includes a considerable quantity of materials from the Kerslake's European tour that began in 1909.

## Inventory

Photograph album	ca.1890-1910	44 p. : 26.5 x 44 cm.	Vol. 1
<a href="#">Contents:</a> Photographs from Hagenbeck, Lil Kerslake, and individual circus performers and acts.			
Photograph album	ca.1900-1916	48 p. : 29.5 x 40.5 cm.	Vol. 2
<a href="#">Contents:</a> Includes images of Lil Kerslake's Pig Circus, clowns, circus acts, the Kerslake home (?), and circuses in New York, Mexico, and Germany.			
Ephemera scrapbook	1899-1923	118 p. : 36 x 29.5 cm.	Vol. 3
<a href="#">Contents:</a> Includes ephemera for Kerslake's Minstrels, Hagenbeck, Ringling Brothers, Keith's Western Vaudeville; Loew's Vaudeville and others.			
Ephemera scrapbook	1891-1919	46.5 x 33.5 cm.	Vol. 4
<a href="#">Contents:</a> Ephemera from Kerslake's European tour (1909) and after.			

## Administrative information

### Access

The collection is open for research.

### Provenance

Gift of Chris Emery, July 2017.

### **Partial Chronology of Kerslake's Pigs**

A loose leaf sheet of paper inserted inside the front of one volume includes a brief and incomplete chronology of appearances for Kerslake's Pigs. The dates may not be entirely accurate.

#### **Fred, Sr.**

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##### **1891-1892**

Mexico

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##### **1894**

Enormous Shows

United

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##### **1895-1896**

Hagenbeck

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##### **1897**

Welsh Brothers

Shows

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##### **1898-1899**

Walter L. Main

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##### **1900-1902**

Great Wallace

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##### **1903**

Luna Park

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##### **1904**

St. Louis World's

Fair

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##### **1905-1906**

Hagenbeck

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##### **1907-1908**

Ringling

Brothers

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##### **"Several years"**

Through Europe

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#### **Fred, Jr.**

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## 1913-1915

H. W.

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## 1915-1916

Cuba (eighteen  
months)

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## 1916-1917, 1917, 1920

Vaudeville

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## 1918

Ringling  
Brothers

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## 1918-1919

Service

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## 1920

Ringling Brothers Barnum and  
Bailey

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## 1920-21, 1921-22, 1922-23

Vaudeville

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## Bibliography

In 2014, the New York Public Library published an excellent three-part blog posting on Kerslake's Famous Pig Circus: [part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#).

Fred Kerslake's obituary appeared in *Billboard* Oct. 8, 194: 66.

## Processing Information

Processed by I. Eliot Wentworth, Aug. 2017.

## Language:

English

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*Cite as:* Fred and Mary Kerslake Scrapbooks (PH 079). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

## Search terms

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### Subjects

- Animal shows
- Circus performers--Massachusetts
- Circuses
- Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus
- Kerslake's Minstrels
- Kerslake's Pig Circus
- Kerslake, Mary Anne

- Pigs
- Ringling Brothers
- Walter L. Main Circus

#### **Contributors**

- Kerslake, Fred **[main entry]**

#### **Genres and formats**

- Photographs
- Printed ephemera
- Scrapbooks

#### **Link to similar SCUA collections**

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