

From The Times
October 2, 2008

Marie Roberts: dancer, horse rider and circus artiste
<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article4862693.ece>

Marie Roberts was the last surviving member of the quartet who ran the Robert Brothers Circus, one of Britain's largest travelling shows, which was renowned for the variety of its animal acts, with bears, lions, tigers, kangaroos, leopards, polar bears, chimpanzees and elephants, as well as horses, ponies and dogs.

One of eight siblings, Marie Beck was born in 1914 into a big showbusiness family, who, like so many other variety-artiste families, lived in the Brixton area of South London.

She made her stage debut at 12 as a member of the dance group known as Terry's Juveniles, appearing in 1926 at the London Palladium in that theatre's annual pantomime.

She left Terry's Juveniles when she was 16 and landed dance work with another famous troupe, the J. W. Jackson Girls, and was sent to work in Paris. She appeared at the Casino de Paris, firstly with the music-hall performer Mistinguett, and later in the 1930 revue *Paris qui rave*, which starred Josephine Baker. She counted her Parisian memories as among the happiest times of her life, and after 15 months on the same stage as Baker, Marie Beck returned to England to appear in variety and light revues in the provinces and London.

A talented tap dancer, she began to work with some of the great British stage personalities of the era, among them the pianist Charlie Kunz, who had his own big road show, the Canadian band leader Teddy Joyce, and the singer Dorothy Squires and her husband, Billy Reid, who directed his own orchestra. When, more than 20 years later, Marie and her sister-in-law Kitty visited the theatre where Squires was starring in concert, she sent a message backstage to say that Marie Roberts was in the audience and would like to meet her, forgetting that Squires knew her only by her maiden name. When they came face to face, Squires's typical retort was "Oh, you bloody silly cow! Who the hell knows Marie Roberts? You're still Marie Beck to me!"

It was while appearing in variety that Marie met her future husband, Tommy Roberts, a variety and circus performer, who was an acrobat in a horizontal bar act. He and his brother, Bobby, were the sons of the circus artiste Paul Otto Kleinschmidt, who had married Mary Fossett, sister of the first "Sir Robert" Fossett of British circus fame.

Tommy had started life as a child clown, later becoming a rider and acrobat. Marie worked in variety with Teddy Joyce and his band, and later with the Danny Lipton Trio, and then in the Muldoon Four, with which group she was working when she met Tommy. They were married in 1941, soon after Bobby

had married Kitty Mednick, another variety artiste dancer and musician.

Bobby and Tommy worked with their partner, Jimmy Scott, as the Otto Brothers in their horizontal bar acrobatic act on the variety circuit, and in 1942 were joined by Marie and Kitty at the Blackpool Tower Circus in a riding troupe, as the Ottawa Troupe.

At the end of the 1942 season, the brothers joined the National Fire Service and were posted to Edinburgh where their wives, billed as the Roberts Sisters, found work at the Edinburgh Palladium with a song and dance act, and playing parts in a production which changed each week.

In 1944 Bobby and Tommy Roberts, with their wives, Kitty and Marie, formed their first travelling circus, opening in Falkirk. The show flourished, and after the "big three" British circuses of the early postwar period, Chipperfield's, Billy Smart's and Bertram Mills, closed down, the Robert Brothers Circus remained one of the largest in the land, travelling with a vast menagerie of animals.

In the early days of their joint venture, Marie Roberts was charged with choreographing the dancing girls who toured the country's variety and music halls in a show called Hip-Hip-Zoo-Ray. She gave up her own appearances in the sawdust ring to bring up her family.

The Robert Brothers Circus ran until 1982 when the brothers decided to go their separate ways. Tommy, Marie and their children performed under a variety of titles, including the Spanish National Circus, the Hungarian State Circus and Robert Brothers Famous Circus. Their son, John, and his family continue to operate circuses and tent-hire firms in Britain today, while his sister, Beverley, and her family maintain their circus heritage with animal acts on the Continent.

Marie, as well as performing in the Ottawas riding act when she first married Tommy, also created circus dance routines and supervised the wardrobe for the show.

Her husband Tommy died in 1995.

Marie Roberts is survived by a son and a daughter. Another daughter predeceased her.

Marie Roberts, dancer, horse rider and circus artiste, was born on June 10, 1914. She died on September 20, 2008, aged 94