



603, story 2 – Society Circus

Gwen: Our next story investigates a souvenir from what seems to be an extravagant party during the great depression. April 1933. The world is in the throes of a devastating economic depression. In the United States, from Wall Street to Main Street, all social classes are reeling. The spotlight is on President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who's only in his second month of office.

FDR Archival: When there is no vision, the people perish.

Gwen : With the nation looking to him to help pull it back from the brink, President Roosevelt decides to ... *join the circus?! 13-year old Claire Aubin from Portland, Oregon has uncovered an unusual document. It's an announcement of a circus ball with a cast of celebrity and society acts ... and a mention of FDR himself.*

Claire: And Gloria Vanderbilt, the Gershwins, Chrysler. And some of the things I'm not sure if they're real or just made up.

Gwen: I'm Gwendolyn Wright, and I'm meeting with Claire to take a look at her circus flyer, which she found pressed between two books in her school library.

Claire: C'mon this way.

Gwen: Okay.

Claire: It says society circus at the top and I didn't know what that was.

Gwen: Cobina Wright's society circus. You don't think of these two words being together.

Claire: Yeah.

Gwen: Wild animals and wild women, buffoons recruited from the bluest bloods.



Claire: Semi nude oysters. Things like that are completely ridiculous but they are pretty funny too.

Gwen: There's a real sense of humor a kind of real irony about the whole thing.

Claire: Yeah.

Gwen: The program seems to promote some kind of high society theme party – a benefit for the boy scouts – at the opulent Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City. It's a who's who of the most wealthy and powerful people of the time... Sloan, Harriman, Hearst, and many others. The ball was scheduled for April 25th 1933. It looks more like something from the 20's and the Jazz age – not the depths of the depression. Honorable Franklin D. Roosevelt, President.

Claire: Is he the one with polio?

Gwen: That's right. So tell me Claire, exactly what you'd like for me to find out. There's a lot on here.

Claire: I'd like to know what a Society Circus is. It talks about Cobina Wright and I'm not really sure who she is. And I kinda want to know what President Roosevelt's affiliation with it is, why he would be going?

Gwen: I can't wait to get to work on this. It's going to be a lot of fun. Let me see if I can find out why these VIP's would be involved in this affair at a time when so many Americans were suffering, both rich and poor alike. So it does seem clear that almost everybody is a member of New York society. They're show business and financial business, brought together here at the Waldorf, and here's a reference to the depression: 'give these boys a handout,' instead of give them a hand'. It's acknowledging that almost everybody needed some help at that time. George Gershwin is listed as a peanut vendor. They seem to be playing on the idea of a circus, and Noel Coward is 'alcoholic stumbling high aloft', so they are playing on themselves being drinkers, being somewhat promiscuous. Who was the woman who planned this extraordinary event? And of all the organizations to be raising money for, why the Boy Scouts? Cobina Wright. She was born in 1887 in Oregon on a sheep farm. And she dies in 1970, so a good long life. Started off in New York society as a concert singer and later became a renowned hostess. From farm girl to fabulous, Cobina married into New York's wealthiest inner circle.



Her husband was millionaire Bill Wright of the New York Stock Exchange. So she is directly connected to Wall Street. And she wrote an autobiography. I found her autobiography. In the roaring 1920's Cobina Wright lived a gilded life, hosting grand parties with the blue blood royalty of New York's fifth avenue. Oh, this wasn't the first of her circus balls in 1933. She's describing in January 1929, 'we gave our annual circus ball.' So this had been a tradition of her life as a society hostess. But on Friday, October 25th 1929, Cobina received a fateful phone call. A falling stock market on Black Thursday had triggered a selling frenzy. By Friday, losses totaled nearly 5 billion dollars. So she and her husband are giving a white-tie ball that night and her husband calls on the telephone late in the morning and says to her darling we have lost everything, everything we have in the world. How did she have a ball that must have cost a fortune just a few years later? Cobina's autobiography explains that, after losing her fortune the Waldorf hired her as a party planner. So this is an extraordinary change in her life and in her husband's life. I want to find out more about this party hosted by a woman who seems to have fallen from the very top of the social ladder. Michael Batterberry, the founder of Food Arts Magazine, is an expert on the history of New York's high society. Very nice to meet you

Mike: This is going to be an interesting time travel

Gwen: Well we'll go back to the 30's

Mike: Shall we begin?

Gwen: Yes. Well, Michael, here's this Society Circus Program I told you about. Cobina Wright at the Waldorf. Take a look.

Mike: This is really extraordinary.

Gwen: She seems to have given earlier circus balls during the 1920's, what was the big difference with this one at the Waldorf.

Michael: Well, so size to begin with. The original ones surely had no more than 400 people in attendance whereas this was like a private party on steroids.

Gwen: One reason for the success of the ball involves the extraordinary measures the Waldorf had taken. Michael explains that Cobina wasn't the only one putting on appearances that night.



Michael: She was not alone in being hired by the Waldorf.

Gwen: All the guests at the party were dressed in finery, but many were actors brought in to make the event seem more cheery and carefree.

Michael: Henry Sell had a casting agency and he would send forty young people as long as they owned good evening clothes, you know, as long as they had and you looked attractive you were sent to the Waldorf and you sort of posed.¹ You sort of artificially furnished the place. They were actors, they were hired.

Gwen: It may have been the grimmest of times, but Michael says the Waldorf gathering that April night was a most extravagant affair.

Michael: You have royalty from the theater, Noel Coward. The Lunts, Fanny Brice. You have the Grand Dutchess Maria, and Prince Matchabelli.

Gwen: So they had this range of people mixing, actors and society and finance; does it surprise you to see this in the 30's.

Michael: It was kind of a banding together to not only keep up with appearances but to cheer each other up and to know it's like war time. You don't stay inside and be glum, you try to keep everybody's morale up. Here's something from the archives at the New York Times that's astounding. 3,000 attend ball in circus setting.

Gwen: It was a great success.

Michael: Total success.

Gwen: That raises another question, did she charge people money?

Michael: It's no different from a benefit today. It was for a cause. She charged \$500 for the boxes.

Gwen: At that price, the twenty box seats alone brought in well over \$10,000. That's equivalent to more than \$150,000 today. But I'm still a little puzzled. Why would the Boy Scouts need so much



money, and garner such enthusiasm – from the President of the United States, no less? I'm heading to the Alpine Scout Camp leader's lodge – about 90 miles from New York City – to meet Cedric Bodley of the Greater New York Council's Boy Scouts of America. Cedric, I'm investigating a society ball that was given in New York City at the Waldorf Astoria in 1933 as a fundraiser for the Boy Scouts.

Cedric: Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a very large part of the boys scout history. He was a firm believer that boys should have the same opportunities and adventures that he had as a young man to get out and be involved in the outdoors. He was very influential in getting businessmen and civic leaders involved.

Gwen: Begun in the United Kingdom in 1907 by British Army officer Robert Baden Powell, by 1910 scouting had spread to many countries of the former British Empire, including the United States. Well, that also reminds us though that the boys scouts were part of a much larger international movement in the 1910's and 20's there was a sense that being in the outdoors learning to be strong and independent was a way to breed a stronger upper class.

Cedric: It was definitely a more closed club when it first started, most of the young men who were involved in the scouts were probably white young males who came from very elite families, which kind of fits in because Roosevelt was a very prominent New Yorker, and most of his contacts were with the upper elite.

Gwen: When did his involvement begin?

Cedric: 1921.

Gwen: So it was right when he had contracted polio. He must have become even more interested in the kinds of sports and the outdoor activities that he felt he was now not able to do himself.

Cedric: He was very involved. We even have pictures of him.

Gwen: So that's him and that's when he's still well, he's standing.



Cedric: Yes, that's probably one of the last pictures that was taken before he contracted polio, actually two weeks after that picture was taken.

Gwen: Cedric explains that with the depression came a serious threat to the future of scouting.

Cedric: This very camp was feeling the pinch just like everybody else. Right here, it says here the Boy Scouts of America they had mortgages due in 1932 and the funds were unavailable.

Gwen: So in 1933 this very campground that was very dear to Franklin Roosevelt could have been foreclosed upon. That would be a possible reason for having a fundraiser that very year.

Cedric: Oh, most definitely.

Gwen: Cedric tells me that just prior to the Waldorf benefit, FDR signed legislation to create the civilian conservation corps. Modelled in part after the scouts, the C.C.C. would become FDR's most popular new deal program, giving employment to half a million men and boys, mostly on rural conservation projects. Cedric believes that, in April 1933, the new President felt a special urgency about saving the scouts.

Cedric: I truly believe that it was very important not only to the boy scouts but Roosevelt. The property was part of a training ground for his early new deal efforts.

Gwen: I see why FDR supported the scouts, but I still don't understand why Cobina Wright was able to draw such an impressive crowd of celebrities that night. Was it because FDR was at the circus? I'm meeting Burton Peretti at the New York historical society. He's made a close study of the President's first 100 days in office. Well as I told you I am investigating the society circus here in New York in 1933. But it also struck me looking at this that there's a kind of hold over from the 1920s, good life.

Burton: Yes. There is that tone of 20's whimsy, there are dare devil acts and so on very much reflecting that good natured time, but there are references to prohibition, there are sort of sly references to drinking and brew and ales and other sorts of things like that.



Gwen: Which of course was still illegal?

Burton: Yes right. Prohibition was not over yet in April 1933.

Gwen: Burton suggests that many at the circus that night were probably less interested in the boy scouts than in what the new democratic President was going to do to pull the nation out of the depression.

Burton: There were mixed feelings about Franklin Roosevelt among the wealthy who attended the circus ball. He was one of them, he was a patrician from a – a farmer state upriver, but he was putting in place a new policy in which the government would assist workers and farmers in regulating the economy and making decisions about how the economy worked.

Gwen: In the President's first days in office he launched a multitude of new policies, including farm subsidies and major banking reform. Many of those programs were broadly sympathetic to business, and sought to preserve the financial system. All the same, increased federal control over the economy upset many business leaders.

Burton: Many of these wealthy New Yorkers were used to the policies of previous administrations, republicans like Calvin Coolidge who abdicated allowing capitalist to do whatever they wanted in terms of the hiring and laying of people, opening or closing factories, so it was a big change.

Gwen: The power brokers at the Waldorf that April night were not just currying favor with the President's pet cause. They genuinely hoped the President had solutions for desperate times. At first FDR believed he could win their long-term support.

Burton: In April 1933 he was still very hopeful about that, but in the next two years the hostility from the most people on Wall Street, most capitalist became very evident, they accused him of being a Communist and if there was something of a divide that Roosevelt became the champion of the common man.



Gwen: By 1935 and 1936, as the depression worsened, Roosevelt's increased social spending and negotiations with labor groups drew growing enmity from many on Wall Street. Nevertheless, a minority in the upper echelons of society remained loyal to FDR.

Burton: Some of the individuals at the circus ball became part of the Roosevelt administration, Averell Harriman became an assistant secretary of state, Bob Sherwood is mentioned here. He was a play wright he became one of Roosevelt's speech writers. So, certainly many people of money became convinced that this kind of reform was necessary simply to keep the social family together.

Gwen: On April 25 1933, Roosevelt and the society circus brought the wealthy and powerful together to support an unlikely cause. But was the President in attendance that night?

Burton: I've located an article from April 26, the day after the circus ball.

Gwen: Perfect. It's time to report back to Claire. Well Clare this party happened, the Society Circus was one of the most lavish parties in New York at the worst point of the depression and all of these famous people came together and they didn't just watch the circus they were the circus, they were the audience and the shows that dressed up like tight rope walkers and clowns and ballerinas; how does that sound?

Claire: If you would have gone, you could have just like you see other people do it but then you would be also in the show which would have been cool.

Gwen: Well. You also wanted to know about Franklin Roosevelt.

Burton: On that day, the day of the ball, Roosevelt was concluding a conference with the British Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald. Very important conference about transatlantic cooperation to deal with the worldwide depression.

Gwen: The extraordinary crowd at Cobina Wright's party that night – bankers, celebrities and surreptitiously hired actors – had a variety of motives for attending. But there could be no doubt about the priorities, or the whereabouts, of the new President.



Burton: Franklin Roosevelt was in Washington the day of the circus ball.

Gwen: He sat up till the wee hours, planning new deal cooperation with the British prime minister. So Franklin Roosevelt wasn't at this party even though whose name was on here because he was staying in Washington working to try to save the country from the worst economic depression we'd ever faced.

Claire: That's cool, thanks a lot for letting me learn with you.

Gwen: I really enjoyed working on this.