

# All Aboard The Wisconsin Rail Car



The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art opened its newest addition, the *Wisconsin*, the Ringlings' private railroad car, which has been undergoing a three-year restoration.

The *Wisconsin* opened at a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a select audience on January 22, 2009 and opened to the public on January 23, 2009. The railroad car adds to the legacy of the Museum's founders, John and Mable Ringling, giving visitors a greater understanding of the Ringlings' tastes and lifestyle.

The opening of the *Wisconsin* and the reinterpreted galleries will enhance not only the visitors' experience, but also their understanding of the vital role the Ringlings' played in circus and Sarasota history.



"The tremendous work we have accomplished as a team is a sincere testament to our commitment to preserving history and making it accessible to diverse audiences," said Ringling Museum Executive Director John Wetenhall. "The team should be applauded for their vision, diligence and hard work in locating, transporting and restoring the *Wisconsin* railroad car to its original grandeur. We are proud to give our visitors another opportunity to look into the glorious life of John and Mable Ringling."

After exterior restoration in Alabama, the *Wisconsin* arrived in its final location on the Ringling Estate at the Circus Museum in August 2008. Since that time, a collaborative team of professionals and volunteers including conservators, curators, construction experts and senior leaders met the challenge of restoring its interior.

Built in 1905, the *Wisconsin* was John & Mable Ringling's private railroad car, that carried them around the country and for travel between New York and Sarasota, Florida. At 79 feet long, the car contains sleeping compartments, a kitchen, bathrooms and crew quarters. The interiors of the railroad car include inlaid mahogany, ornate moldings and stained glass.

The railroad played a large role in shaping the United States as well as the history of Florida. At that time, the private rail car was equivalent to today's private jet a means of transportation; and a symbol of the wealth and stature of its owner. For John Ringling, the railroad car was a means to conduct not only the business of the circus,

but personal business and pleasure as well. The *Wisconsin* was used as an office, a home away from home and a place to entertain friends, family, business associates and politicians in style.

The *Wisconsin* railroad car was selected for restoration because of its historical relevance, condition, restoration value and availability. "It is a perfect compliment to the Cà d'Zan Mansion," said Deborah Walk, Tibbals Curator of the Circus at the Ringling Museum. "The railroad car is a precursor to the Cà d'Zan. The same attention to detail, ornate decoration and opulent accoutrements is present in the *Wisconsin*. This railroad car will give visitors a greater understanding of the Ringlings' lifestyle."

Most of the exterior restoration work was completed by the Edwards Rail Company in Montgomery, Alabama before the railroad car arrived at the Circus Museum. The majority of the interior restoration has been worked on while at its home in the Circus Museum.

The Ringling Museum's conservation team is restoring the interior to its original grandeur using photographs and plans to reconstruct decorative moldings, paint colors, clean and replace original stained glass from the Kokomo Glass Company and fabricate components of the car.

"The opportunity to work with such talented professionals in restoring the *Wisconsin* has been rewarding and a wonderful lesson in patience, care and dedication," Michele Scalera, Chief Conservator of the Ringling Museum, said. "Our work is not complete and we will work within our means to bring the car back respectfully to its original form when Mr. John Ringling owned it."

Due to the delicate nature of the restoration process and the limited space of the railroad car, visitors will be able to view the *Wisconsin* and the restored rooms from a designated viewing platform on the exterior perimeter of the car.

The *Wisconsin* railroad car was funded through a four-year, \$400,000 federal grant awarded in November 2002 by the Florida Department of Transportation and generous donations from individuals. For more information on the *Wisconsin* and the Circus Museum visit [www.ringling.org](http://www.ringling.org).



The *Wisconsin* is 79 feet long, 14 feet high, 10 feet wide and weighs 64 tons. The car contains an observation room, 3 bedrooms, a dining room and kitchen, a bathroom, and servant's quarters. Most of the rail car's extravagant interiors including inlaid mahogany, ornate moldings and stained glass are original.

*Built by the Pullman Company in 1905, the Wisconsin, was John and Mable Ringling's personal rail car, and from 1905-1916, it transported them across the country and back and forth between New York and Sarasota. The car is a true icon of a gilded age entrepreneur.*

