

Bicycles and Saxophones, The Elliott-Savonas Troupe

Mike Brubaker, 26 February 2022



THE ELLIOTT'S
ON THEIR
PATENT UNICYCLES

PATENT UNICYCLE ACT

In which they execute in a most graceful and finished style their Grand Original Parisian Quadrille, as given by them in their Grand Carnival on the ice on the whole of the European continent.

Their exciting tournament of amazing skill is accomplished by firmly buckling on each foot a 21 Inch Revolving Wheel, upon which they stand erect and manipulate with apparent ease, and spin in circles around the stage with locomotive velocity, executing a startling succession of unnatural evolutions, and exhibiting many incredible poses, the like of which no mortal ever saw before and which at once places this phenomenal troupe FAR IN ADVANCE of every other bicycle celebrity. We do not challenge. To do that invites comparison and admits of doubt. We simply say that WE DEFY THE WORLD TO PRODUCE ANYTHING LIKE THEIR EQUALS.

All Patent rights protected by Messrs. Munn & Co. of New York.
THE ELLIOTT'S are the only family that is allowed by LAW to perform in America.

*The Elliott's on their patent Unicycles
Source: Milner Library, Illinois State University*

DECEMBER 18, 1897.

T H E E R A.

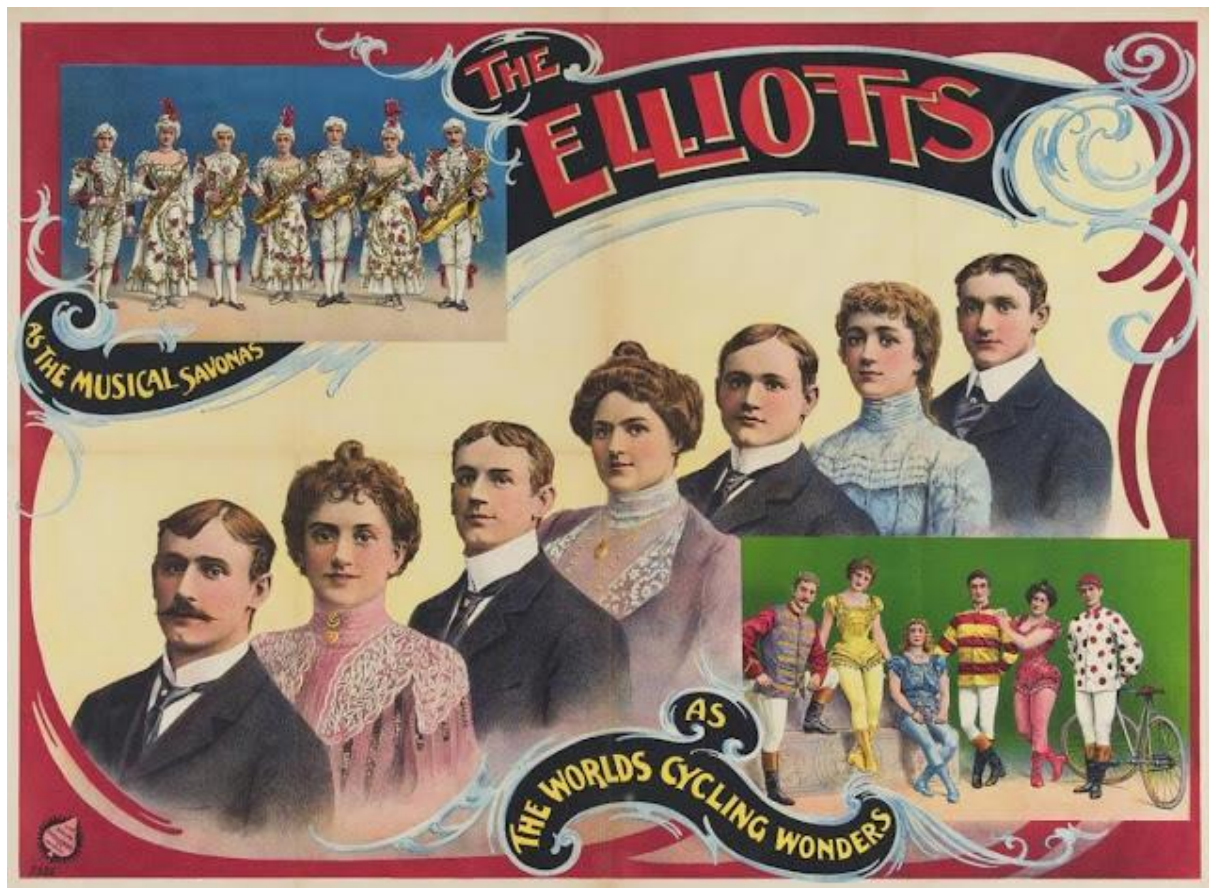
CARROLL, T. P. Comedian, Headed Music Hall, Finsbury, London. At Liberty Jan. 30th. Comic songs required.	DUDLEY, LYDIA. Comedian and Top-hat Dancer. Principal Girl. "Star Board" every Evening, Colina's Circus, Edinburg.	HENO, PROFESSOR. Ventriloquist. Marion, and Punch and Judy Manipulator. Can accept for Evening Parties. 38, St. James's, Brighton.
CATTO BROS. Sensational Flying Gymnasts and Comic Bar Performers. Greater success than ever. Birmingham, Fourth Engagement. Lasts 6 Shows, Coventry.	DUNBAR, MR. EDWARD C. at Liberty. Specialities and "Merrie Blacksmith" Sketch. Bath, Jan. 3d. 21, Chichester, Chelsea, S.W.	HERBERT, MR. FRED. Familiar Vocal Vocalist, concludes Tonight's Albumina Sketches. Monday, Empire, Portsmouth. R. Warner and Co.
CHARLEY, SISTERS. Duetists and Specialty Dancers. Panto Rehearsals. Communications, care of S. A. Turner, Levensham, Birmingham. Liberty April.	DUNLOPS, THE LILLIAN SIVADO. Pantomime, Amphitheatre, Barnet.	HETHERINGTON, MISS DOT. Unconcluded Provincial Tour. More Rehearsals, Edin- burgh, "Clarendon," at Opera House, Birmingham.
CHESTER and LEES MARIONETTES. Currents Grand Waxworks, Belfast. First Week. Dignified success.	DUNNING, MISS KAHN and KAHN. Ventriloquist, Second Sight and Magic. The Budget Act. Smartest and best prices. Monday, Empire, Cardiff.	HILL, ROWLAND. Exquisite Character Comedian, concludes To-night Sketches, Pantomime. Monday, returns, Leam, Bath.
CHINKO, LITTLE. The Marvelous Juggler, Circus, Rotterdam. A Feature. Communications, 41, Bricklayers-avenue, Galeshead.	DUPRE, E. Z. The Premier Magician and his Celebrated Circus Wonders, now appearing at First Pavilion, Hastings.	HUGH and HIGH, Empire Leicester. Just closed. London Nightly. Always a success everywhere.
CLARE, LESLIE. Vocal Actor, Concludes another pleasing Tour. Forty three Weeks. "A Trip to Ham-Pan" Co. Address, 175, Princes-street, Liverpool.	ELCOCK, SISTERS. Double Wire Performers. L. SISTERS ST. ROY. Song and Dance Artists. Great Suc- cess, Palace, Croydon. Monday next, Amphitheatre, Barnet.	HUGHES, TOM. Comedian. Permanent, 21, Flowering-avenue, Galeshead-on-Tyne.
CLARE, SISTERS. Up-to-date Duetists and Smart Dancers, big success. Bath's Amphitheatre, Bath.	ELEN, MR. GUS. Christmas Arrangements: - Palace, Standard, and London. Bath and Sonnet.	HUME, MR. LIONEL. Palace Theatre (exclusively engaged), in his New 8 act, "The British Compost." Published by Weeks and Co., Manchester-street.
CLARIBELL, SISTERS. Monday, Pantomime Rehearsals, Duetists and Duetists, in "Clarendon," Palace Theatre, Friday, N.E.	ELLIEN, MISS NELLIE. Accompanied Solo and Dancer, address, Ruffa, Wigan.	HUNTER, G. W. Comedian and Recitator, Middleton and Tivoli.
CLARKE, FRED. Authorized Baggage Man for Vandyke and Palace Theatres, Newcastle-on-Tyne. Address as above.	ELLIOTT, GEORGE and MAGGIE SIMS. Graves 1st, 18, Upper Dunsen-street, Leam. Always Pleased to see Old Folks.	JACKLEY WONDERS (Original). Solely Marvels, Open Jan. 30th at Metropolitan Music Hall. For Dates address, P. Higham.
CLEMOLO, Clowns. Rehearsals To-night, Tudor's Circus, Ipswich. Monday next, 26, Hall-street, Canterbury, S.E.	ELLIOTT TROUPE, the Only and Originals. great success, Barnet's Circus, Pantomime, and Theatre for offer. 61A, Smith-street, Kennington-park, S.E.	JAMES, JIMMY. Musical and Vocal Solo Comedian, Song and Character Tour. Agents, Manchester and London.
CLIO and ROCHLIE (HARRY and TERRY) Empire, Huddersfield. Returns to Town for Christmas. Ready Funny Duet required.	ELLIOTTS and SAVONAS, the Marvelous Electric Musicians and Safety Cyclists. Permanent address, 42, St. Paul's-road, Middlebrough-on-Tees.	JUDGES, CHAS. Marvellous Performing J. Pantomime, Colossus, and Musicians. Last Week, Bradford; next 27th, Sunderland. Bird Show For Scotland.
CODA and CARRY. Musical Comedians, Palace, Croydon.	ELVIRA, AMY. Refined Solo and Dancer, at Midweek, Nightly. Rehearsal daily Pantomime, West London Theatre, Leam, 26, St. James-street, W.C.	KARNO and LESTER. Men from College, grand success, Gaiety, Birmingham. Dec. 23th, Rehearsals, Pantomime, Theatre Royal, Bath.
COLLEY'S AGENCY. Sole Proprietor, Leon Victor, 30A, St. James-street, W.C.	EMERY, PEECY. Celebrated Comedy Solo Sketch Troupe, including LITTLE SQUIRE JACK, Barnet, and other Experienced Artists. Grand, Manchester.	KERRIE, NORA. Burlesque Actress and Dancer, Princess, Pantomime, "Dish Whittington," Grand, Glasgow. - Sole Agent, H. Bingham.
COLLINS, CUTHBERT. the Well-known Composer, Pantomime, Rehearsal for First-class Melodist, Huddersfield. - 27, Wyndham, South Hackney, London, N.E.	EMMETT, TOM. Vocalist and Comedian. Another Big Success. "Our Vagabond Heroes." Library-January. Royal Albert, Opening to-morrow.	KERNES, THE (BILLY and MADEL), the Great Black and White Artists. Monday, Empire, Pantomime, Theatre Royal, Bath.
COLLINS, LARKELLE, and COLLINS. Just finished Irish Tour. Vandyke, Newcastle-on-Tyne. Barnet and Queen's, Christmas.	ENO, ENO, ENO. the Great Mimic, South London. Communications, George Foster.	KEMBLE, H. J. "The Comedy Oddity." Sketches To-night Starline Tour of the Principal Halls. Next Week, Pantomime Rehearsals, Theatre Royal, Bath.
COLVERD, JOVIAL JOE. Empire, Portsmouth. More Successful than ever. Monday next, Empire, Hull. Two Weeks.	ESMAN, N. Juggler, Sunderland.	KINGSTON, GEORGE. Pantomime.
CONROY, OLIVER. Comedian, starring Grand, Shortland. Monday, Gaiety, Birmingham. Will always say Good Character Solo. Authors Note.	ETHAIEN BROTHERS. "The Professor and his Pupils," the Palace.	LAMONTE, SYRIA. cannot fulfil Engagements on account of indisposition. Thanks Harry, Leam, Vernon Dunsen, for Postponement. Case of "The Era."
CONROY and MCABE. Success, Empire, Bath, and London, Shoreditch. Specially Engaged for Mrs. St. Paul and Bath, with Val Simpson, Beg.	EVREMOND TRI. Economic Pantomime, Theatre Royal, Cardiff. "Robinson Crusoe." Agents, R. De Vere.	LANARD, LANCE. Novel, Economic Comedian, and Unique Gaiety Dancer. Great Success with Lady Concert Company. Town Hall, Leam, Fifth.
COOK, STEVE. Solo Artist, in "Blue Beach." What, again! Theatre Royal, Bath.	FAREEN, ARTHUR, and YOUNG. MAGGIE, now at Liberty for Pantomime, Bath and Wigan. 117, Bardon-street, Leicester.	LAYBURN, NELLY. "The Lady Slavey," 71, Kennington-road, S.E.

London, *The Era*
18 December 1897

In December 1897, London's theatrical trade paper, *The Era*, ran its weekly directory of acts then touring the theaters and music halls of Britain. In the center of the D to H column was a notice:

ELLIOTTS and SAVONAS, the Marvelous
Electric Musicians and Safety Cyclists, Permanent
address, 42, St. Paul's-road. Middlebrough-on-Tees.

They were a troupe of entertainers who performed in two separate and completely different acts. The first was as the **Cycling Elliotts** and the second was as the **Musical Savonas**. This multi-talented ensemble of seven siblings (Mostly, but more on that later.) got their start in show business as a circus family of trick cyclists. In the 1880s they expanded their act, becoming a musical ensemble that played an amazing number of instruments, notably on the saxophone.



The Elliotts, 1903

Source: University of Amsterdam, Theatercollectie

This colorful poster of the Elliotts dates from 1903. Framed across the center is a picture of the four brothers and three sisters dressed in "civilian" attire. In one corner is a vignette of the Elliotts as "the Musical Savonas" dressed in quasi-18th century costumes with seven saxophones. In another corner are the Elliotts as "the Worlds Cycling Wonders" wearing fancy acrobatic leotards and posing with a bicycle. In 1898 they appeared as the headline attraction at the People's Palace in Bristol, England.

PEOPLE'S PALACE,
BALDWIN STREET, BRISTOL.
Managing Directors..... Messrs LIVERMORE BROS.
Acting Manager..... Mr CHARLES GASCOIGNE.

EXTRA ATTRACTIONS FOR THE HOLIDAY
WEEK.

TO-NIGHT (FRIDAY), APRIL 15TH.
ENGAGED, AT ENORMOUS EXPENSE, THE
7 SAVONAS, 7
THE MUSICAL MARVELS, with their splendid Electrical
Stage Fit-up of over 400 8-Candle Power Lamps.
FLO ELVIN, Character Comedian. | JOHNNY GILMORE, The Quaint Comedian.
RAY & RANFORD, Knockabout Drolls. | WITTINGTON BROS., Head and Hand Balancers.

THE ACADEMY,
Laughable Sketch by the RENOWNED COLLINSON
COMBINATION,
THE ELLIOTTS,
The Wonderful Acrobatic Safety Cyclists.
HENDERSON AND STANLEY TRIO, | ALMA O'BREY, Character Comedienne.
Warp Song & Dance Artists.

MARIE TYLER,
Character Comedienne, in all her Latest London
Successes.

Popular prices, 3d to 2s 6d. Seats can now be booked at
the Office of the Palace. 8851

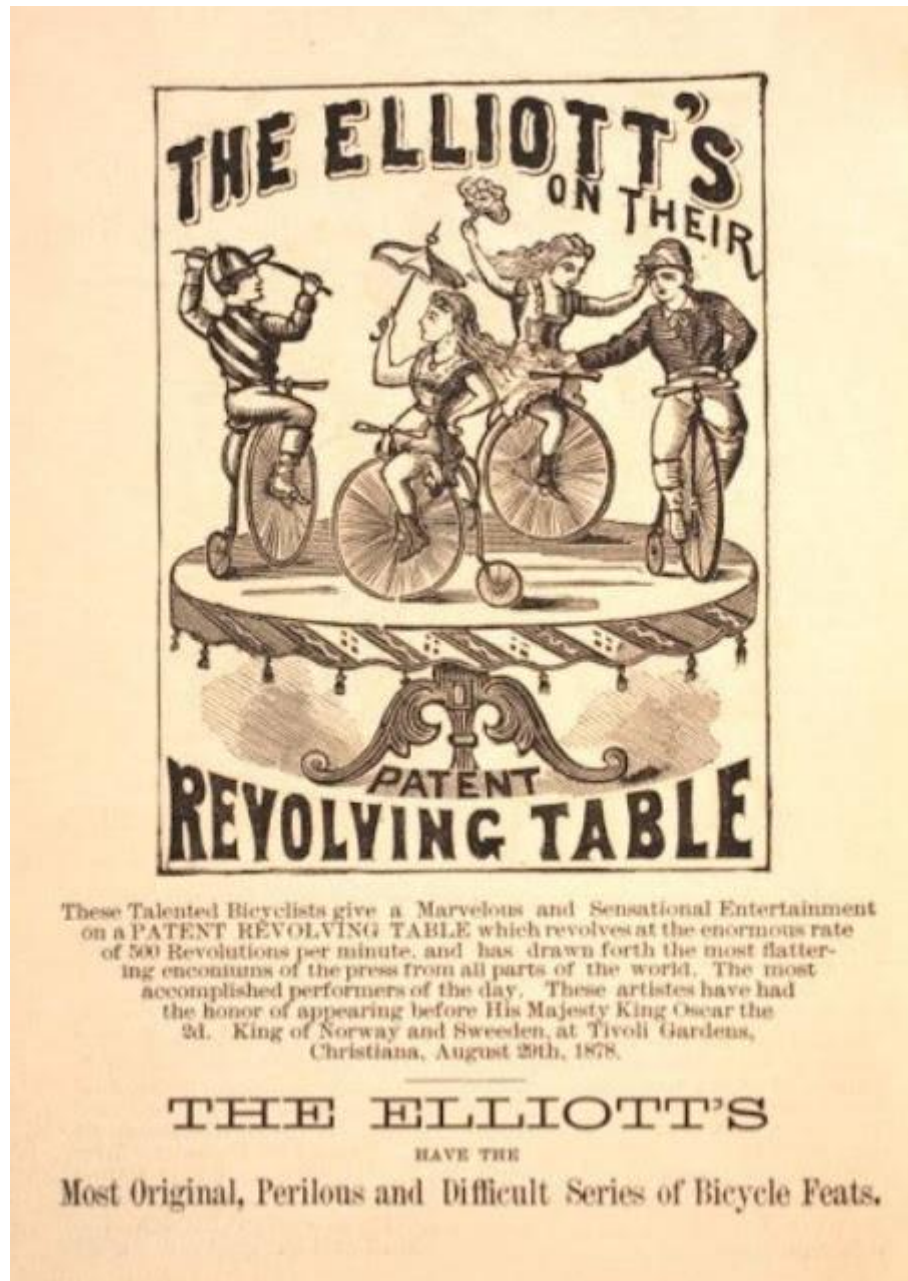
Bristol Mercury & Daily Post
15 April 1898

The Seven Savonas, "musical marvels", were the same performers as the Elliotts, the "wonderful acrobatic safety cyclists". "Engaged at enormous expense" they appeared at the People's Palace alongside various comedians, two knockabout *drolls*, song & dance artists, and a head and hand *balancer* act. The Palace announced that the Savonas electrical stage fit-up used "over 400 8-candle power lamps." Their cycle act came later in the show after "The Academy, the laughable sketch by the renowned Collinson combination". Ticket were at "popular prices, 3d to 2s 6d."

The Elliott troupe consisted of Catherine Thompson Elliot, also known as Kate, born 1868; Thomas Elliott, aka Tom, born 1870; James Elliott, aka Jim, born 1871; Mary Rand Elliott, aka Polly, born 1878; Matthew Albert Elliott, aka Little Dot, born 1878; Amphlett Elliott, aka Harry, born 1880; and possibly May Elliott, a step-sister born in 1883; or maybe a cousin, Dorothy Ann Elliott, aka Little Annie; or maybe, Tina Elliott, a wife of one of the brothers; or perhaps someone else unrelated but brought on to fill a vacant spot in the Elliott troupe. This was how show business worked then, and still does today. A successful high class act could never really disappear as long as suitable substitutes could be hired to keep the show on the road.

The patriarch of the show was **James Bedford Elliott** (1846–1906), a blacksmith from Middlesbrough, Yorkshire, England. As a young man he developed a passion for cycling, becoming both a bicycle racer and trick rider. He started first on the high-wheel penny-farthing or "ordinary", and then moved to the so-called safety bicycle, which became the modern bicycle. His ambition led Elliott to set up his own bicycle shop, building cycles to his own designs. But it was after starting a family with his first wife Mary Thompson when his two oldest, Tom and Catherine, demanded that he make cycles for them, that James discovered just what clever, nimble children

were capable of. Both children proved to be adept riders and were soon able to demonstrate progressively more extreme stunts. Their younger siblings quickly followed, and by the 1880s James had enough cycling talent in his family to form a show good enough for the circus.



The Elliott's patent Revolving Table

P.T. Barnum Circus

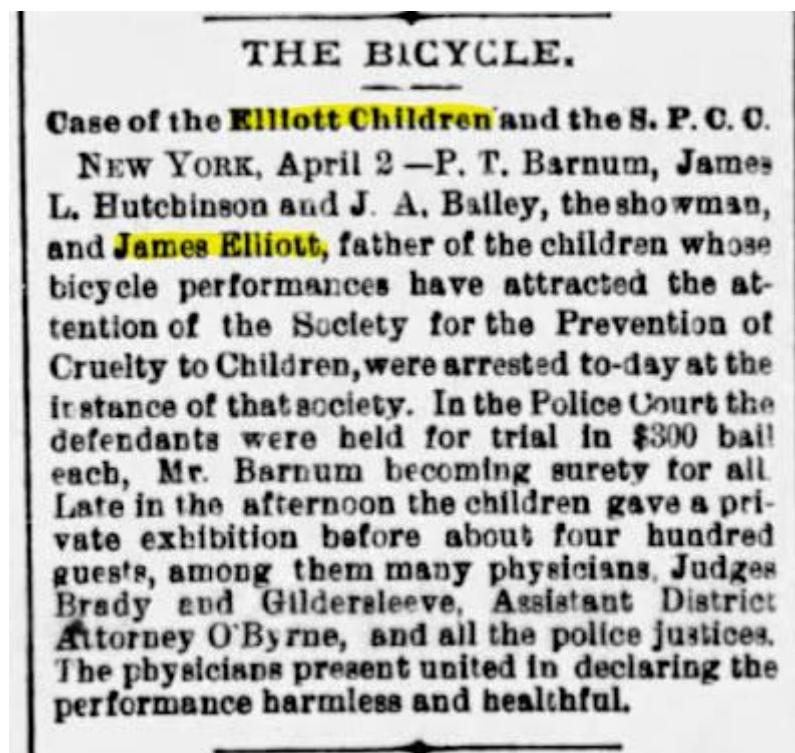
1883 Route Book and Diary

Source: Milner Library, Illinois State University

Inspired by his children's agility and balance, Elliott began fabricating novel child-size bicycles and tricycles. One concept that Elliott called a unicycle were terrifying cycle skates which attached a wheel to each foot. Another equally precarious invention, inspired by how his son Tom could pedal round and round in small

circles, was a large revolving table that rotated powered by a crank mechanism. When Tom was on it he would propel himself counter to the rotation, creating an illusion of stationary motion. This contraption had a platform just large enough for all four of the Elliott children to ride around on their high wheel machines. It was a stunt that deserved to be seen by a larger audience, so in the late 1870s James Elliott and his family joined a circus company.

After gaining some celebrity in Europe, in the spring of 1883 the Elliott family left England for New York City where they were engaged by P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth and Cooper & Bailey's Great London Circus for a grand tour of the U.S. and Canada. Its first shows were set for a two week run at Madison Square Gardens beginning on March 26, 1883. The Elliott cyclists were booked for the circus's center ring that season. But there was a little problem with the city authorities.



Philadelphia *Inquirer*
3 April 1883

The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, established only a few years before in 1874, objected to the performance of the Elliott children, charging that their act was in violation of the city's child protection and labor laws. A warrant was issued for the arrest of the circus owners, Phineas T. Barnum, J. L. Hutchinson, and J. A. Bailey, as well as the children's father, James Elliot. After covering the \$300 bond for each of them, P. T. Barnum arranged for a special demonstration of the Elliott cycle act in front of 400 invited guests that included the district attorney, the police court's judges and officers, and several prominent physicians to judge for themselves if the act was harming the children in any way. After seeing the Elliott's performance, the medical fraternity "fully approved the exercises of the Elliott

children upon the unicycle and bicycle, and that [there was] no detriment, morally or physically, to them." The charges were removed and the Elliott's act could go on. All across the country, newspapers major and minor, reported on the incident. P. T. Barnum was a master at getting free advertisement.

On April 22, Barnum's circus left New York for two weeks in Brooklyn. The Elliott family just missed crossing the East River on the new Brooklyn Bridge which would open a month later on May 24th. The next cities on the route were in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington D.C. before the circus headed west. The circus would not stop until reaching Hannibal, Missouri on October 20th after which it returned to Barnum's winter quarters in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The total journey of the Barnum, Cooper & Baily's circus was calculated at 9,932 miles for 180 working days, not counting cancellations due to rain. The various acts thrilled audiences under the big main tent, 377 ft x 216 ft, by appearing simultaneously in three rings, a Barnum innovation. There were four additional tents for the menagerie, museum, dressing rooms, and side show. Altogether Barnum employed 650 people that traveled in 59 railroad cars. Besides the performers, bands, crew, tents, wagons, and equipment, the circus also took along 249 horses; 22 ponies; 29 elephants, including the great Jumbo brought over in 1880 from the London Zoo; and 25 camels.

All this information and more is recorded in the 1883 Diary or Route Book of P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth, which meticulously records the effects of weather on the gigantic circus company and gives daily reports on incidents like ill health, accidents, and injuries suffered by animals and humans alike. For the six Elliott children it must have been an amazing adventure, but it was also a lot of work. Excepting Sunday when there was no performance of the circus, every day required setting up tents and displays, marching in a parade, performing a single or even double show, and later that night dismantling everything to move on to the next city. To succeed the Elliotts needed to learn the harsh discipline of circus life. Evidently it agreed with them as they went on to join other circuses and traveled the world with their trick bicycles.

But in a few years the Cycling Elliotts transformed into the Savonas with saxophones.



The Elliott~Savonas, 1910

Source: University of Amsterdam, Theatercollectie

In 1910 the seven Elliott~Savonas armed a full array of saxophones appeared on a poster "in a Spectacle Musical Act" that would have delighted Mozart. Dressed in red, white, and gold, quasi-18th century costumes, the illustration gives us a better idea than their sepia tone postcard of what their stage show looked like. The Elliotts had been entertaining audiences for over thirty years together, but the bicycles and leotards were gone and instead were replaced with saxophones and powdered wigs. They also added a kind of suffix to their name, the Savonas. This double name, not to mention the two separate acts, made it a difficult challenge for me to find references that identified them as the same seven people. But finding out how the Elliotts transformed their cycling act into a musical concert ensemble seemed an impossible question to answer.

But amazingly the explanation came from Mr. James B. Elliott himself in a December 1900 interview that he gave to a reporter from the *Midland Daily Telegraph*. It was reprinted in March 1901 by the *Chatham & Rochester News*. The article's title reads: **The Savonas' Saxophone (sic) Band**

THE SAVONAS' SAXAPHONE BAND.

MR. J. B. ELLIOTT INTERVIEWED.

The success of the musical Savonas' entertainment at Transfield's Circus has been so instantaneous and remarkable this week that Mr. Transfield has secured the services of the talented family for one week longer. The remarkably clever performance of the Elliotts, with its entire freedom from vulgarity, has greatly pleased the public of the city, and among local musicians much interest has been excited by the brilliant playing of the saxophone band, which contributes so largely to the success of the entertainment.

The precision with which the musicians perform is, considering the absence of a conductor, remarkable, and their careful attention to all the light and shade of excellent music they discourse raises their playing to far higher standard than that of ordinary variety instrumentalists. A "Telegraph" representative had to-day an interview with the father of the family, Mr. J. B. Elliott, who gave in the course of the conversation some very interesting particulars as to the training and career of his company. Mr. Elliott, it may be remarked in passing, is the same as the cyclist Elliott, who was known in the early years of the wheel as "The Great J. B."

"Tell me about the origin of your saxophone septet," said the interviewer.

"Well, the first time I ever saw a saxophone was some twenty odd years ago," replied Mr. Elliott. "I was greatly struck with its appearance, so like a great Kruger pipe, and its tone. My family were all very little at the time, but were musically inclined, and I thought it would be a good thing to have one of my sons play a saxophone solo. I bought an instrument, and after some time one of my lads learned to play it. The others were jealous of him, and they all wanted to play one, and that gave me the idea that we might use them in harmony. I made enquiries, and found that there was a whole family of the instruments made, from the soprano size to the bass. I immediately embarked on the purchase of a set, and we formed a saxophone band, which is the only one in the world. At least, we have travelled through Cuba, North and South America, Europe, and the United Kingdom, and have never met or heard of another, so that I conclude that ours is unique."

"What is the pitch of your instruments?"

"They vary from soprano to bass," said the interviewer. "Our largest saxophone was specially built for us by the makers, Buffet and Cie, of Paris, at a cost of sixty guineas. It is of the same pitch as the great "BB" brass bases that you hear in the prize brass bands."

"How do you do about arranging the music. Do you select the parts out of the full military band scores published, or how?"

"Well, most of our music is specially arranged for us by Mr. J. Ord Hume, the well-known brass band conductor, instrumentalist, and adjudicator. He knows our capabilities well, you see. One of my sons, Matty, is also a composer, and arranges some of our music himself. We are going to play one of his pieces as our second item next week—"A Midsummer Night's Dream." We play every class of music. Yes, our repertoire does include the marches of J. P. Sousa—all of them. We are playing one this week, "The Occidental." Next week one of the things we shall give will be the grand selection from "Carmen," including the splendid "Toreador's Song."

"And how did your brass band start, Mr. Elliott?"

"That was originally a brass quartette, two cornets, tenor, and euphonium. Now the seven instruments are: first, second, and third cornets, two E flat tenors, valve trombone, and euphonium. Next week we are going to introduce a septette of ocarinas, of various sizes, which I believe is the only one in existence. Also a band of cycle horns."

"Your Louis XVI. costume is a good idea."

"Yes. We endeavour to make our entertainment pleasing to the eye and ear. We find the humorous element, gracefully introduced, very successful, too, though, of course, we have first of all to demonstrate our capabilities as musicians. My son, the young man who does that part, is a capable cornet soloist. We think of getting him to give a good triple-tongue solo next week."

Mr. Elliott proceeded to explain the various instruments which the family play on in the course of their entertainment, and incidentally remarked that the central organ of the stage set up supplies the base, with brass band effect. The one on the right is a clarinet, and the one on the left a flute and piccolo organ. All have separate keyboards, but are blown from one gigantic set of bellows. There are also first and second sets of sleigh bells, and first and second "Marambas," a South American instrument. The bells introduced are Javanese, native made, and were brought out at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, where Mr. Elliott saw and purchased them. Additional novelties are to be introduced next week, and a souvenir of the family is to be presented to every member of the audience on Friday night.

At the conclusion of the interview, Mr. Elliott smilingly remarked that if the story of their travels and adventures were to be related, much space would be taken up by it. "I must write a book," he observed. "Everybody does it nowadays, don't they?"

[From the "Midland Daily Telegraph," December, 14th, 1900.]

The Savonas will perform at the Gaiety, Chatham, on Monday next. Their engagement is for a fortnight.

Chatham & Rochester News
2 March 1901

In the long story J. B. Elliott explains that 20 odd years before he had heard a saxophone for the first time and been impressed by its appearance and tone. As his young children were musically inclined, he bought one for his son who learned to play it. Soon, just like with the cycling, the other siblings became jealous and asked to get a saxophone too, so Elliott ordered a full set, soprano to bass, from the Buffet Co. of Paris, the premier maker of woodwind instruments. Having traveled through Cuba, North and South America, Europe, and the United Kingdom, Mr. Elliott had never met or heard of another saxophone band like his children's septet, so he considered them a very unique musical ensemble.

The group also performed as a brass band following the British style instrumentation, and had plans to add a septet of ocarinas. The Elliott-Savonas

concert also used a large organ keyboard on stage, sets of sleigh bells; marimbas from South America; bells from Java bought at the Chicago's World's Fair in 1893; and many other novelty instruments they had discovered on their travels. They sometimes advertised that they played over 50 instruments in their show.

Though it is not mentioned in Mr. Elliott's interview, I learned from a recent article on the Elliott family troupe, that the name *Savonas* was coined by Elliott from the French word for soap, *savon*. Considering the Elliott family's long experience working in a circus environment, *soap* was likely an old family joke.



Spokane WA Chronicle
1 June 1912

Sadly, James Bedford Elliott, died suddenly at Jarrow-on-Tyne on 22 May 1906 after returning from a trip. He was just 60 years old. Though they had retired from cycling

just before his death, his children kept their instrumental act going and in 1912 the Musical Savonas planned a return to America for a coast to coast tour.

In the notice promoting their performance in Spokane, Washington at the Orpheum Theatre, the local newspaper printed a picture of the Elliotts dressed in the same 18th century outfits but holding brass instruments instead of saxophones. With so many instruments, costumes, and stage props, the Musical Savonas traveled with more equipment than the typical shows of the time. This was the final golden age of vaudeville theater and the competition was tough for every entertainer. You had to find a hook to keep the public's attention.



San Francisco *Examiner*
30 June 1912

In June 1912 the artist for the San Francisco *Examiner* concocted a montage of the different headline acts playing the city's theatres that week. Borrowing from the same photo with brass instruments he places the Musical Savonas at no. 4. To the right, at no. 5, are the American stage and screen actors, Richard Bennett (1870–1944) and his wife, Mabel Adrienne Morrison (1883–1940). {I'm not certain, but I think they are appearing in a play adaptation of *Cabbages and Kings*, a 1904 novel/short story collection set in a fictitious Central American country called the Republic of Anchuria. The author was O. Henry, aka William Sydney Porter (1862–1910) who happens to be a favorite writer of mine and who is buried in a cemetery just a 5 minute walk from my home here in Asheville, North Carolina.}

To the left of the Savonas are three men in Scottish kilts with bagpipes, the Gordon Highlanders. Next to them at no. 2 is a woman dressed in a kind of military tunic representing the Musical Nosses. They were another family band that played a wide variety of instruments and enjoyed a very long success playing the vaudeville circuit.

I wrote their story in November 2020, The Noss Family Band - Practice Makes Perfect. And on the far left at no. 1 is another woman, Sophie Tucker (1886–1966). This Russian-born American singer was just getting starting in show business, but would soon be recognized as one of the most popular entertainers in the country. She was also earned a reputation as a comedian, actress, and radio personality, and went by the nickname "The Last of the Red-Hot Mamas".



Kansas City MO Star
14 September 1912

Later that summer the artist for the Kansas City Star made up a sketch of Mrs. M. Elliott with the Musical Savonas. She is holding an alto saxophone and dressed in an elaborate baroque gown. They were playing at another Orpheum theatre again, part

of the Orpheum Circuit, a chain of vaudeville and later cinema theatres. It was founded in 1886 by the theatrical impresario Gustav Walter who built the first Orpheum in San Francisco, and then expanded to other major cities on the West Coast and in the Midwest. This allowed the agency to make it profitable for an act like the Elliott~Savonas to tour the country following the major rail lines.

The few references that I found on the Elliott~Savona's music focuses on their arrangements of standard concert band works by composers like John Philip Sousa and, no doubt, others from the circus band repertoire. Unlike with formal concert groups, vaudeville acts usually did not print a program and were rarely given a proper artistic review by newspaper music critics. While this was the era of ragtime, the saxophone sound in jazz, blues, and rock music was still decades away in the future. Most likely the Musical Savonas, with their English background, played light dance music such as waltzes and polkas, patriotic tunes, opera overtures or arias, and maybe a bit of ragtime that was familiar to their audiences. There is no mention of singing though that's certainly plausible for talented musicians in a family band to do.

The Elliotts returned to England in 1913 and in the following year scheduled a tour of Australia. During the summer of 1914 they were in Sydney and Melbourne negotiating dates for a tour of Germany when war broke out across Europe. Fortunately the deal with a German theatrical agency fell through and in September 1914 the Elliotts were able to get back to Britain rather than be arrested as enemy aliens in Germany and placed in an internment camp. {For more on that sticky problem, read my story, *The Role of a Lifetime*}

ALHAMBRA. "THE BING BOYS ARE HERE." ALFRED VIOLET ROBEY. LESTER. LORAIN. Evgs., 8.30. Varieties, 8.15. Mat., Wed., Thurs., Sat., 2.15.

EMPIRE. The Great Drury Lane Revue, "RAZZLE-DAZZLE." Shirley Kellogg, Harry Tate, George Formby. Twice Daily, at 2.30 and 8.30. Gerr. 3527.

PALACE. "WE'RE ALL IN IT" (New Version), at 8.30, with WILL EVANS, DOROTHY WARD, GEORGE TULLY, BLANCHE TOMLIN, LUPINO LANE, NANCY BUCKLAND, NEW SCENES, NEW SONGS, VARIETIES at 8. MATINEES, WED. and SAT., at 2.

PALLADIUM, 2.30, 6.10 and 9. **LITTLE TICH, JACK AND EVELYN, ELLA SHIELDS, NELLA WEBB, MURIEL WINDOW, THORNTON AND DELIA, JACK BIRCHLEY, ALEC KENDAL, THE 5 WHITELEYS, DALY AND HEALY, ELLIOT SAVONAS,** etc.

MASKELYNE'S Mysteries, St. George's Hall, W.—At 3 and 8. New programme, including Mr. J. N. Maskelyne, in his inimitable specialities. Phone, 1545 May.

MISSING SOLDIERS.

SERGT. G. W. ALBONE, Bedford Regiment, missing since July 15.—News to A. Albone, 24, Cross-rd, Chadwell Heath.

PTE. A. WARREN, 14445, Suffolk Regiment, missing since July 1.—Write to Mrs. A. Warren, near The Chapel, High-st, Burwell, Cambs.

PTE. J. POYNTER, 21151, Duke of Cornwall's L.I., missing July 23. Mother, Mrs. Poynder, 7, Lyndhurst, Vera-rd, Fulham, S.W., grateful for news.

PTE. TOWNLEY, D.C.M., Border Regiment—Will any relatives kindly communicate with ~~the~~ **Mr. H. Stockton,** Border Regiment, Whitehall Red Cross Hospital, Sittingbourne, Kent?

London Daily Mirror

23 August 1916

During the war years, the Elliott men were now too old for military service, but as the Elliott~Savonas they served on the British theatre circuit, appearing often in London. In August 1916 they played the Palladium and the notice in the Daily Mirror was just above the classified ads for Missing Soldiers, heartbreaking appeals by family members desperate for any information on their sons and husbands lost and missing in action.

SATURDAY, JULY 13th, 1918.



THE ELLIOTT-SAVONAS.

Illustrated Leicester Chronicle
13 July 1918

A photo of eight Elliott~Savonas with their brass instruments made the pages of the *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle* in July 1918. A fourth woman was now part of the group. The grainy image looks as ancient as if it was taken in the 18th century. As the Elliott siblings were moving into their fifth decade they must have recognized that the musical times were changing. In a few years the Musical Savonas would play their last engagement, fold up their costumes, sell or give away their instruments. Like Mozart led to Beethoven led to Brahms, the music changed key and audiences moved on to different kind of entertainment.



The Elliotts as the Musical Savonas, 1903
Source: University of Amsterdam, Theatercollectie

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This story is based entirely on a quirky postcard of an oddly dressed saxophone ensemble. There were no postmarks or messages clues, only an English publisher in Bristol to mark the postcard's location. They looked like professional musicians. After all, who would dress like that unless they were paid? But it was impossible to know who they were or what kind of group they were without tracking down the single clue on the postcard's caption, **Elliott~Savonas**.

As a family band the Elliotts were not unlike many of the families of musicians that I've featured on this blog. They were talented kids, even gifted, and they had parents who fostered that innate passion for music. But unlike the other family bands, the Elliotts came into music after they were already established performers in an

incredibly different pursuit. How many people try a career at trick cycling and then pick up the saxophone? And succeed? So many questions and too few answers.

We can't know at what level of musicianship the Elliotts performed on saxophones, nor for that matter, on what level their cycling stunts might be measured today. All we know is that they received generous praise for both and enjoyed a long career entertaining people around the world. That took skill, talent, and endurance to achieve. It's the first rule of show business. Box office sales prove an artist's worth.

The Cycling Elliotts were not the first bicycle circus act, but James Elliot's idea for his children were clearly innovative. It surely inspired other acrobatic families to imitate them and pushed the boundaries for extreme sports. How many boys and girls dreamed of getting on a bicycle after watching the Elliotts cavort around their revolving table?

Likewise, the notion of a saxophone band was not new, but creating one out of a family of seven siblings who played a soprano, two altos, two tenors, a baritone, and bass saxophone? That was a shrewd choice by their father. And to dress them in 18th century costume? That was genius. I believe that countless people, adults and children, were inspired to pick up the saxophone after hearing the Musical Savonas perform. When the Elliotts first performed in the 1890s the public thought the saxophone was a peculiar foreign instrument. Even professional band directors were still trying to figure out where to place these shiny brass/reed instruments. Little did anyone know what fantastic music the saxophone would make in the 20th century.

CODA:

The Musical Savonas stopped playing in the 1920s, but that didn't stop the next generation from keeping the Elliott musical tradition alive, if not its trick cycling heritage. It is rare for me to find a detailed personal history on forgotten performers, but much of the story I've written here was first presented in a delightful biography, *Tommy Elliott and the Musical Elliotts* written by Viona Elliott Lane, Randall Merris, and Chris Algar.

Tommy Elliott, born Thomas Varley, (1902–1987) started his career in the British music hall circuit as a single act playing concertina and cornet. As a young man from South Shields, Durham he happened one week to be on the same bill as the Musical Savonas, where he met Hazel Elliott, one of James B. Elliott's granddaughters. A spark of mutual admiration led them to form a new troupe of eight musicians called Hazel Elliott and Her Candies which found success in the 1920s. Hazel and Tommy also fell in love and married in 1924, Tommy changing his name to Elliott. In the 1930s they started another variety group with other family members and artists that they called The Seven Elliotts. Then in the 1940s Tommy, Hazel and their daughter, Viona, one of the authors, then age eleven, became The Musical Elliotts.

After playing his concertina in music halls, cinemas, and variety shows from 1923 to 1980, Tommy Elliott had a career that put him on stage with hundreds of entertainment stars of stage, screen, and television. But this is really a story for another postcard. With apologies, I have drastically condensed Tommy Elliott's

remarkable life into this postscript on the first Elliott~Savonas troupe, but I highly recommend downloading his biography to anyone who wants to learn more about this entertainer's history. The bit about Tommy playing his concertina in Berlin for Eva Braun, Hitler's girl friend is well worth the effort.