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POSTED: MAY 24, 2010

Irvin Romig: Ricky the Clown made generation of kids smile

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Irvin Romig, better known as Ricky the Clown to baby boomers who grew up in metro Detroit, died Sunday of congestive heart failure at Henry Ford Macomb Hospital Warren Campus. He was 90.



Whether in the circus or on TV, Irvin Romig's gags and routines made him a standout performer. (DETROITKIDSHOW.COM)

A version of this story appears on page 11A of the Monday, May 24, 2010, print edition of the Detroit Free Press.

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Mr. Romig was born in Detroit into a circus family; his father was a horse trainer and his mother, a slack-wire walker. Together, they would eventually open their own show, the Romig and Rooney Circus. He debuted as a clown at age 5 and later worked with his two uncles, also clowns, and his calliope-playing aunt.

During World War II, Mr. Romig, who had limited formal education, served in an Army K-9 land mine-searching unit and as a bugler. He also formed an informal clown troupe to entertain the troops; he called it the Section 8 Gang after the type of military discharge given to people deemed mentally unfit.

Mr. Romig worked for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1946-1950 and appeared in the 1952 movie "The Greatest Show on Earth" about the famous American circus.

The following year, Mr. Romig started performing on WXYZ-TV (Channel 7) -- and at a programming director's urging, changed his clown name from Irvie to the easier-to-remember Ricky. Over the 12 years he was a Detroit TV fixture, he was on "Tip-Top Fun," "The Ricky the Clown Show," "The Robin and Ricky Show" and "Action Theater."

"He really loved to see the children happy and smiling," his son, Christopher Romig, said Sunday. "He worked very hard to make new gags and routines to keep it fresh. He

didn't rest on his laurels."

His other clowning work included 22 years with the Shrine Circus and teaching a clowning class at Oakland Community College with his wife, the former Rose Dobo, who died in 2002 after 52 years of marriage. Mr. Romig -- who lived in Troy, Southfield and for the last nine years, in Sterling Heights -- was inducted into the International Clown Hall of Fame in Wisconsin in 2001, the same year as Charlie Chaplin.

His hobbies were making ventriloquist dummies and clown props, watching cowboy movies and thinking up skits.

"He stood out -- not because he's my father. I've seen many clowns that are blah," Christopher Romig said. "He developed a clown personality, so he was a definite character, not just a guy without tricks in a suit."

In addition to his son, Mr. Romig is survived by his sister Fay Romig and his adopted sister, Grace McIntosh, both of whom were circus performers and trainers.

Visitation is 1-9 p.m. Tuesday at E. J. Mandziuk & Son Funeral Directors' Sterling Heights Chapel, 3801 Eighteen Mile, with a scripture service at 7 p.m. Mr. Romig will lie in repose at St. Jane Frances de Chantal Parish, 38750 Ryan, Sterling Heights, from 9 a.m. until the 9:30 a.m. mass on Wednesday. Burial will follow at White Chapel Memorial Park Cemetery in Troy.

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