



The circus train has stopped in front of the Dingling Brothers, Blarney and Bullfeathers Circus. The circus is built on plywood boards so that it can be taken in during winter months. Plywood also provides support for the guy wires.

The Dingling Brothers, Blarney and Bullfeathers Family Circus

A garden-railway circus and how to make it

by Anne and Allan Dake

Ann Arbor, Michigan
Photos by the Authors

“**L**A-A-A-A-DIES AND GENTLEMEN! See Elmo’s Elephants, Danni’s Dancing Bears, the boisterous Blarney Clowns, and much more. Presenting the Dingling Brothers, Blarney and Bullfeathers Family Circus. Maestro, strike up the band! Let the show begin!”

When you visit the Boulder Junction, Yellow Springs & Dake (BY&D) Railroad in Ann Arbor, Michigan, you might imagine that you hear the ringmaster starting the circus show under one of the two big tops. This is the story of the circus and how you can make your own big top.

A BRIEF HISTORY

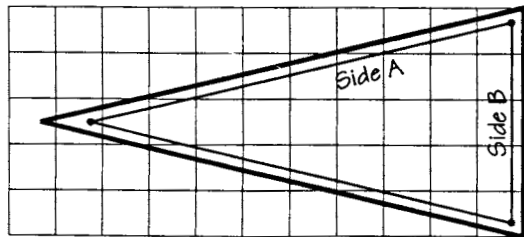
In 1920, Samuel E. and Austin A. Dingling purchased a large tract of land in northern Washtenaw County. Their plan was to establish a summer headquarters for their circus. Once the land purchase was made the Dingling Brothers successfully negotiated with the BY&D Railroad (a small but very efficient, privately owned line operating throughout Washtenaw County) to provide rail service for their circus train and passenger service for circus personnel. For many years the circus trains could be seen passing through Boulder Junction and Ann Arbor on their way to connect with the mainlines that would take them to their scheduled performances across the Midwest.

In 1928 Benjamin Blarney joined the Dingling Brothers and they expanded the circus headquarters to include a small

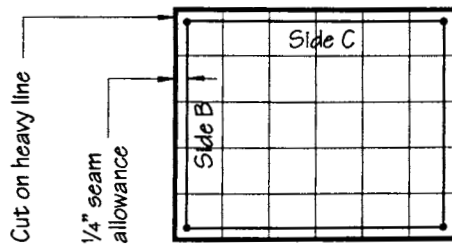
show tent and arcade. They encouraged Washtenaw County residents to ride the BY&D Railroad out to see the circus. Even after the Great Crash of '29, the circus prospered, offering fine entertainment at a very reasonable price.

Ten years later the Dingling Brothers, gentlemen of advanced age, chose to retire, leaving Ben Blarney and new partner Roger Bullfeathers with a large debt. The next year the circus was sold to P.T. Barnum, and the summer headquarters was closed.

Today the old circus headquarters has been reopened as a circus-training school and historical park. A restored circus train circles the grounds, and daily performances by students and instructors are given under the big top from May to October. Once again passengers can ride the BY&D Railroad out to the circus and see the DB3 Family Circus.

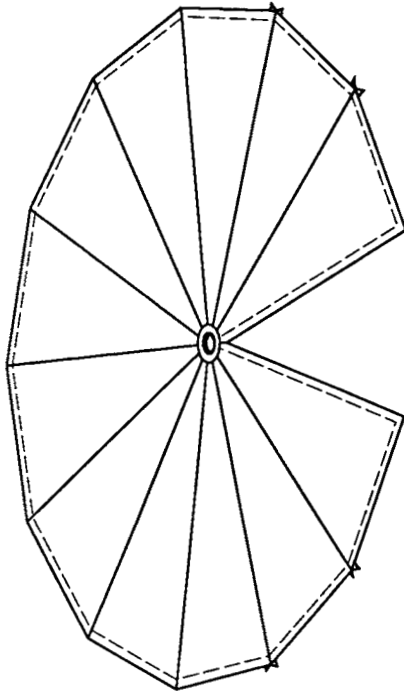


**Tent Top
Pattern A—cut 12**



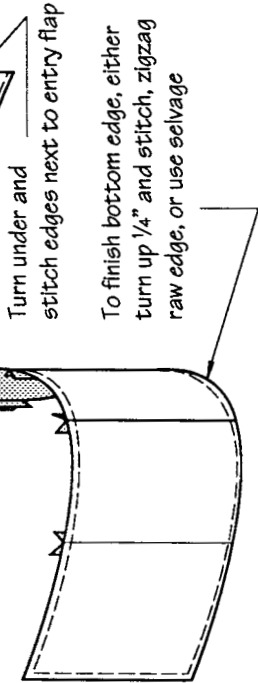
**Tent Sides
Pattern B—cut 12**

**Circus Tent
Pattern Pieces**
Redraw pieces on a 1" grid



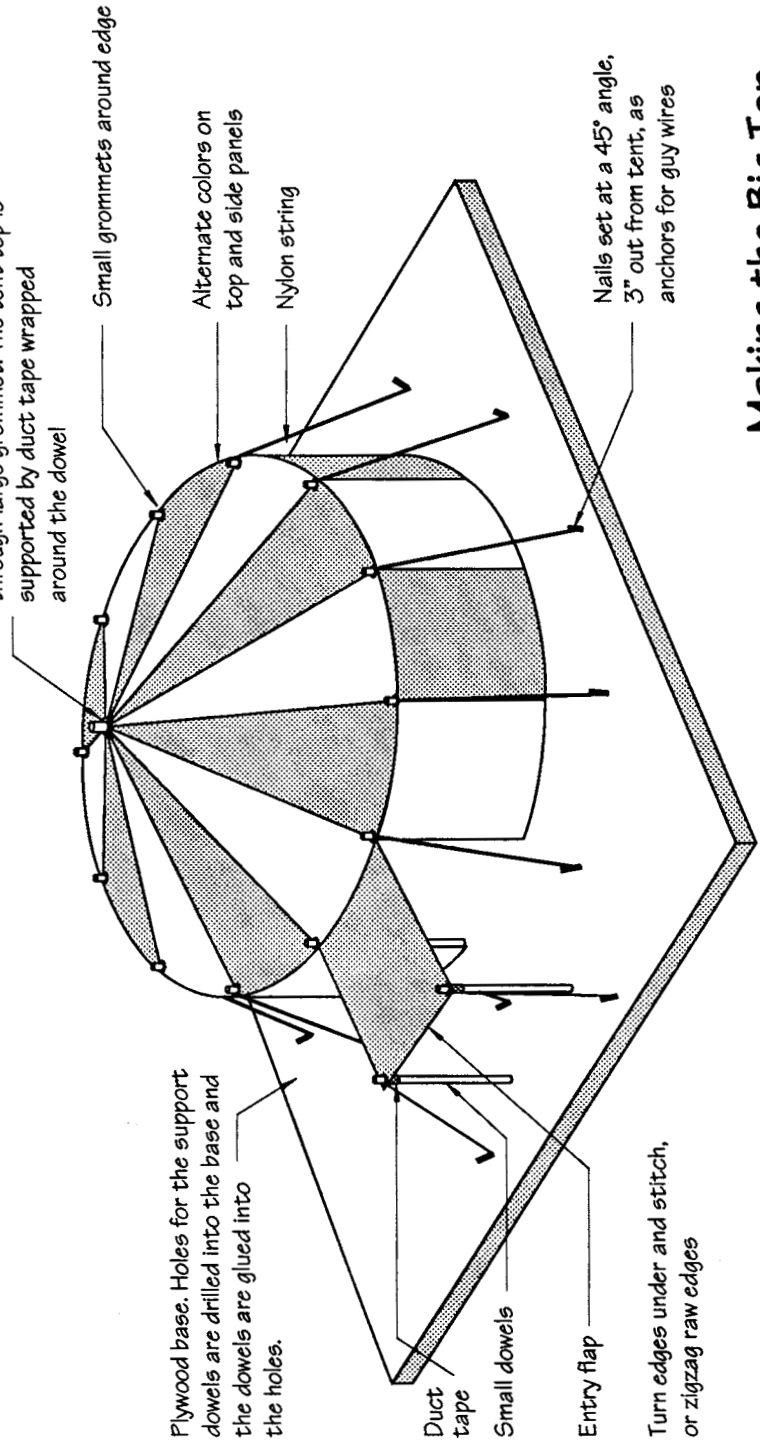
Tent Top
In this diagram, all of the top pieces have been stitched together. All that remains is for the final seam to be sewn. The grommet, though shown here, is inserted only after the top has been entirely sewn together.

**Side Panels
Sewn Together**
Sew 11 together, saving the 12th for the entry flap



Turn under and stitch edges next to entry flap
To finish bottom edge, either turn up 1/4" and stitch, zigzag raw edge, or use selvage

Large grommet in center—large dowel through large grommet. The tent top is supported by duct tape wrapped around the dowel



Making the Big Top

THE REAL STORY

The Dingling Brothers, Blarney & Bullfeathers Circus started with the purchase of an LGB Circus Train at the Garden Railway Convention in Cincinnati, June 1991. In September the BY&D carried trains past the circus on the way from Ned's Sand and Gravel Company, the abandoned Morton Salt Mine, Yellow Springs Station, and the Coal Creek Lumber Company before returning to Boulder Junction. Trains on the second loop of the BY&D travel from Boulder Junction to the depot at the circus, passing Sunny Meadows Quarter Horse Farm and Dake Lake.

Plantings in the circus area include miniature cheddar pinks, *Dianthus gratianopolitanus* 'Tiny Rubies;' *Hosta undulata* 'Medio-picta;' astilbes; Kew winter creeper, *Euonymus Fortunei* 'Kewensis;' red verbena; and two stonecrops, *Sedum* 'Golden Acre' and *Sedum spurium* 'Dragon's Blood.' Mulch is finely ground bark that came from a sawmill.

The circus area includes several wagons, the circus train with a scratchbuilt calliope (PH Hobbies circus sound system), and three cars painted and detailed by Allan. Highlights of this area are the two big tops designed and sewn by Anne.

MAKING THE BIG TOP

The two tents, made from alternating strips of red and royal blue Sunbrella-brand canvas, are a 15"-diameter round tent and a 30" by 15" oval tent. The tents are supported by dowels through grommets and are mounted on plywood that is painted to match the ground mulch used in the circus area. Guy wires of nylon string hold the tents in place.

Tent top

1. Cut 12 pieces of pattern A (triangle), 6 of each color.
2. Take a piece of each color and, with their right sides together, sew together between dots along side A, with 1/4" seam allowance.
3. Continue sewing pieces together, alternating colors.
4. Stitch piece 12 to piece 1 to complete the top.
5. Fasten the large grommet in center of the top with the grommet tool.

Tent sides

1. Cut 12 pieces of pattern B (rectangle), 6 of each color.
2. Take a piece of each color and, with their right sides together, sew along side C, with 1/4" seam allowance.
3. Continue adding pieces, alternating

Materials list

To make the 15" round tent you will need:

- 1/2 yard each of two colors of Sunbrella (or equivalent) canvas
- 1 large brass grommet
- 14 small brass grommets
- 1 grommet-setting tool
- 1 11"-long dowel, 5/16" dia., for center post
- 14 6"-long dowels, 1/8" dia., for side poles
- 1 24"x 24"x 1/2" marine or exterior-grade plywood for the base
- 5 yards of nylon string for tent guy wires
- 14 brass nails
- duct tape
- TiteBond II glue

colors, until 11 pieces are sewn together in one long strip.

4. Reserve the last piece for the tent flap.

Attaching the tent top to the sides

1. With right sides together, pin or baste the tent sides (long strip) to the top, carefully alternating colors (pin blue side panel to red top piece, etc.) at side B around the tent.
2. There will be one top piece left over, to which the tent flap will attach.
3. Sew the top and sides together with 1/4" seam allowance. When done, zigzag the raw edges of finished seam.
4. At the tent opening, turn fabric under 1/4" on both sides and stitch. This will finish the edges.

Attaching the tent flap

1. Zigzag around the edges of the remaining side piece (the 12th piece of pattern B).
2. With right sides together, attach the flap to the remaining top piece at side B, using 1/4" seam allowance.

Finishing touches

1. To finish the bottom of the tent, either zigzag, turn up 1/4" and stitch, or use selvage when cutting pieces.
2. Insert small grommets in the top at

each seam, just above the sides.

3. Attach one grommet in each of the two corners of the tent flap.

Mounting on plywood

1. Drill a 5/16"-diameter hole into (not through) the center of the plywood and glue in the large dowel.
2. Wrap duct tape around the dowel, 1" from the top, thick enough to keep the tent up.
3. Carefully put the tent over the dowel, which will protrude from the top of the tent.
4. Take smaller dowels and, 1" from the top, wrap each with duct tape as above.
5. Insert one dowel in each of the small grommets around top edge of the tent.
6. Carefully mark and drill 1/8" holes into (not through) the plywood base. Insert a dowel in each and glue.
7. Insert the remaining dowels in the tent flap, drilling holes in the plywood for them, and insert and glue them in place for the tent entrance.
8. Put in nails at a 45° angle, 3" out from the outside edge of tent. Attach short pieces of string from the small tent dowels to the nails to hold tent in place, representing guy wires and tent stakes.
9. Embroidery hoops make the circus rings. Add your choice of animals, clowns, and circus acts. All items can be glued in place for easier transporting.

THE OVAL TENT

To make the oval tent, add rectangular strips—the same width as the tent sides—to the center of the tent top, and cut more tent sides to match. Sew the tent ends, making two half-circles. Attach the rectangular pieces together, then attach the ends. Sew the side pieces in a long strip, then sew them to the tent top, omitting two, three, or four side pieces for an entry. Finish the tent as above.

The Sunbrella-brand canvas is available from most tent/awning/boat-cover businesses and is made for outdoor use. It comes in a variety of colors. These tents will withstand all but the most severe weather. You may have to replace the dowels periodically, and be sure to paint all sides of the plywood with several coats of good exterior-grade house paint.

The Dingling Brothers, Blarney and Bullfeathers Circus closes in October and the tents are stored, so passengers on the BY&D see only the bare circus grounds. In May the circus personnel and animals return. A circus parade on Main Street in Boulder Junction announces the reopening of the circus for another thrilling, entertaining season.