May 2002

Book Review: *Tent Show: Arthur Names and His "Famous" Players* by Donald W. Whisenhunt

Terry Wunder
*University of Maine at Fort Kent*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly)

Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly)


[http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/53](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/53)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Great Plains Quarterly* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tent shows traveled throughout much of the United States, achieving their greatest success prior to the 1920s and gradually disappearing by the 1950s. Small towns in areas like the Great Plains looked forward with great anticipation to their form of entertainment tailored specially for rural audiences.

Tent Show is the story of Art Names and how he and his partner William Whisenhunt managed to maintain a traveling tent show until Names's death in 1945. Donald W. Whisenhunt, through research in Names's papers and interviews with his family members and friends, gives an account of tent show survival through the Plains states of Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and Kansas.

The book has a dual focus. It deals with life on the road, with such matters as maintenance cost and travel expenses being a major concern. Tent shows also encountered severe weather, fire damage, hostile audiences, and competition from inexpensive forms of entertainment such as movies and radio. Yet a few shows, Names's among them, were able to survive these trials, operating through the economic turmoil of the Depression as well as rationing during World War II.

The second focus is on Art Names the individual. A chapter discusses his growing up on the prairie and his reputation as a trustworthy person. Another is devoted to an analysis of his poetry, and still another to his playwriting. Sections of the book are also concerned with Names's economic and social philosophy, his political views in the first half of the twentieth century, and his desire to run for governor of Kansas. This concentration on Names's ideas dominants the book and causes some repetition.

It was Art Names's reputation, however, that helped him sustain his tent show. Theater has always been a suspect profession, and Names's honesty and ethics made him welcome in every rural community. It was because of his character that Names was able to keep alive a manner of entertainment that all but vanished a few years after his death. This justifies the book’s dual focus and makes Whisenhunt's account a much needed document about the history of the tent show as well as an engaging reading experience.

TERRY WUNDER
Department of Arts and Humanities
University of Maine at Fort Kent