WORKING FOR PEANUTS:
LABOR, GEOGRAPHY, AND CLASS COMPOSITION IN THE AMERICAN CIRCUS INDUSTRY, 1872-1938

by

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on class composition in the traveling circus in the Gilded Age (1870s-1900s), the Progressive Era (1890s-1910s), and the New Era (1920s-1930s). American circuses became industrial operations beginning in the 1870s under the leadership of P.T. Barnum and his business partners, and within a few years, they had become the most important form of entertainment in the United States. By the turn of the twentieth century, the major industrial circuses employed around 1,200 people each and traveled the country in what amounted to a mobile factory town. However, up to this point, collective action by circus workers was virtually nonexistent, despite a uniquely insular culture and frequent instances of serious mistreatment.

During the Barnum & Bailey tour of Europe in the 1890s, which altered the social geography of the circus workplace, class consciousness began to materialize. Employees of the show formed a fraternal order called the Benevolent and Protective Order of Tigers, which they imported to the United States upon their return in 1903. This society served as both a source of class consciousness and a forum for workers' collective action. Despite this, circus workers remained largely unorganized and invisible to the forces of organized labor, partially due to their remarkable mobility compared to most other jobs. Although certain groups of employees, such as teamsters and billposters, joined their international unions early on, circus employees were not unionized across the board until 1937. Why did it take so long for this to occur? To what degree did circus employees see themselves as a class of and for themselves? How did the geography of the circus affect the development of classes within the workplace? This dissertation explores the previously untold story of the class composition and class struggle in the circus, which took place in fits and starts, and remains an ongoing process in the present.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The problem with writing an acknowledgements section is that it will inevitably fall short of expressing the gratitude one feels, and to every person that one feels it. Nevertheless, I will do my best to convey how grateful I am for my remarkable network of supporters that made this work possible.

In my first semester as an undergraduate at UT Arlington, I was required to take a course in World Regional Geography, which I can say without exaggeration changed the course of my life. The teacher of that course, Andy Milson, took me under his wing, revealing to me potential I did not know that I had. He also honored me by hiring me to assist in the early research stages of his book *Arkansas Travelers*, mapping out the routes of explorers in Google Earth. This work opened doors for me that I did not know existed, and in turn, geography and GIS became indispensable tools in my research. Without the mentorship of Dr. Milson, I do not know where I would be.

Gerald Saxon, a professor of Texas history and archives, has also been a mentor to me for many years. An excellent listener, Dr. Saxon always seems to know exactly how to move a discussion forward. He also is notorious for knowing exactly how much one is capable of, and for not accepting less than one's absolute best, which has taught me a lesson more than once. Dr. Saxon has guided me through my archival and public history training with patience, wisdom and humor, and for all of these things I am grateful.

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that point, essentially zero knowledge of labor history. As the department doctoral student advisor, Dr. Zimmer also worked hard to make it possible for me to mold my educational experience to my liking, which allowed me to take the eclectic coursework that I felt suited me. I cannot overstate how appreciative I am of Dr. Zimmer's efforts to make sure I succeeded.

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Davis' book *The Circus Age* was the first academic work on the circus I ever encountered, and it is upon her work that I base my own. I thank her for her generosity in agreeing to serve on my committee.

This project began as research commissioned by Deborah Walk, former Assistant Director of Legacy and Circus at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida. During my first ever summer internship in 2017, Deb encouraged me to research the veracity of circus route books, and the result of this research was an article in *Bandwagon*, the journal of the Circus Historical Society. At the time, I had no idea that this work would become the nucleus of my doctoral dissertation. I thank Deb for her foresight and for introducing me to the world of circus and its rich history.

In 2018, I returned to perform a second internship at The Ringling, at which time I worked more closely with Jennifer Lemmer-Posey, currently the Tibbals Curator of Circus. Jen was especially instrumental in helping me to get my work published, and in building my connections with the Circus Historical Society. In addition to Deb and Jen, I must also thank Ringling Archives staff Heidi Connor and Ron Levere, who helped me to develop my skills as an archivist and researcher that would propel me through the rest of my graduate career (and beyond).

Jeremy M. Johnston, curator of the Buffalo Bill Museum at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming, and managing editor of the *Papers of William F. Cody* project, has proven an excellent mentor and staunch ally. Dr. Johnston has provided me with several outstanding research opportunities, and has been generous in making himself available to help me whenever I have needed him, as a colleague and as a friend. Jeremy has helped me to further expand my research and to broaden my horizons, and for that I am grateful. Dr. Johnston also

took the time to provide feedback on Chapter Five, which deals with Buffalo Bill's Wild West, and for that I thank him as well.

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I have also been quite fortunate in receiving generous funding opportunities, without which this dissertation would not have been possible. The UT Arlington Department of History, of course, provided funds for travel on several occasions, as did the College of Liberal Arts. I thank Drs. Scott Palmer, chair of the Department of History, and COLA assistant dean Les Riding-In for their support. The Milner Library awarded to me their first annual Circus and Allied Arts Fellowship in 2019, and in 2021, I was awarded a research fellowship as an Assistant Editor with the *Papers of William F. Cody* project. For all of these sources of financial support, I am most grateful.

As a final note, I would like to thank The Ringling, Illinois State University, Circus World Museum, the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, and UT Arlington Special Collections for their generosity in allowing me to publish images from their collections in this dissertation free of charge. The use of these images has greatly enhanced the work in ways both analytic and aesthetic.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory to my mother,

***Cathy Elaine Hansard** (1959-2021),*

who knew long before I did that I would someday earn a Ph.D.

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INTRODUCTION

I have found that the circus is generally viewed by many of my peers in the historical profession as a "fun" topic, one removed from the potential bleakness of more traditional topics and well-covered territories. But the story of the circus, as much as it is a story of wonder and amazement, is also a story of hardship, struggle, and conflict. This is especially true when exploring the history of circus labor, which is in many (if not most) cases a story of opposition and exploitation. Living and working on the circus train and in the "great canvas city" required one to face difficult work, dangerous conditions, and strict management. These conditions created something of a social "family" among the employees of any given circus. And yet, due to many factors, mobility chief among them, circus workers had (and continue to have) great difficulty in becoming a class "in and for itself." Because so few are familiar with the circus, and even fewer with circus labor, I felt a strong call to do my part in raising visibility of this topic to other scholars. What follows in this introduction is an explanation of the intellectual framework that I have used to guide the composition of this dissertation.

To begin, I would like to explore a complex and contentious concept in labor history: class composition. What exactly does the term "class composition" mean? Historical models for understanding class are numerous, complex, and ambiguous. My own understanding of these concepts has been primarily developed through the Marxist traditions, but that does not narrow the possibilities much. Marx and Engels used the term "class composition" in varied ways that changed over time, and E.P. Thompson believed that scholars may have been focusing on that concept too heavily. Herbert Gutman further developed these concepts in his work, explaining

that class was not static or linear, and that classes went through processes of composition, decomposition, and recomposition.[1]

More than any other single sources, the article "Class Consciousness or Class Composition?" by Salar Mohandesi, a scholar of the transnational history of ideas, has most guided my thinking about these terms. Mohandesi breaks down these Marxist conceptions of class into three categories: class as relation, noting that classes can only exist in relation to one another; class as struggle, explaining that struggle is something that class *is* rather than something that class *does*; and class as process, using the terms "reconstitution and deconstitution" to describe the ebbs and flows of classes.[2] Looking to the ways these concepts have been applied, he then analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of both class composition and class consciousness as models for understanding them. Mohandesi finds class composition to be a more useful concept, due to the fact that "class consciousness stresses a particularly long period of maturation before a class can be said to have definitively emerged as for itself."[3] He admits, however, that class composition has a tendency to be applied too specifically without considering broader historical patterns, favoring centrality for certain groups of workers or for technical over political composition, for example.[4]

I am following Mohandesi's logic to suggest that there can be a reconciliation between these two models. Class composition is the process by which workers materially and socially constitute themselves (class "in itself," as Marx described it) and class consciousness is the result of that process, a conscious realization of class solidarity (class "for itself"); as Mohandesi

[1] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Communist Manifesto (Chapter 1)," Marxists Internet Library; E. P. Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?," *Social History* 3, no. 2 (1978): 133–65; Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," *The American Historical Review* 78, no. 3 (1973): 531–88.
[2] Salar Mohandesi, "Class Consciousness or Class Composition?," *Science & Society* 77, no. 1 (2013): 74–75.
[3] Mohandesi, 81.
[4] Mohandesi, 88–90.

describes such a process, the move from potentiality to actuality.[5] Using Mohandesi's models and Marxist tradition as an intellectual framework, this dissertation tells the story of how the process of class composition took place, and the times at which class composition was realized, for the employees (and managers, and proprietors) of circuses and Wild West shows from the Gilded Age through the New Deal Era. It is important to note, however, that both of these models are not always as useful as we would like, and that understanding class as struggle is imperative, and perhaps should be the starting point from which we seek to understand class as a historical concept. E.P. Thompson himself put it best when he wrote that class struggle, above all else, is what we should strive to understand, and that "class and class-consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage in the real historical process."[6]

Much of this dissertation, despite the best attempts to write from the bottom-up, is based largely upon top-down sources, written by prominent circus impresarios and managers. Some are also what I would call "middle" sources, such as department managers, press agents, and performers. The heavy use of these types of primary sources is first and foremost due to necessity – roustabouts, razorbacks, and other circus laborers were not usually the type of person to leave significant written records of their lives. But it is possible to read these sources critically to better understand the lives of the employees who worked under and with these men, and I have done my best to read these top-down sources from the bottom-up. At the same time, I also argue that these sources are valuable because it is important to understand the experiences of the managers as well. The managerial class has also at times been a class in and for itself, and the rise of the circus industry has gone hand-in-hand with these historical developments. The upper

[5] Mohandesi, 85.
[6] Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society," 149.

classes are classes too, and without understanding their perspective and their relation to the lower classes, we lose crucial points of analysis for class struggle.

The chronological range of this work may sound highly specific, when other works are often set in general decade ranges. Why 1872 and 1938 in particular? Because of developments that took place in these years, I see them as specific bookends around the story of the modern American circus in its "golden age." P.T. Barnum and his business partners perfected circus rail travel in 1872, transforming the circus into a veritable industry. The railroad circus required a massive army of employees to operate, and a strict class hierarchy was established by both the management and the workers themselves, which the circus came to rely on to exist. But changes to the social geography of the workplace, numerous accidents and tragedies, as well as wider developments in organized labor, at times broke down those internal barriers. In 1938, the unionization of and strike by the workforce of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey ultimately dealt a blow to the circus industry from which it never recovered. The blame is not on the workers for this – this was the natural progression of class struggle – but nevertheless, the big top came billowing down. It is important as well to understand the historical narrative arc of the circus in the United States in order to understand why the developments on which I am focusing are significant. In this regard, Chapter One covers primarily the years prior to 1872, and the Epilogue discusses the circus from the 1940s to the present.

The organization of this work is roughly chronological, but primarily thematic and analytic in nature. Chapter One is a historical overview that charts the circus's development from essentially a cottage industry into a true industrial powerhouse, operated by segmented labor and scientific management. Chapter Two analyzes the role of mobility in the development of class composition (or lack thereof) among circus employees. Chapter Three expands upon this by

following the Barnum & Bailey circus on its four-year-long grand tour of Europe, during which time class consciousness was achieved by circus workers, arguably for the first time, as evidenced by the formation of a fraternal society called the Benevolent Protective Order of Tigers. Chapter Four deals with the return of Barnum & Bailey to the United States, and the ripple effect of class composition that took place throughout the industry, in no small part due to increased territorial competition between shows that led to a "Great Circus War" in 1903. Chapter Five takes an aside to discuss Buffalo Bill's Wild West, a "cousin" of the industrial American circus which faced great difficulties in labor management, especially during the time it was managed by James Bailey and his staff. Chapter Six analyzes class composition among the managerial classes that developed as a result of these prior events, and the complex relationship between management and labor that ultimately led to Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey employees unionizing for the first time in 1937. The Epilogue, as previously stated, briefly outlines developments in circus labor from the 1940s to the present, in particular focusing on the closure of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 2017.

With that, I invite you to "step right up" and be transported into the circus world, and to be educated and entertained by stories of triumph and tragedy, insult and injury, danger and daring, and most of all, of strictly managed hard work.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM MUD SHOWS TO THE GREATEST SHOW: THE INDUSTRIALIZATION OF THE CIRCUS

Though the true origins of pink lemonade may seem as murky as the drink itself, more likely than not it was a product of the circus. The standard story was first recounted in the memoir of George Conklin, a famous lion tamer and circus proprietor. As Conklin tells it, his brother Pete invented pink lemonade quite by accident. In the summer of 1857, Pete Conklin was an acrobat on the Jerry Mabie circus, a popular but small-time organization based in Delavan, Wisconsin, which in the mid-nineteenth century was the country's capital of wagon-based traveling circus troupes.[1] One day, the Mabie show's star clown, Tony Pastor, quit the show unexpectedly. Pete Conklin was ordered to stand in for Pastor, and was so successful that he was asked to continue as a clown for several more shows. He then demanded a clown's wages from Mabie, who refused. Conklin decided to quit, but continued to follow the circus, using money he had saved to take up selling concessions on the show grounds. (For most of the circus's history, concessions were generally contracted out to third parties in a system called "privileges.") Conklin had saved enough money to buy two mules and a covered wagon, as well as peanuts and supplies for lemonade. On a particularly hot day at a stand in Texas, demand was so high that Conklin ran out of water to make his lemonade. Knowing that he would soon be mobbed by thirsty Texan ruffians, Conklin rushed for the nearest water supply he could find: a washtub in which bareback rider Fannie Jameson had just finished laundering her red tights. Conklin marketed the resulting pink beverage as "strawberry lemonade," and a timeless treat was born.[2]

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[1] Dorothy Moulding Brown, *Wisconsin Circus Lore, 1850-1908: Stories of the Big Top, Sawdust Ring, Menagerie, and Sideshows* (Madison, Wis: Wisconsin Folklore), foreword p. 1, http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/search.asp?id=1229.

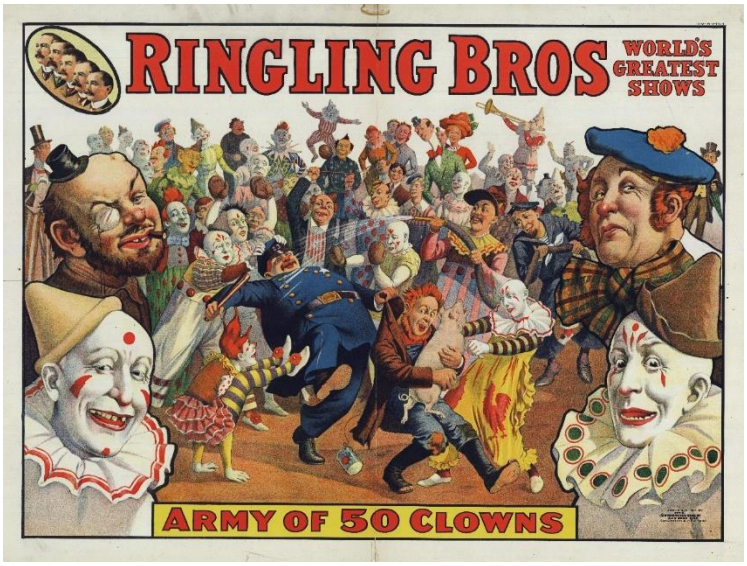
[2] George Conklin and Harvey Woods Root, *The Ways of the Circus: Being the Memories and Adventures of George Conklin, Tamer of Lions* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1921), 228–30.

Although there are numerous ways to read such a colorful tale, there are two key themes to take away from it: Conklin's mobility and his sense of agency as a laborer. Conklin felt justified in demanding the pay that the work he was doing afforded, and when his boss told him he could take what he was offered or quit, he had no qualms with quitting. This was not uncommon among "showfolks" (as they have long been generally referred to), regardless of whether or not they had saved as considerable a sum of money as Conklin. Conklin also had a high degree of mobility that allowed him to continue traveling alongside the show even after he had quit it. He was far from alone in this, and many others simply chose to move on to other industries. In fact, many circus laborers planned to do so from the beginning, using the circus as a springboard to travel west to mining, agriculture, or urban employment. On the other hand, Jerry Mabie doesn't seem to have been particularly worried about delivering such an ultimatum. Although it might have caused him some inconvenience, replacing his employee would not have been exceedingly difficult, for there would have been plenty to take his place. It is worth noting that Conklin would later return to clowning, but with the Spalding & Rogers show – which presumably paid what he considered a fair rate.[3] Regardless, before we can understand how circus laborers negotiated their situations, we must make a survey of how the industrial American circus came to be.

The roots of the industrial railroad circus of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era run both wide and deep. Regularly held entertainment programs and organized games that were common in the Roman Empire, taking place in an elongated arena they called a *circus*, are generally considered the modern circus's oldest ancestor. Indeed, in modern imagery, Ancient Rome and its version of the circus are inextricably linked, such as in the phrase "bread and circuses,"

[3] Stuart Thayer and William L. Slout, *Grand Entrée: The Birth of the Greatest Show on Earth, 1870-1875* (San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 2009), 4.

referring to shallow methods of satisfying the *plebeians*. But just how similar were Roman entertainments to what we would now recognize as the circus? Certainly, the most extravagant of these public spectacles, called *ludi*, featured many acts we now associate with the circus, including horsemanship and races, exotic animals, feats of strength and agility, the *ludi circenses* (chariot races), and the *pompa circensis*, an extravagant parade preceding the events. Sometimes arenas were even flooded with water in order to engage in naval re-enactments, a practice the Romans called *naumachia* that was resumed in the Gilded Age industrial circus. There were also similarities in the cultural importance of the circus across time and space. In both the Roman Empire and the American Empire, "circus day" became a public holiday during which business would not be conducted and work would not be done (except by those doing the work of putting on the spectacle).[4] Despite these similarities, there were, however, two crucial differences between the *ludi* and their modern descendants. First, the *ludi* were stationary (with the exception of the *pompa circensis*), whereas the American circus was mobile, at first by necessity and later as an integral part of the spectacle. And second, the *ludi* lacked clowns or other forms of comedy, which would become a tentpole of the modern circus.



Clowns eventually became so important to the circus that the largest shows carried fifty or more with them, as seen in this 1910 poster. Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

[4] Matthew Bunson, *A Dictionary of the Roman Empire* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1995), 246, http://archive.org/details/dictionaryofroma0000buns; Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 2.

However, although they cannot be convincingly traced back as far as Ancient Rome, both of these traits do have centuries-old antecedents. Throughout the European Middle Ages, and simultaneously in Asia and North Africa, adventurous solo players as well as roving bands of entertainers traveled to royal courts and popular fairs, performing plays, comedy, songs, acrobatics, and more. This became so common that regulation and organization of these players became a necessity for both themselves and the courts. During the Renaissance period in Italy and England, the first professional traveling performers emerged, organizing acting troupes that resembled the later "mud shows" of nineteenth-century America in many ways. These performers were first and foremost professional actors, and in Renaissance Europe the most popular entertainment was the *commedia dell'Arte* – "comedy of the professional artist." Traveling widely across the European continent, often sponsored and regulated by the nobility, organized *commedia* troupes performed physical, prop-based comedy; they traveled in ornate, custom-designed wagons; and their acts were relatively standardized, with only a few adjustments based on the locations they played. Even more importantly, these troupes were more conscious than their predecessors (and many of their contemporaries) of devising ways to best to manage their own labor and to maximize their profits.[5]

Still, despite the temptation, drawing parallels between the modern circus and its ancestors must be done with caution. Pre-modern links to these "allied arts," as they are referred to by scholars of popular entertainments, can be tenuous, especially given the lack of integration of variety acts that came to be a hallmark of the circus as it is recognized in the present. It is only in the eighteenth century that we begin to see the earliest incarnations of the modern circus

[5] For further reading on the performing troupes of the Medieval and Renaissance periods, consult David Brubaker, *Court and Commedia: Medieval and Renaissance Theatre* (New York: Richards Rosen, 1975), Kenneth Richards and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), and Winnifred Smith, *The Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964).

institution develop. The oft-cited "father of the modern circus" is Philip Astley, a cavalryman turned riding instructor, showman, and impresario working in Great Britain and France in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Astley was not the first to combine entertainment and education in his field, but was rather the latest in a line of enterprising European equestrian entertainers, riding masters who put on performances for the same nobles to whom they gave lessons. This phenomenon was not unique to Great Britain, and in continental Europe the glamour and showmanship of the *Spanische Hofreitschule* ("Spanish Riding School") in Vienna was particularly renowned.[6]

Philip Astley was different than those equestrians who came before, however, in that he was the first to open a venue that was geared more toward commercialized entertainment rather than education of the nobility. Astley, a former dragoon who was celebrated for his theatricality on the battlefield, hungered for more fame after returning to England from fighting in the Seven Years' War, and began in 1768 to perform public feats of equestrianism at his riding school. Soon, the exhibitions became the focus, and in the 1770s he ordered the construction of wooden amphitheaters for performance in London and Dublin, as well as semi-permanent venues to be built all across Great Britain. Circus director and historian Dominique Jando notes that Astley became so well-known for the proliferation of these structures that he was soon referred to as "Amphi-Philip."[7]

Astley also developed a clearer understanding than his predecessors of the peculiar utility of performing in a ring. Centrifugal force, he found, allowed riders to stand fully erect and

[6] Dominique Jando, *Philip Astley and the Horsemen Who Invented the Circus* (San Francisco: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018), 20–23. The cultural importance of the *Spanische Hofreitschule* would indeed transcend time and space, as evidenced by the current existence of the Medieval Times chain of dinner theater venues, where the evening's entertainment is themed around medieval Spanish horsemanship.
[7] Jando, 41.

perform other physical feats from the back of a horse galloping in a circle. This discovery cannot be overstated, for it became the basis of circus performance arts from that time through to the present. Then, in the 1780s, Astley did as the Romans did, adding supplementary performers to keep the audience entertained between acts of the main attraction. Acrobats, strongmen, musicians, and more provided additional spectacle. Beyond new feats of horsemanship, Astley's most influential addition to the circus was that of clowns. Astley did not invent the circus out of thin air, but as is the case for many of those who are credited as the "father" of a historical phenomenon, he standardized and popularized his format. Indeed, for the next two centuries, almost all circuses were based on Astley's model: arena-based equestrian-centered performances, with ancillary acts in-between, all engaged in feats of spectacular nature.

The act of riding or sending horses to perform in a ring became the basis of the modern circus, and is still the centerpiece of most circuses that remain. This 1896 poster for the Barnum & Bailey show boasts the immense cost of purchasing fifty horses and their stage costumes. Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

This new circus format was first imported to the United States by British equestrian John Bill Ricketts, who established an Astley-esque circus and riding school in Philadelphia in 1793. Ricketts had cut his teeth as a protégé of a competitor to Philip Astley, Charles Hughes – who was actually the first to use the word "circus" to describe the venue in which his exhibitions were performed. Ricketts' feats of horsemanship were legendary, and he kept good company among equestrians on both sides of the Atlantic, not the least of whom was George Washington. Washington was indeed so fond of Ricketts and his performances that when he stepped down from the presidency, one of his public celebrations was held at Ricketts' Amphitheater. Wanting to capitalize on this popularity, Ricketts took his show on the road, as had Astley and his other predecessors in Great Britain. As press agent-turned-historian Earl Chapin May describes it, Ricketts "trouped from Albany to Baltimore" with his circus, which consisted primarily of equestrian acts and pantomime, either performing in existing venues or constructing semi-permanent amphitheaters, just as Astley had.[8]

In the late 1820s, New York businessmen led the next wave of transformation of the circus business, and one pair in particular have perhaps as great a claim to the title of "fathers" of the modern circus than their predecessors like Philip Astley or John Bill Ricketts. In 1825, impresarios J. Purdy Brown and Lewis Bailey became the first circus owners to exhibit their entertainment under canvas tents, touring a rural route just beyond the East Coast cities of the United States. Brown and Bailey also expanded the scope of the circus beyond performance by combining it with another popular form of entertainment. Concurrent with the rise of the traveling circus in this era was the popularity of the traveling menagerie, in which animals were not generally made to engage in performance acts, but were instead appreciated largely for their

[8] Earl Chapin May, *The Circus From Rome to Ringling* (New York: Dover Publications, 1963), 20.

visual aesthetics, and on the basis of being "exotic." Although the menagerie and circus had begun as separate endeavors, it did not take long for enterprising proprietors to realize the money to be made in exhibiting the two together – especially given that circus performances and performers were often considered as "exotic" as wild animals. Brown and Bailey, as a matter of fact, were both members of menagerie-owning families and cut their teeth in that business before transitioning to circuses. And so, in 1828, they combined the circus and menagerie, both under canvas, essentially creating the circus as it would exist for over a century, and that to some degree persists into the present.

Circus historian Stuart Thayer argues that the advent of the canvas tent is what "led to the establishment of the rituals of itinerancy" of the modern circus, as opposed to the less mobile and less unified companies of earlier decades. In a return to form evoking their medieval predecessors, companies were now "formed and maintained in a season-long coherence," the nature of their work requiring a stronger commitment to logistics. Thayer further notes the expansion of both labor and management required to manage even the smallest show of this nature: "The traveling company needed someone to ride ahead and advertise the show, and someone to transport the tent and the ring fence and the personnel. Thus, were introduced people and horses who didn't perform but who required feeding and housing. Concomitantly, the duties of the manager increased."[9] Thayer goes on to note that by 1830 – four years after the introduction of the canvas tent – five of the nine major traveling circuses in the United States were owned by dedicated managers rather than performers, as had been the tradition since the

[9] Stuart Thayer, *Traveling Showmen: The American Circus Before the Civil War* (Detroit: Astley & Ricketts, 1997), 1.

days of Philip Astley. By 1850, managerial businessmen owned two-thirds of the United States' seventeen traveling circuses, sometimes in conjunction with a star performer.[10]

Throughout his seminal study *Traveling Showmen*, as well as his earlier work *Mudshows and Railers*, Thayer repeatedly returns to the concept of an increasing division of labor and growing managerial concerns. In *Mudshows and Railers*, he documents the lack of division of labor that existed on the small "mud shows" of the nineteenth century: "On a family show the personnel were in the kitchen just as the wagons were in the backyard. There are records of circuses with as few as eight people, each doubling as performer, musician, and workman."[11] In *Traveling Showmen*, he further expands on this concept, documenting how even on the larger shows (family-owned or otherwise), in the beginning work was done by all involved – the band and performers were responsible for erecting the tents, seats, and rings, for example. But as circuses continued to grow in size and scope, separate departments were created, from equestrians to canvasmen to billposters.[12] In this part of his narrative, however, Thayer leaves a sizeable gap. He pays particular attention to managers and the role of capital, without much considering the viewpoint of the laborers, much less any agency they may have had in the process.

This new class of entertainment managers and their employees, as examined by Thayer and others, did not develop in a vacuum, but were rather early examples in the long historical arc of the specialization, and Taylorization, of industrial labor. The principles of what is more formally referred to as "scientific management" were perfected by mechanical engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor around the turn of the twentieth century. The central idea of

[10] Thayer, 6.
[11] Stuart Thayer, *Mudshows and Railers: The American Circus in 1879* (Stuart Thayer, 1971), 2.
[12] Thayer, *Traveling Showmen*, 99–100.

Taylorism is that manufacturing work done by humans should mirror the operation of machines and tools. Rather than having a specialized artisan produce goods from beginning to end, under Taylorism the process is subdivided into individual tasks and routines. Managers are then employed to supervise groups of employees performing the same task and to enforce policies designed to maximize efficiency. In this way, workers become as interchangeable as the mechanisms they operated and produced, and they are operated by their managers (who are themselves somewhat interchangeable) as if they were machines. It was this development that ultimately led to the now-common distinctions between "skilled" and "unskilled" labor, as well as "blue-collar" and "white-collar" workers. Because it allowed for the expansion of industry on a hitherto unheard-of scale, scientific management quickly became the standard by which most industrial businesses operated.[13]

This new circus model also did not develop in a geographical vacuum. Although the traveling circus is often thought of as a distinctly American form of entertainment – and reasonably so – it did in fact rely on transnational networks of proprietors, performers, and many others from its earliest inception. In his article "The Transnational History of the Early American Circus," historian Matthew Wittmann argues that the history of the circus must be understood in a global context, and that the development of the modern American circus industry was dependent on "transnational circulations." Wittmann notes that Ricketts' circus was composed primarily of European performers, augmented with some American talent. One of his competitors, Philip Lailson, was Swedish, and Lailson's employees too came from all across the European continent. French equestrian circus proprietors also entered this rapidly growing field

[13] For further reading on Taylorism, consult Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, 25th Anniversary edition (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998).

in the early years of the nineteenth century.[14] It is worth nothing, however, that the French circus style, wherever it was being presented, was not at this time substantially different from the British style – the modern circus in Paris had been established by none other than Philip Astley![15]

Within just a few decades, however, European dominance of the circus trade had been overturned. Circuses owned and operated by Europeans had flourished in no small part due to the geographic origins of the circus arts, but by the 1820s, native-born American impresarios had taken over the business. The passing of another decade – time in which Americans were able to develop a stronger understanding of circus arts and the logistics of show business – would see a proliferation of American performers starring in European circuses. The next logical step, then, was the spread of American circuses outside of the United States. The new American circus business became a global enterprise beginning in the 1830s, taking advantage of well-established entertainment circuits in the Atlantic world, from Canada to the Caribbean. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the circus took advantage of newly developing entertainment markets, not only following Anglo-American settlers all the way to California, but expanding into the Pacific world as well, with shows touring Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, and Japan.[16]

By the 1860s, having had a strong presence in the United States for several generations, the traveling circus had become so integral to American culture – for both those who supported it and those who opposed it on moral grounds – that even the Civil War could not derail it as seriously as one might imagine. Circus historian William L. Slout documents this astounding

[14] Matthew Wittmann, "The Transnational History of the Early American Circus," in *The American Circus*, eds. Susan Weber, Kenneth L. Ames, and Matthew Wittmann (New York: Yale University Press, 2012).
[15] Dominique Jando, "Chapter Four: The Circus Expands Its Reach," in *Philip Astley and the Horsemen Who Invented the Circus* (San Francisco: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018).
[16] Wittmann, "The Transnational History of the Early American Circus."

history in *Clowns and Cannons: The American Circus during the Civil War*, demonstrating that although at the onset of the war circuses were largely forced out of the South, this changed quickly as those who were hungry enough for opportunity saw a chance to profit from the situation. Despite the danger, some shows either remained in the South when the war began, or followed the front lines of the Union Army as it marched southward. Once the Union had taken control of the Mississippi River, circuses that were already equipped to travel by boat often did so, although the effects on river travel produced by the implementation of the Anaconda Plan sometimes made that difficult.

For example, the famous clown and proprietor Dan Rice – a household name celebrity in nineteenth-century America who was possibly a model for "Uncle Sam" – actually continued to perform in New Orleans in the early days of the war, and was labeled as a secessionist sympathizer as a result, his reputation permanently damaged.[17] Another show, exhibited under the name of the soon-to-be-famous Dan Castello, steamed down the Mississippi River in 1862, zigzagging its stands from side to side and exhibiting under the appropriate flag so as to avoid direct confrontation.[18] The circus already occupied a precarious social position, and by no means did the civilian status of showmen keep them safe from attack. Slout documents a number of instances in which circuses were outright attacked by Confederate forces, but despite the serious risk to life and limb, the show would usually go on. In fact, Slout estimates that 1863 could well have been the most prosperous circus season in America up to that time, which he argues was due to the need to "drown out the unpleasantness" of a war that pitted brother against brother.[19]

[17] William L. Slout, *Clowns and Cannons: The American Circus During the Civil War* (San Bernardino, Calif: Borgo Press, 2000), 54–55.
[18] Slout, 86–87.
[19] Slout, 155.

Dangerous conditions meant that although there was potential for profit in the South, many shows chose instead to expand their geographical reach, and thus the Civil War also contributed to the further transnational spread of the American circus. With the Southern market closed off to all but the bravest of shows, intense territorial competition led shows to travel not only deeper into the American West, but also abroad to the Caribbean, South America, and Canada in greater numbers than in past seasons.[20] However, this was simply a new phase in an ongoing process, as was the rest of the behavior of circus managers during this period. Slout says that the circus came out of the war years "unscathed and unchanged," and that seems relatively true – although this obscures the fact that the circus continued to occupy a precarious social position throughout the mid-nineteenth century.[21] Not long after the Civil War, though, this situation would change drastically.

We should take a moment to pause here before reaching the industrial era upon which this dissertation is focused. The narrative to this point certainly opens up questions of the labor involved in producing these exhibitions. How, in practical terms, were circuses produced, and who engaged in both the performance labor and the manual labor required to put on such a show? In the first century of the modern circus, the productions were smaller in scale and scope, and thus required significantly less labor than the industrial circuses of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. They had few if any performers or animals whose primary job was not performance, compared to the industrial shows which required dozens or even hundreds of non-entertainer employees, and whose animals were also put to work at manual labor. Those shows generally required a break from touring in the winter season so that they could repair and construct wagons and equipment, design and produce props and costumes, train animals and

[20] Slout, xi.
[21] Slout, 215.

performers, and more. Philip Astley's exhibitions, however, had toured more or less continuously, playing London in the summer, Dublin in the winter, and numerous other locations along the way. Not only that, but Astley only directly employed performers, who were engaged only in that form of labor. The building and maintenance of the amphitheaters for which Astley was so well known was presumably done by local laborers.

This tradition persisted through the first half of the nineteenth century, when Thayer notes that some sixty percent of "mud shows" were traveling year-round, perhaps with a one-month break.[22] In George Conklin's memoir, he claims that the Jerry Mabie circus had once traveled for seven continuous years without "laying up," a feat that he had not seen matched at the time of his writing in 1921. Thayer's later research contradicts Conklin's memories, finding some shows that had traveled for nine- and eleven-year stints with no wintering required.[23] By the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the circus began to develop into a larger and more segmented business, the shows employed their own carpenters to construct arenas, and in the era of the circus under canvas, the labor of erecting the "great canvas city" was done mostly by circus employees called "roustabouts," supplemented with local labor when necessary.

Labor, then as now, was also managed and exploited through the circumventing of government regulations. One early example of this is the circus of Charles Hughes, whose labor was performed largely by juvenile boys. Hughes and his business partner, theatre impresario Charles Dibdin, were refused licensing for their business, in part due to issues of petty infighting among the royal patent holders. To get around this problem, Hughes and Dibdin marketed their circus as a riding school and theatrical academy, rather than a professional theatrical troupe. The boys were said to be instructed in religious learning, grammar, oratory, singing, acrobatics, and

[22] Thayer, *Traveling Showmen*, 3.
[23] Thayer, 45.

ballet. However, the idea that this was an academic school was a farce, and their headmaster was literally a clown. Worse yet, the managers could not bring themselves to abide by their own method of circumventing royal regulations, and were shut down for the first of many times shortly after opening night for employing a professional adult actor in their cast.[24]

Although it has been shown that by the mid-nineteenth century, circus labor had already begun to undergo serious division and specialization, that process was not yet complete. Slout demonstrates that there were a number of specialized positions in both manual labor and managerial staff, but there was also often overlap, with employees being expected to double up on their duties.[25] Still, the circus had stabilized in operational terms, Slout argues, and would remain so until the next big innovation, one that became as integral a part of the circus as horses or clowns – circus trains.

Experiments with rail travel by circus proprietors began as early as 1838, and continued sporadically throughout the 1850s and 1860s.[26] Slout argues that the reluctance of shows to travel by rail was in part due to the lack of standardization of rail gauges, which although not impossible to overcome, still proved too logistically cumbersome and cost-prohibitive for most shows to turn a profit.[27] On the other hand, Slout also notes that during the Civil War, most shows in the southern United States moved at least in part by rail, even toward the war's end (and in the years following) when much of the track in the South had been destroyed.[28] In addition, it is worth noting that wagon-based "mud shows" and irregular instances of rail travel were not the only way that circuses moved. Thanks to the Transportation Revolution that was

[24] Jando, *Philip Astley*, 52.
[25] Slout, *Clowns and Cannons*, viii.
[26] Thayer, *Mudshows and Railers*, 6; Thayer, *Traveling Showmen*, 54.
[27] Slout, *Clowns and Cannons*, 16–17.
[28] Slout, 196–97.

occurring throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, a great number of shows traveled the rivers by steamboat. This method, however, proved limiting in some ways, Thayer and Slout argue, as the circus could only be as large as a steamer could safely carry.[29] All this being said, few scholars would disagree that the true railroad circus era – and thus, the true industrial circus – began in 1872, when proprietor William Cameron Coup put his new traveling show on rails, becoming so successful that his world-famous business partner soon dubbed the circus "The Greatest Show on Earth."

Although Phineas Taylor Barnum is today best known for his success as a circus proprietor, he became a major figure in that business late in life, with an already storied career behind him. For this reason we should take a brief detour to discuss a few biographical anecdotes about Barnum, without whom the modern American circus would not exist. Barnum and his partners brought together the many thus far disparate elements that would comprise the circus in its golden age and increased the scope and complexity of the business by orders of magnitude that were previously unimaginable. And perhaps more importantly for our purposes, we must examine the development of his managerial sensibilities and attitudes towards his employees, contractors, and business partners.

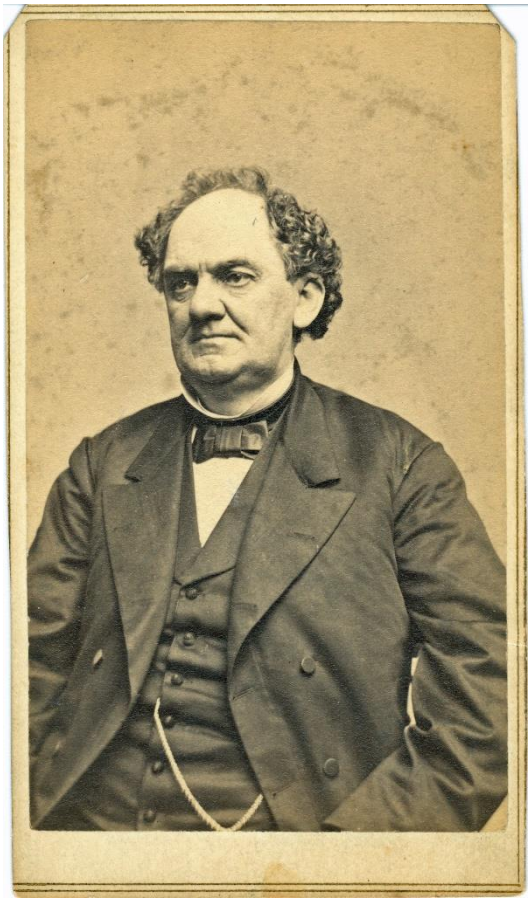


Photo of P.T. Barnum, undated. Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

[29] Thayer and Slout, *Grand Entrée*, 10.

Most people today think of Barnum primarily as not only a showman, but "The Greatest Showman," a title he gave himself through the press and his autobiographies, and that persists in the present in popular culture. But Barnum cut his teeth as a businessman, and although he was a consummate showman, he never lost sight of the highly profitable nature of showmanship. Born in 1810 in Bethel, Connecticut to businessman Philo Barnum and his second wife Irena Taylor, P.T. Barnum was placed early on the path to a life of commercialism. Following in the footsteps of his father, who died of a fever when Barnum was fifteen years old, as a young man he cycled through a number of small business ventures in the town of Danbury, from retail shops to a lottery to a weekly newspaper, all of which were moderately successful. In addition to a penchant for commercialism, Barnum also grew up in a community filled with people exhibiting what was then called "Yankee cuteness." Cuteness, in this sense, was a shortening of the word acute, and so "Yankee cuteness" referred to the cleverness of Yankees, who were seen by themselves and others as shrewd barterers – and also lovers of a good practical joke. This included Barnum's own maternal grandfather Phineas Taylor – affectionately known in the community as "Uncle Phin" – who was both a prankster and a schemer. This "Yankee cuteness" was perhaps the greatest defining trait of P.T. Barnum's life and career, and one that would come to define circusdom as well.[30]

The most lucrative of Barnum's early businesses had been a lottery, but in 1835, lotteries were banned by the Connecticut legislature on moral grounds, depriving him of his greatest source of income. Barnum then elected to move to New York City, where he continued to chase success with small businesses, and began to see the potential profit to be made in entertainment exhibitions. Barnum started down his path as a showman with a particularly despicable

[30] Robert Wilson, *Barnum: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 9–10.

beginning – as a slaver, albeit briefly. Barnum purchased the rights to exhibit an African American woman named Joice Heth, who was in her late seventies and physically frail, blind, toothless, and almost completely paralyzed. She had not lost the ability to speak, and retained some capacity with her right arm. Slavery had been fully abolished in New York by 1827, but Barnum exploited a loophole by only leasing the rights to her labor, rather than purchasing her as property outright. Heth had been marketed unsuccessfully by her formal owner, R.W. Lindsay of Kentucky, as a 161-year-old woman and the former wet nurse to George Washington. The degree to which both Lindsay and Barnum were intentionally defrauding their audiences is debated among circus scholars – there does in fact exist contemporary evidence to suggest that both earnestly believed that Heth was the same woman mentioned in a 1727 bill of sale to Augustine Washington.[31] When Heth died in February 1836, Barnum sold fifty cent admission to her autopsy to medical professionals, clergymen, and newspaper editors. The reveal by a surgeon of her actual age of approximately eighty years confused the public, who had trouble believing the decrepit woman they had seen was not what Barnum had claimed.[32] They preferred to continue believing what seemed to be true rather than to accept that they had been fooled. Barnum had discovered something seemingly magical in this interaction with the public, and had answered, as Barnum biographer A.H. Saxon describes it, a "divine call" to showmanship and humbuggery.

The financial success of exhibiting Joice Heth allowed Barnum to make further investments in the entertainment business, which he would actually come to find unsatisfying in his first attempts. He soon took on his first variety troupe, becoming a partner in a small circus

[31] A. H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man*, Reissue (Columbia University Press, 1995), 68–69; Wilson, *Barnum*, 32.
[32] Saxon, *P.T. Barnum*, 72.

which he renamed "Barnum's Grand Scientific and Musical Theatre." The acts consisted of an Italian juggler known as "Signor Vivalla," blackface minstrel James Sandford, clown and magician Joe Pentland, and a handful of musicians. Saxon notes that Sandford and Pentland both left the troupe, and that there were in fact continued "desertions," but does not bother to ask why this may have been. Whether it was because of Barnum's management or simply that they found better opportunities elsewhere on the established variety theatre circuit is unknown. Either way, Barnum apparently found it difficult to replacing these performers quickly, and was forced to perform many roles himself, learning both magic and minstrelsy to keep the show on the road until he could find suitable replacements.

After a few years of ups and downs, Barnum's "big break" finally came in in the spring of 1841 – just after he had quit traveling – when the contents of the American Museum in New York City went up for sale. The collection had been offered for sale several times before, and Barnum had expressed interest early on. Through a drawn-out, complicated, and nefarious scheme, Barnum convinced the owner of the building to purchase the museum collection for him and swindled a rival buyer out of their previously established contract with the estate managing the collection. Just a few days before the dawn of 1842, Barnum had successfully humbugged his way into proprietorship of the American Museum.[33]

Saxon notes that managing the American Museum and its three hundred employees was no easy task for Barnum, and he often found himself preoccupied with maintaining control and authority over both his employees and his customers: "He needed to be constantly on guard against anything that might offend the more squeamish among his patrons or threaten his authority. Performers who stepped out of line or refused to accede to his wishes were firmly

[33] Saxon, 89–90.

disciplined; employees caught pilfering or guilty of disrespect were promptly discharged." Here too, we can see early examples of what we now might call "middle management," and Barnum's struggles in that regard. For example, Saxon notes the case of the Lucasie family, who displayed their albinism, and their manager Dr. Oscar Kohn, from whom Barnum wanted their contract transferred so that he could punish them directly for any misbehavior.[34] Additionally, whether they were managed by someone else or themselves, the so-called "freaks," prodigies, and other "platform acts" who worked for Barnum in the American Museum were essentially independent contractors. This too was the case with the concessionaires who filled the section of the museum referred to as the "Perpetual Fair," hawking their wares and services, running the gamut from clairvoyants to phrenologists to taxidermists. The experience of managing these contractors surely proved useful when later managing the concessionaires on the circus lot in the system known as "privileges."

During this period, Barnum also became quite famous as a sort of talent agent and manager of touring acts, of which there are two famous examples. The first is Charles Sherwood Stratton, a boy from Bridgeport with proportionate dwarfism whom Barnum marketed as "General Tom Thumb," after an English folk hero, and as hailing from England. Although he was four years old when Barnum discovered him, audiences were told little Charley Stratton was eleven or twelve so as to further exaggerate his dwarfism. Stratton performed characters, impressions and jokes, and physical acts, and as the years progressed more performers were added and the act became full-scale productions of melodrama. Barnum embarked on a European tour with Stratton (and his parents) in 1844, which included not only public shows, but many private engagements with European royalty, nobility, and high society. Upon his first return to

[34] Saxon, 99–100.

Bridgeport in 1847, locals remarked how intelligent and charming the little boy was, declaring that he had been "Barnumized."[35] Despite some tensions between Barnum and Stratton's parents, "Tom Thumb" became an international icon, and the Stratton family continued to tour the US and Europe with Barnum until 1848 and remained associated long afterward.[36]

The second of Barnum's most famous touring acts was opera singer Jenny Lind, "The Swedish Nightingale," perhaps the greatest *coloratura* of the nineteenth century. Lind toured the United States from September 1850 to May 1852 while partnered with Barnum. Unlike the child Charles Stratton and his inexperienced parents, the latter of whom Barnum was able to treat as he pleased, Lind was a well-established performer and a shrewd negotiator. She was in high demand, and was courting four other agents with offers of American tours. Neither mobility nor agency were seriously limited for Lind, and she knew this. Lind demanded that Barnum deposit the entirety of the salary for herself and two colleagues up front – a total of $187,500 – which required him to sell property and borrow all that he could, and on top of her salary, Lind was entitled to one-fifth of the net profits! Lind effectively shielded herself from any possibility of financial loss, with Barnum shouldering the entire enterprise. Barnum, however, took the risk in stride, helping to spread the rumor that this deal would spell his doom, while gladly signing the contract in January 1850. Lind was so popular – in no small part thanks to Barnum's incessant advertising campaigns – that tickets to her performances were sold at auctions, which themselves became massive events. She was consistently mobbed by throngs of worshippers, and requested that their travel arrangements be made secret, but Barnum only pretended to acquiesce. Touring conditions continued to deteriorate, and in the early months of 1851, the relationship between Barnum and Lind began to breakdown. After Lind refused to perform one night in Pittsburgh

[35] Wilson, *Barnum*, 111; Saxon, *P.T. Barnum*, 151.
[36] Saxon, 123–34, 140-146, 152-153.

because she feared for her safety, the two broke off their partnership, and Lind continued her American tour acting as her own agent. Publicly, the two agreed to pretend the split had been amicable.[37]

Thanks to the financial success of the Tom Thumb and Jenny Lind tours, as well as the popularity of the performers hired to be exhibited at the American Museum, transatlantic talent management became the life's work of the self-proclaimed "Greatest Showman," affording Barnum massive wealth and unlimited fame for three decades and beyond. The original American Museum was destroyed in a fire in July 1865 – miraculously, every employee and guest escaped, even while saving or plundering museum objects, respectively. Tragically, however, most of the animals perished.[38] And although he started again at a new location, that museum too burned in March 1868. Although Barnum had many plans to build yet another museum - even a chain of museums – public museums and zoological gardens were by that time coming into their own, and Barnum instead shifted his support to those institutions.[39] Above all else, P.T. Barnum should be remembered as a man who wanted to make a lot of money, and believed he could do so by providing a unique blend of entertainment and education, held together by a healthy dose of consensual humbuggery.

After the burning of the American Museums, and having temporarily semi-retired from public life after a stint as an abolitionist politician, Barnum returned to the itinerant outdoor show business. And with Barnum's entry into the circus industry proper came the dawn of a new era in show business. W.C. Coup, who had once worked on an earlier show with Barnum, and his

[37] Saxon, 164–66, 180-181.
[38] Wilson, *Barnum*, 210–11.
[39] Saxon, *P.T. Barnum*, 112. Despite Barnum's exit, the dime museum as a cultural phenomenon thrived well through the 1920s, and its influence can still be felt today, such as in the "odditoriums" of Ripley's Believe It Or Not!

partner, former clown Dan Castello, first joined forces with Barnum in the winter of 1870, forming a show called "P.T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie, and Circus." Although it would go through a number of other titles in the coming years, this one demonstrates the simple genius of combining all of these forms of entertainment in such a way that perhaps only Barnum was daring (and foolhardy) enough to do. Furthermore, it is commonly understood among historians of popular culture that Barnum helped to moralize the circus and attract the middle class to the show. His museums had been considered respectable educational establishments, and combining the museum with the other entertainments under the Barnum name meant that they would surely all be respectable, family-friendly endeavors. This would soon have great implications not only for his own business, but for the entire traveling circus industry.

Coup and Castello were originally only interested in Barnum's name recognition, and at first that is all he cared to offer, no longer wishing to be engaged in major traveling entertainment endeavors. But Barnum had long since made himself into a showman for life, and could not resist getting more directly involved. Given that his greatest successes in show business up to this point were with the American Museum, Barnum was eager to integrate a museum component with curiosities, automatons and wax figures, and platform acts (live sideshow performers, often "freaks") into the circus for the first time. Barnum also made another significant contribution in the beginning, because while day-to-day management of the show was largely Coup's responsibility, Barnum was naturally in charge of advertising. Barnum is generally credited with the invention of a type of advertisement called a "courier," which was a small booklet not dissimilar to a modern show program, with illustrations and descriptions of the circus, as well as advertisements for local businesses.

Both Barnum and Coup claimed credit for the idea to go on the rails, and circus historians are not in agreement on the subject either. Regardless, it would have been Coup who dealt with the management required to put the idea into practice. This new arrangement would be different from the previous circus experiments in rail travel in a significant way, in that the show would own the cars, which would be built to their specifications. Both men were concerned with the continued practice of playing small towns with small audiences, which had continued in part because the distance a circus could travel each day was restricted by the stamina of its horses and mules. The "Greatest Show on Earth" had grown so expensive that this practice was unsustainable, as they would have to increase the ticket prices beyond acceptable levels. Traveling by rail could eliminate such concerns, allowing circuses to play only the largest towns that would provide the biggest receipts. With this drastic change in transportation arrangements, the show could now travel as many as one hundred miles per day, as opposed to twenty miles maximum by wagon caravan.

After some fits and starts – the first attempt to load the circus train took twelve hours – Coup and his men developed a number of logistical innovations that remained the standard throughout the circus's history, not the least of which was the creation of specialized ramps used to load wagons on to the flat cars. With the realization of efficient rail travel, the circus had truly become an industrial operation. According to Barnum, the new show, "P.T. Barnum's Great Traveling Exposition and World's Fair," which traveled on sixty-five railroad cars, earned nearly $1,000,000 of profits in 1872.[40] The immediate financial and cultural success of this railroad experiment, just three years after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, would permanently alter the landscape of the traveling entertainment industry.

[40] Wilson, *Barnum*, 235.

Despite the success, Barnum's relationship with his business partners soon soured, in part because he began associating with other shows, and he broke off the partnership in 1880. At that same time, a new and serious competitor had begun to make themselves known, with a show almost equal in spectacle to those with which Barnum was involved. Rather than try to beat him, Barnum instead joined forces with a man who was perhaps the most famous case of a boy who ran away and joined the circus.

The biography of James Anthony Bailey, sometimes known as the "Little Napoleon of Show business," is more difficult to write, if only because Bailey himself was extremely secretive about his own life – to the point that he had even changed his surname. Born in Detroit in 1847, James McGinnis was orphaned at the age of eight and was then raised by his sister, who frequently physically abused him. McGinnis faked his death and ran away to the nearby town of Pontiac, taking odd jobs to survive. As a teenager working as a bellhop, McGinnis was taken apprentice by the "advance man" (chief advertising agent) for Robinson & Lake's Circus, Frederick Harrison Bailey, and McGinnis would later take his name. This served the purpose not only of giving him a new family identity, but also greater prestige in the industry – Fred's uncle Hachaliah Bailey was famous for importing the first elephant into the United States, and both Hachaliah and Fred's brother George F. Bailey were circus proprietors. James Bailey advanced through the ranks of the circus industry, eventually partnering up with

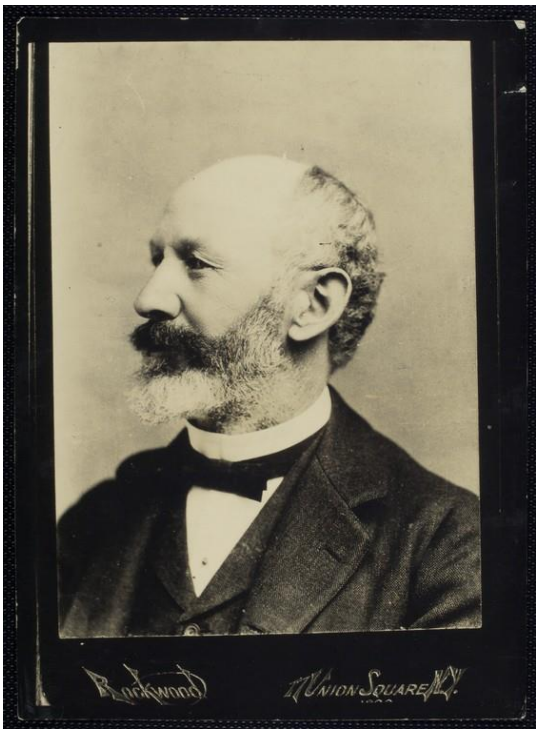


Photo of James A. Bailey, undated. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

James E. Cooper's International Circus in 1873. In 1878, Cooper and Bailey merged with the Great London Circus, which itself was a show that had been created through mergers of smaller circuses. They drew great crowds, especially after March of 1880, when their elephant Hebe gave birth to the first elephant conceived in the United States.[41] It was at this point that Bailey and his show began to seriously attract the attention of P.T. Barnum, who offered $100,000 for the two elephants. Bailey not only refused the offer, but out Barnum-ed Barnum by reproducing Barnum's telegram as an advertisement under the headline "What Barnum Thinks of the Baby Elephant." The two men and other investors soon entered partnership negotiations, finalizing their agreement later that year.

Bailey was a shrewd manager, but a nervous and paranoid man, and let not even the smallest detail go unfretted over. He was often ill and had to be away from the show, in which case his duties were usually performed by other high-level managers. Barnum, still very much "The Greatest Showman," was content to be largely the face of the business and to have to deal with business affairs only from the highest levels, leaving Bailey and Hutchinson to sweat the details. Still, despite or perhaps because of their differences, Barnum and Bailey together were able to further innovate and expand upon circus industry practices in numerous ways. Theirs became the first show to consistently exhibit in three rings, as well as to use the relatively new technology of electric arc lighting. They also established state-of-the-art winter quarters in Barnum's home of Bridgeport, Connecticut, with a three-hundred-foot-long shed with tracks holding the railroad cars, steam-heated barns and nurseries for the animals, a permanent circus ring for training, equipment workshops, and more. Many of the circus employees then put down

[41] Saxon, *P.T. Barnum*, 283.

roots in Bridgeport, establishing the first of several places in America that lay claim to the name of "Circus City."[42]

The developments set in motion by Barnum and Bailey led to an explosion of new circuses and related traveling shows, as well as the exponential growth of many shows that had already existed. As the number of traveling circuses – both mud shows and industrial shows – grew and competition for profit and territory intensified, advertising became crucial to a show's success. Barnum had also taken advantage of rail travel for publicity purposes, introducing in 1876 the innovation of dedicated advertising cars, which would precede the show by weeks, carrying a crew of press agents and billposters known then as the "paste brigade" to drum up interest in the area.[43] Of course, long before Barnum and Bailey arrived on the scene and before the standardization of circus rail travel, even the smallest shows generally had an "advance" department, which traveled the route a few weeks ahead of the show to make sure the show was sufficiently advertised. For some, this was one man on horseback, for many it was at least six men. By the time of Barnum & Bailey, the advance department on industrial shows had grown large enough to have their own division of labor, separating the copywriters from the billposters from the contract agents – in fact, often literally separating them in multiple railroad cars. In some cases, just as was the case with the erection of canvas tents, sometimes local labor was enlisted to supplement the show's advance crew.[44]

Of course, the advance department was far from the only expansion of labor forces required to put on industrial circuses. In addition to the arena performers (including clowns, equestrians, acrobats, animal trainers, etc.), the advance crew, and the managerial staff, all but

[42] Wilson, *Barnum*, 258–59.
[43] Wilson, 250.
[44] Thayer, *Traveling Showmen*, 38.

the very smallest of circuses consisted of a number of other departments as well, such as a menagerie, a museum (after Barnum), sideshow acts, and a concert band. The larger circuses also included secondary performance troupes, such as minstrel bands and Wild West shows. Concessions of food and confections, as well as balloons and other sundries, were referred to as "privileges," as they were often contracted to outside vendors, who paid for the privilege to hawk their wares on the circus lot. To return to the example of Pete Conklin, even though his boss Jerry Mabie lost him as a performer, Mabie still benefited from Conklin quitting, as Conklin then had to pay Mabie for the privilege of working on his show!

On a show like Barnum & Bailey's, or those of their large competitors, such as Adam Forepaugh's, each of these departments and proprietors had their own crews of men to execute the tasks. In fact, a veritable army of dozens – and soon hundreds – of manual laborers were required to put on the show. In addition to the previously mentioned advance crew, canvasmen, seat men, ring and track men, and train men (among others) fell under the category of "roustabouts," manual laborers who were generally considered dispensable and interchangeable.[45] Performance laborers were called "kinkers," separating them from the other workers. There were also horse drivers and grooms, exotic animal handlers, ticket sellers and door keepers, wardrobe and prop assistants, cooks and waiters, candy "butchers" and balloon sellers, even a barber.

Of course, not all shows were Barnum & Bailey. The somewhat pejorative term "mud show" had never been used prior to the advent of the steamboat and railroad circuses, because the small-scale wagon circus was the only type of circus that existed in the United States. But another among the many cultural changes that Barnum initiated through his contributions to

[45] Micah D. Childress, *Circus Life: Performing and Laboring under America's Big Top Shows, 1830–1920* (Knoxville: Univ Tennessee Press, 2018), 77–78.

industrializing the circus was to further devalue in the eyes of the public those shows that either could not or would not follow suit. The mud shows had been present in America for a century, and the country had not seen a year without at least one since 1820.[46] The term evoked then, as it does now, an image of a small, rag-tag troupe of misfits trudging through muddy backroads in a rickety wagon or two, just barely scraping by on the limited profit margin provided by visiting towns not much more populated than the show itself. Although such small-time operations continued to exist throughout the circus's history and into the present, they were already either growing or being overtaken by the 1830s, and by the 1870s, they had become far from the norm. By 1879, thanks to rapid industrial development, the circus had fully entered its "golden age." This was a short but crucial historical moment in which the small, family-run shows, the middling mud shows, and the industrial circuses still co-existed on mostly equal footing. Thayer demonstrates that even those circuses that did not fully industrialize still experienced growth of personnel and deepening divisions of labor.[47] The rationalization of circuses big and small propelled the industry to new heights, but this also spelled its eventual doom.

[46] Thayer, *Mudshows and Railers*, 4.
[47] Thayer, 5.

CHAPTER TWO

RED-LIGHTED ROUSTABOUTS: MOBILITY AND LABOR IN THE CIRCUS

In 1931, the Robbins Bros. Circus was struggling, as were most businesses, of course. The show was relatively young, having been organized in 1923 under the stewardship of veteran circus proprietor Fred Buchanan. For a while, the circus enjoyed considerable success for an up-and-comer, despite shouldering some debts. This success was exemplified by Buchanan's ability to purchase and lease attractions from other shows – most notably an African bull elephant named Bingo, perhaps the largest elephant in history, in close competition with his famed predecessor Jumbo. But the Depression spared very few businesses, and despite having star attractions, the ticket sales had slowly but surely petered out for Buchanan and his show. And so, he did what most business owners do in the face of declining revenue – he cut costs and terminated employees he considered expendable. Late in the summer, towards the end of the scheduled tour, the circus closed business without warning in Mobile, Alabama, and immediately began traveling back to the show's headquarters in Lancaster, Missouri. In the dead of night, as the locomotive rumbled through the southern forests, Buchanan ordered an unknown number of the show's roustabouts physically expelled from the speeding train – without stopping. One man was killed and several

Bingo the elephant previously had performed on the Ringling Brothers show, and is pictured here with its baseball team in 1915. Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

others were injured. Bankrupt and wanted for manslaughter, Buchanan became a fugitive from the law and never returned to show business.[1]

This practice, known most commonly as "red-lighting" – so called because the ejected employees could only watch helplessly as the lights of the circus train's caboose faded into the darkness – was far from uncommon, despite its barbarity. It was in fact common enough that it has even become a part of the modern mythology surrounding the circus. Red-lighting was most effectively brought into the popular consciousness by Sara Gruen's 2006 historical fiction novel *Water for Elephants*, which in 2011 was adapted into a star-studded major motion picture that enjoyed moderate success. Although Gruen's story is rife with inaccuracies about the realities of circus life and logistics, the story's setting is realistic enough – a struggling second-tier circus in the year 1931, not at all unlike the real-life Robbins Bros. And there is at least one aspect of the circus that is depicted reasonably well, if still over-dramatized. One of the major plot threads involves the main character's fear that he or his fellow employees will be red-lighted by the manic and cruel circus owner, who regularly engages in the practice.[2] At the climax of the story, the circus's employees, finally fed-up with being exploited by their boss, release the circus's menagerie animals into the big top during a packed performance. In the ensuing chaos, the show's star elephant kills the abusive circus director in retribution.

Although the results were rarely, if ever, as dramatic as all that, red-lighting was a very real and very concerning practice. From the early decades of the American circus, shows large enough to have any meaningful division of labor routinely abandoned employees (and animals)

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[1] Fred Pfening III, "William P. Hall," *Bandwagon*, December 1966, https://classic.circushistory.org/Bandwagon/bw-1966Nov.htm; Joseph T. Bradbury, "The Fred Buchanan Quarters at Granger, Iowa," *Bandwagon*, September 1963, http://www.classic.circushistory.org/Bandwagon/bw-1963Sep.htm.

[2] Red-lighting is depicted in the film as a murderous act, but not so in the novel, which takes fewer artistic liberties. In reality, although death could occur as it had on the Robbins Bros. show, this was always an unintended consequence.

whenever finances began to run short, or at least refused to pay a salary to those laborers they considered unskilled and replaceable. Conversely, circus management also endeavored to keep their laborers if possible, because although it was possible to replace so-called "unskilled" workers, much of the manual labor on the show, such as driving stakes, was dangerous and required practice in order to perform efficiently and with any degree of safety. To that end, circus management instituted a practice of "holdback," withholding a portion of whatever salary had been promised, not to be paid until the tour reached its conclusion. This also had the advantage of, in effect, providing the show with an interest-free loan to help keep it solvent through the more difficult runs. Stuart Thayer notes that in the pre-industrial circus, when calculating the cost of running the show, managers generally did not include salaries, which were "hostage to the success of the circus." Employers did provide room and board, but routinely did not pay salaries unless sufficient profit existed to do so. They also were already engaging in the practice of holdback pay, and this at rates as high as 50 percent! Thayer goes on to note that periodicals dealing in entertainment news, such as the *New York Clipper*, generally indicated whether or not salaries were being paid, the clearest marker of success for a traveling circus.[3] And finally, particularly unscrupulous managers sometimes chose to red-light their workers before arriving at the show's last stop or winter quarters, allowing the show to keep thousands of dollars in held-back pay for itself.

The roustabouts (also called canvasmen), who drove the stakes and raised the tents, and the razorbacks (from "raise your backs") who loaded and unloaded the train cars, were in many ways the backbone of the circus. The unloading of materiel from the boxcars, the rolling of the wagons off the flat cars, and the raising of the tents was all backbreaking and highly coordinated

[3] Thayer, *Traveling Showmen*, 18.

labor that had to be performed quickly and efficiently in order for the show to go on. Because these laborers were such a ubiquitous presence – at least in aggregate – they were as much a part of the circus as the clowns or the lion tamers. "They were a husky lot, those fellows," George Conklin observed. "Six-footers mostly, broad-shouldered and heavy in proportion, with muscles that laughed at an eighteen-pound sledge. … A red flannel shirt, corduroy pants, cowhide boots, and a slouch hat made a costume which added considerably to the color and picturesqueness of the outfit." Night and day they guarded the tent from those who would try to cut their way in, and fights with "toughs" who would attempt to obtain free entry through violence were not uncommon.[4]

A group of circus workers share a moment of rest in the "backyard," the name for the private areas of the circus grounds. Circa 1920, Breckenridge, Texas. Image courtesy of the Basil Clemons Photograph Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries

The adventure, danger, hardships, and spectacle that were a part of daily life in a traveling circus have led to a romanticization of the popular memory of the circus, as in Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants*. There is no doubt that this has happened in part due to Americans' long cultural history of equating geographic mobility with freedom and independence, from sailors to early settlers to cowboys. Indeed, professional historians have often seen this as a key element of the historical trajectory of the United States. In 1893 (at the height of the industrial

[4] George Conklin and Harvey Woods Root, *The Ways of the Circus: Being the Memories and Adventures of George Conklin, Tamer of Lions* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1921), 233–34.

circus period), Frederick Jackson Turner famously examined this cultural phenomenon as a historical process, positing in a speech to the American Historical Association at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago that "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West."[5] The "Frontier Thesis," as it came to be known, was held as gospel among historians and social scientists for decades to come (and still forms a core tenet of scholarship on the United States today). Labor historians, too, have explored this question. In his 1906 treatise *Why Is There No Socialism In The United States?*, Werner Sombart, when attempting to explain the lack of class consciousness and composition among Americans, included sociogeographic mobility among the answers.

And although there are problems with treating such romances as reality, it is true that this adventurous imagery certainly reflects portions of a circus employee's experiences. Danger and spectacle were common for many laborers, but the roustabout lived a unique life compared to many of his contemporaries. For although most of America's workforce was highly mobile, very few operated within a workplace that was also mobile. Circus employees – not just roustabouts and razorbacks, but performers, managers, and even the "freaks" – developed a unique and insular culture based on their shared experiences on the road. Before we examine this directly, however, let us examine a predecessor that can serve as a model for this form of class composition: sailors.[6] For example, both the lived reality and the popular memory of the lives of

[5] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 2, http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/empire/text1/turner.pdf.

[6] My understanding of class composition and class consciousness as explored in this dissertation is primarily influenced by the work of New Left labor historian E.P. Thompson. For further reading, consult E. P. Thompson,

seafaring laborers on merchant ships were significant antecedents that we can employ in understanding this phenomenon. In his seminal work *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750,* Atlantic historian Marcus Rediker takes the "romance of the sea" and flips it on its head, exploring in fascinating detail the realities of labor relations and workplace culture aboard the "floating factories" that comprised eighteenth-century British shipping ventures.

Although the comparison is rough and uneven, the parallels of the seaman's life in the "wooden world" and the roustabout's life on the circus train are numerous and remarkable. Through their shared experiences of harsh conditions and exploitation, as well as a degree of separation from mainstream society, Rediker's merchant seamen developed a workplace culture of collectivism, relied on specialized jargon, and resisted exploitation through work stoppages when possible. And just as on the merchant ship, the line between work and life on the circus train was blurry, and one was always "on call," so to speak. Finally, in both cases, the division of labor was at once highly specialized and separated – Taylorized, as such methods would later be called – but also completely interdependent. The canvas sail and the canvas tent both must be raised for the work to continue, and to do so requires the power of skillfully coordinated labor. And it is also worth noting that even Rediker's gangs of maritime rogues and pirates find an analogue in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era: hobos. Sailors generally became pirates so as to free themselves from the abuse they faced as employees of royal navies or merchant shipping, and in doing so created a maritime society all its own. American men became hobos for the same reasons. In his book *Citizen Hobo,* Todd DePastino explores the development of counterculture of young men looking to free themselves from the chains of strict discipline and wage labor that

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The Making of the English Working Class (Pantheon Books, 1964); Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society"; Mohandesi, "Class Consciousness or Class Composition?"

became the norm for so many laborers in the United States. These men embraced the culture of "hobohemia," a lifestyle in which men took to a life of transience on the rails, choosing acquisition over accumulation, and forming communal bonds in the process. Masculine, white, and outcast, it would seem at first that hobos would be a natural fit for the circus.[7] However, because their goal was to obtain freedom from regulated work and society, hobos largely avoided joining the circus, which required rigorous and factory-like work, as well as strict obedience to management. Such labor was, to most hobos, the antithesis of their culture.[8]

Rediker argues that the popular imagery of seafaring as a struggle of man versus nature has obscured the fact that the reality of being a merchant seaman was just as much a battle of man versus man, and more specifically a story of class conflict.[9] But for cultural depictions of the circus, the opposite has generally been true. From the "happy-hearted" roustabouts in Walt Disney's 1941 animated feature film *Dumbo* to the abused employees in *Water for Elephants*, circus labor – and the often-antagonistic relationship between employees and management – has long been a part of the romanticized imagery of the railroad circus. Indeed, during the golden age of the railroad circus around the turn of the twentieth century, the Herculean efforts required to put on the circus was an attraction in and of itself. In *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top*, American Studies scholar and circus historian Janet Davis describes how crowds descended on the train station before dawn to watch the razorbacks unload the cars and roll off the wagons, and followed the show to the lot to watch the roustabouts erect the great canvas city.[10] Circus management capitalized on this trend by instituting the evening concert, at

[7] Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America*, New edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
[8] Childress, *Circus Life*, 64.
[9] Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700 - 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3–5.
[10] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 37–39.

which the real attraction was the workingmen disassembling and packing up the show, rather than the minstrel band or other performances.[11] One contemporary commentator noted just how remarkable such an act was: "a city that folds itself up like an umbrella … would have staggered Napoleon himself."[12]

In the industrial circus, labor and performance were inextricably linked, and the line between them was blurred indeed. And as we have noted, such spectacular labor imprinted itself strongly on American culture. In *Dumbo*, the "Song of the Roustabouts" scene shows workers of color toiling in the rain, driving sledges quickly and rhythmically. This was actually quite a realistic depiction of the work, which was often referred to as the "Bailey method." In his memoir *The Big Top: My Forty Years with the Greatest Show on Earth*, star equestrian Fred Bradna recalled that the sledge team "co-ordinated its energies so precisely that the falling hammers beat a fast tattoo. Each man swung his sledge in rhythm. A split second's delay brought another mallet down on top of his own or, worse luck, on his head. Around the circle the beat revolved without pause until the boss canvasman shouted "Down stake," and the crew moved to the next red-tipped pin."[13] The difficult and dangerous nature of this work created serious tension on the circus lot, and lyrics of the "Song of the Roustabouts" speaks of the contentious relationship between labor and management, and how they think of each other; for example: "We don't know when we get our pay/And when we do, we throw our pay away."[14]

[11] Davis, 50.
[12] LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 75.
[13] Fred Bradna, *The Big Top: My Forty Years with the Greatest Show on Earth*, ed. Hartzell Spence (Simon and Schuster, 1952), 30.
[14] YouTube Movies, *Dumbo*, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fon21SZgkg.

Circus culture, although it was unique and insular, does not appear to have been as developed as that of the sailors of yore. This is perhaps due to the fact that for all of the strife and hardship of life aboard the circus train, the "wooden world" was one of much more extreme danger and isolation. Circus management did not generally discipline workers with beatings or other savage punishments, red-lighting being the exception. Although storms and other aspects of the natural world could certainly be a danger, rarely did nature threaten life and limb of a roustabout with such regularity and intensity as it did a seaman. And finally, the circus stopped in a new "port" daily or almost daily, allowing employees to come and go as they pleased, for the most part; the seaman's opportunities to do so were significantly more limited. This also meant that roustabouts were significantly less isolated from the world at large, potentially hindering the development of such a separate culture as the seamen had. It was because of such factors, Rediker argues, that merchant seamen developed a culture of labor militancy. It seems that the reverse is true of the industrial circus; the "push" factors that could have led to class composition were not nearly as strong for most employees of circuses.

In this undated photo by Bub Simmons, a team of roustabouts drives a tent stake into the ground. Image courtesy of the collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the State Art Museum of Florida, Florida State University.

By far the strongest comparison between seamen and roustabouts is the ways in which they were able to use their mobility as a form of resistance to poor working and living conditions. Rediker demonstrates that "footloose seamen, continually coalescing and dispersing, awarded great significance to an autonomous mobility that could be used to reduce exploitation and increase their chances of finding better employment."[15] This was to some degree true of industrial laborers as a whole during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, but their success in this method was not always as great. In *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Labor in the North American West, 1880-1930*, Gunther Peck demonstrates that for many thousands of laborers in America, the concept of free labor was inextricably linked to mobility, and particularly to the freedom to move and freedom to quit. But mobility also came with a price, and quitting a job was often not an effective form of resistance due to the fact that other jobs in their industry – as well as access to goods, services, legal assistance, and more – were likely to be controlled by the same *padrone* whom they were attempting to escape. Although the United States, and particularly the American West, was supposed to be the land of opportunity through free labor, the reality was such that labor opportunities for transient workers existed in varying degrees, none of which were fully "free." Peck further explains, "Because transient wage earners had few alternative means of survival, they were often compelled to accept whatever wage work they could find. For the unskilled, transient worker, the right to earn wages was as much a gamble as a promise, a chance to earn a livelihood but also the right to starve if one failed or was injured on the job."[16] This was most true for the immigrant workers on which Peck focused, but it was true for other transient laborers as well, including circus employees.

[15] Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 291–92.
[16] Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8.

Except for perhaps the most talented and in-demand performers, mobility had as many disadvantages for circus laborers as it did advantages. It is true that the complexities of transatlantic immigration and employment networks allowed the *padrones* to hold their employees in a much stronger grip than many other members of the managerial classes. Still, the comparison has some merit, as most circus employees (immigrants or otherwise) experienced similar situations due to their mobility, and were certainly just as subject to the uncertainties of the secondary labor market. During the Gilded Age, transient seasonal labor became a way of life for most circus employees – just as it was for most of the labor force in the United States at that time. In fact, labor historian Kim Moody has argued that this is one of the overlooked answers to Werner Sombart's age-old question of why there is no socialism in the United States. Almost all laborers in the United States shared common experiences due to their position in the secondary labor market, Moody argues, including unstable wages, subjugation to their employers, and unnatural work rhythms. This was a driver of class composition, but at the same time, the geographic mobility that helped to create these conditions also "undermined the major efforts to construct unions and labor-based parties in the US during the Gilded Age.[17]

Circus employees fit into this theoretical framework rather neatly. Performers, managers, and other skilled laborers had a sporting chance of remaining employed by the circus year-round, working in the off-season at the show's permanent winter quarters to make preparations for the next tour. But unskilled laborers, especially roustabouts, usually entered the same general labor pool as the rest of America's remarkably mobile workforce, competing for seasonal employment in the nation's cities. Attempts to trace these employment patterns has proven elusive, both then and now, with little direct evidence to draw upon, as roustabouts were not the type of people to

[17] Kim Moody, *Tramps and Trade Union Travelers: Internal Migration and Organized Labor in Gilded Age America, 1870–1900* (Haymarket Books, 2019), 23; Moody, 25–26.

generate permanent records of their activities. In his 2018 study of circus life and labor, Micah Childress quotes a boss canvasman as saying "The Lord only knows where they go to in the winter."[18] George Conklin, interestingly, had observed that circus laborers typically worked on logging camps in the winter.[19] Facing some of the same research problems that plagued Peck, Childress also demonstrates the anonymity of mobile circus laborers operating within a Taylorized business model. "We call 'em by numbers and pay 'em by numbers," a boss canvasman told a reporter in Texas in 1895.[20]

Just how many of the roustabouts and razorbacks were immigrants is difficult to know, especially given that company sources like route books and ledgers mostly do not provide this information. But we do know that immigrant laborers were present, in part from observers such as George Conklin. Of course, many performers, from clowns to horsemen to musicians to acrobats, were immigrants or world travelers. When traveling in Europe, circuses could tap into secondary labor markets and immigrant labor there as well, moving people from country to country with them as they toured. When Barnum & Bailey wanted to advertise an "All-American Show" as they moved from England to Germany, Conklin claims (with some exaggeration) that they discovered that only two of their employees at that moment were American![21] And just as they would hire local men and boys occasionally in the United States, so too in Europe would they take advantage of supplementary labor. Conklin notes that while Barnum & Bailey was in France, they set up on military drill grounds and paid French soldiers to assist in the labor of setting up and taking down the show.[22] And finally, there were also those American workers who

[18] Childress, *Circus Life*, 63.
[19] Conklin and Root, *The Ways of the Circus*, 233.
[20] Childress, *Circus Life*, 61.
[21] Conklin and Root, *The Ways of the Circus*, 274. In reality a much greater number of employees were surely American, as the show brought many of its employees with it.
[22] Conklin and Root, 286.

were from non-Anglo ethnic groups, a prominent example being Cajuns, who were often referred to as "Frenchie." This could be either derogatory or endearing; yet another Conklin story tells of one particular "Frenchie" he worked with who sold balloons, and employed a team of men to surreptitiously burst them so that he could sell more.[23]

Returning to Gunther Peck, he has also demonstrated ways in which class composition was able to take place among groups of transient laborers despite the uncertain and tenuous connections inherent in a life of geographic mobility. Using the anthropological concept of "fictive kinship," Peck demonstrates the development of homosocial mutualism and a collectivist culture among groups of immigrant laborers in the American West. "Free labor," Peck writes, "was less about becoming one's own individual boss than finding forms of collective emancipation and independence."[24] These men, in addition to finding ways to share in the domestic work of their daily lives, also formed bonds through activities such as competitive sports, gambling, and drinking. Peck also details the formation of mutual aid societies among his groups of laborers, which became crucial to their experience as sojourning men. Although these workers struggled in creating enduring communities in part due to the lack of access to permanent, tangible spaces in which to meet, it was precisely the exploitation of their transience which led them to persist in these efforts.[25] If they did not seem to seek the same type of "independence" as Peck's laborers, circus roustabouts and razorbacks, regardless of their ethnic background, did engage in many of those same homosocial activities. It is important to note that they did this despite holdback and other attempts by circus management to curtail such behavior, which had the potential to damage the reputation of a show if things got out of hand, as well as to

[23] Conklin and Root, 150.
[24] Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor*, 156.
[25] Peck, 189–90.

promote class composition and resistance to authority. And again like Peck's laborers, they relied on mutualism and fraternalism for support, although the societies and bonds they formed were in almost all cases significantly less cohesive, and primarily existed to provide for those who were injured when circus management would not.

Although the actions of transient immigrant laborers have been seen by some as "primitive rebellions," Peck argues that their struggles were "part and parcel of a larger process of working-class formation and acculturation."[26] The question, then, is why did such processes not seem to take place in the circus, despite many similarities? Up until the New Deal era, there was little labor organization or sustained resistance among circus employees. There was no labor press, minimal organization and communication between "unskilled" workers on different circuses, and mutual aid funds of individual shows were limited to big-top performers – with the notable exception of the Benevolent Order of American Tigers, which was made up of a variety of employees and is the subject of later chapters. Quitting, although it meant losing room and board and employment uncertainty, was by far the most efficient way for circus employees to resist poor working conditions. For men like Pete Conklin, for example, it even had the potential to be a springboard for greater opportunities. On the other hand, circus management could easily quash labor disputes by simply firing their employees and abandoning them (especially those who instigated disputes and strikes) and hiring replacements at the next stop. It was in large part due to these tenuous connections that circus employees never seemed to fully develop class consciousness until the New Deal era. Furthermore, Childress argues that what class composition did occur among these workers actually hindered their ability to organize effectively, and their mobility kept them from fully developing ideas about class. Because their mobility also led to

[26] Peck, 225.

stigmatization, "[circus employees] saw themselves as a class apart from the rest of U.S. society, and this prevented them from forming alliances with other groups of workers," he explains.[27]

Janet Davis has explored in some depth the nature of class composition in the circus and found the process to be complex, but stunted by the structure of the work and the workplace. The railroad circus was essentially a traveling company town, Davis argues, with Taylorized labor structures and strict control over workers' activities and personal lives. Consumption of alcohol was generally forbidden, welfare capitalism was practiced in the form of organized activities such as sports and picnics, and workers were sometimes even monitored by Pinkerton agents or other private detectives. Even within these constraints, however, they did find ways to resist and rebel against unfair treatment and overbearing management – through methods that have previously been mentioned, including quitting, drinking, and other unauthorized activities.[28] Finding commonalities through both organized activity and rebellion against it, there were certainly opportunities for class composition to occur, but these opportunities were few and far between, and this tension created a sort of dichotomy. On the one hand, circus workers tended to see themselves as a sort of family, especially when compared to the rest of mainstream society. They made heavy use of specialized terminology that separated them from the "rubes" (customers on the circus lot) to the degree that outsiders picked up on it as well. For example, some terms like "gimmick," "ballyhoo," and of course "rube" made it into the American vernacular at large.[29] When there were violent confrontations with visitors on the show lot – such as when a "tough" tried to force his way in for free – the worker in need of help could shout

[27] Childress, *Circus Life*, 180.
[28] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 75–81.
[29] We can make yet another comparison here between sailors and roustabouts, for they shared some lingo, such as words related to rigging and canvas, and the phrase "Jonah's Luck."

"Hey Rube," and their fellow employees would come to their rescue without fail.[30] In fact, this is one example in which the circus almost literally became the army that it was seen as by others, and it was seen as risky to attempt rowdyism on the circus lot due to being vastly outnumbered – and this was often reported in the papers.[31]

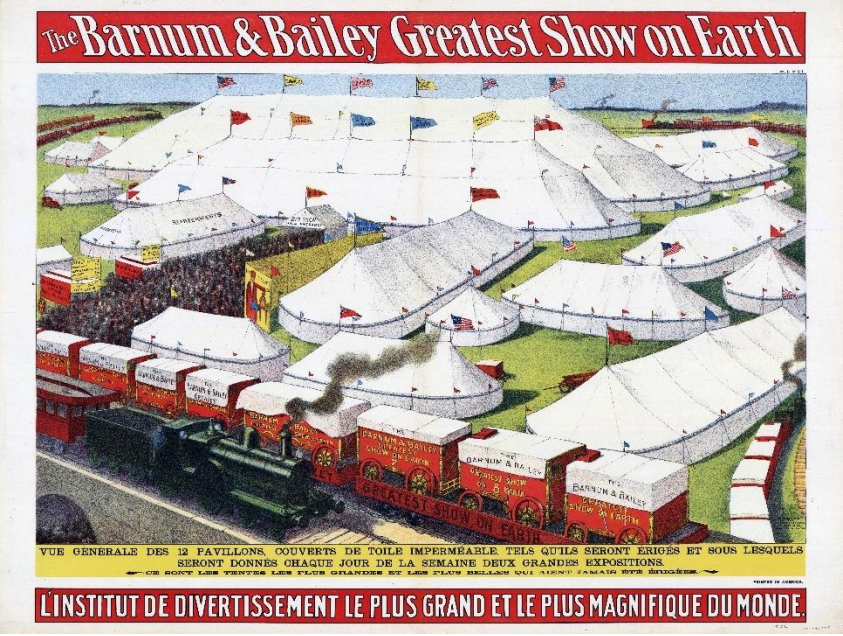
On the other hand, the different categories of laborers were otherwise mostly segregated from each other not only by necessity and managerial policies, but also because employees "maintained and policed the caste hierarchy among themselves."[32] Workers of different types rarely interacted with each other; this is in part because of the segmented sequence of events of putting up, performing, and taking down the show. But circus workers were also separate even when together. On the train and in communal spaces like the dining tent, living and seating arrangements were divided by job and seniority, as well as by race and sex. Because of this, "circus workers maintained a sense of solidarity within their particular occupational group," much as was the case for most other groups of industrial laborers during this period.[33] It was only on a small number of special occasions when all members of the show made a special effort to interact with one another, the most important of which was usually the Fourth of July. For example, the Independence Day celebration of the Ringling Bros. show in 1903, which was put on by the employees, for the employees, was especially grand. Firecrackers lit up the lot, the parade and lot were decorated with extra bunting, and patriotic music was played as they rolled through the town of Beloit, Wisconsin:

> The Turks and "Scotty" the bagpiper tried to grind out "America" on their instruments, to the great amusement of their friends. The entire crowd shouted and shot firecrackers galore. They invited Major Soopromani, the Singhalese midget, to assist them, and after

[30] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 72.
[31] Childress, *Circus Life*, 56–57.
[32] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 65.
[33] Davis, 72.

> the day had been fully explained by Lew Berella and John Walker, the Major said he was "hep" and entered into the festivities with great enthusiasm.[34]

Perhaps even more importantly, as was customary, the interior walls of the dining tent would have been brought down and special meals served to all employees of the show. At almost no other time during a tour would this happen. It was in part special events such as these that helped engender some level of familial sentiments among showpeople, despite the many factors that separated them during the season. And, of course, on July 5 they would have returned to those same routines.



This 1902 poster, translated into French for the Barnum & Bailey tour of Europe, advertises the show's twelve different "pavilions." That the circus was a large, segmented, industrial business was an important part of its appeal. Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

"Routines" is an important word to emphasize here, for the routines of circus labor were required to run extremely smoothly and efficiently – it is somewhat baffling to think that the word "circus" is now generally used to denote chaos and uncertainty, when the fact is that the labor on the biggest shows was tightly controlled, in many cases down to the minute. Historian LeRoy Ashby notes in his survey of the history of public amusement in the United States, *With Amusement for All*, that the circus not only grew into an industry during the period in which the

[34] *The Circus Annual: A Route Book of Ringling Brothers World's Greatest Shows Season 1903* (Chicago: Central Engraving and Printing, 1903), 65.

world came to be ruled by the clock, but that the circus itself contributed to that phenomenon through its rationalized operations. From railroad time schedules, to performances set to music, to the rhythm of driving stakes, synchronization was key to the operation of any large circus. Barnum's show presented itself as a pinnacle of industrial efficiency and rationalization, he notes, having once been advertised as the "Centralization of All That Is Great In the Amusement Realm."[35] So logistically efficient was the circus at moving its roughly 1,200 employees, hundreds of animals, supplies, equipment, baggage, and more, that military forces in both the United States and Europe periodically studied the organization and operation of industrial circuses in order to improve their own logistical practices. For example, while the Ringling circus was in Visalia, California in 1903, several officers of the U.S. Ninth Cavalry rode in thirty-five miles to study the show, and Captain Lester W. Cornish found himself especially impressed with equestrian director Rhoda Royal's methods for training horses. "We train our horses to lie down but our method is crude compared with yours. I intend to adopt your methods and will explain its advantages in an article I will write for the Army and Navy Register," Cornish told him.[36]

Of course, the circus army was made up of much more than the rank-and-file manual laborer "soldiers." Although roustabouts (and razorbacks) have thus far been the primary focus, there is another group of employees for whom the mobility of the workplace both created opportunities and invited exploitation – "advance" men, and especially billposters. Sometimes called the "opposition gang," these teams of men plastered towns with thousands of posters, banners, and heralds (smaller but still extravagant single-sheet advertisements), offering free tickets to the owners of prominent buildings in exchange for the advertising space. These posters

[35] Ashby, *With Amusement for All*, 73–74.
[36] *Ringling Circus Annual 1903*, 71.

were brightly colored and depicted wild beasts, scantily-clad women, and feats of daring, often exaggerated to the edge of suspension of disbelief. With the growing number of large railroad circuses touring the country, hyperbolic print advertising became more and more crucial and competition to play larger and more desirable cities grew ever more intense. This led to a new form of competition between shows called "billing wars," which sometimes involved actual violence and weapons, but that was fought largely with words, pictures, paste, and tacks. Billposters and other members of the advance team frequently fought battles against both men and nature that endangered their wellbeing. P.T. Barnum and his business partners had set the standard for extravagant billing in the 1870s, and also set the tone for the billing wars due to competition with his rival, veteran circus proprietor Adam Forepaugh. These billing wars involved ruthless oppositional advertising methods, including "rat bills" which accused rival shows of misdeeds, stealing or destroying rivals' handbills, and even plastering over previously placed advertisements.

Billposters putting up a poster on a billboard outside of Brockton, Massachusetts, 1903. Image courtesy of the collection of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the State Art Museum of Florida, Florida State University

Advance men were intensely loyal to their shows, to the point that "knock-down, drag-out fights ensued if billposters tried to commandeer the poster-laden walls of their rival."[37] In addition to the potential for violent confrontations with rival

[37] Fred Pfening III, "A Very Short History of Circus Billing Wars Part I," *White Tops,* August 2017, 17–18.

showmen, there was also the possibility of conflict with building owners if a "hit" was being made without authorization. And the physical labor of the job carried its own dangers. A billposter (who pasted paper posters) or bannerman (who tacked up cloth banners) might be knocked off a ladder or scaffolding by wind or rain, might accidentally swallow tacks (which he would quickly follow with a piece of bread in an attempt to ease the gastric distress), or might even potentially break his front teeth in the act of getting the tack from mouth to hammer so quickly.

Whether it was in spite of – or perhaps because of – their loyalty to their shows, the billposters also experienced the development of class consciousness to a greater degree than did some of their colleagues. Formed in 1891 through an alliance of state and local associations that had begun as early as 1871, the International Alliance of Bill Posters, Billers and Distributors of the United States and Canada (which has gone by several names, and eventually morphed into the current Outdoor Advertising Association of America) was one of the few labor organizations in which circus employees maintained membership before 1937 – and which circus management actually recognized and involved themselves with. Circus managers regularly attended their conventions to engage in negotiations, especially in the early years of the twentieth century.

It is also important to note that this attitude of cooperation (or perhaps attempts at direct opposition) was not consistent – and even circus scholars have not completely unraveled the complex relationship between circuses and the Bill Posters' Alliance. Micah Childress notes that in 1907, Charles Ringling and press agent Louis Cooke determined that it would be better to boycott the Bill Posters' Alliance directly – and because the Ringlings were practicing horizontal integration and now owned controlling interests in Barnum & Bailey and Forepaugh-Sells, they

had the power to do so.[38] But Jerry Apps, in his book *Ringlingville USA*, tells a more complicated story. In 1908, a new agreement was drawn up between major circuses and the Bill Posters' alliance, detailing what behavior was appropriate for advance men in an attempt to curtail billing wars. It also renegotiated salaries, holdback, allowances, and holidays. This agreement was signed by management for Forepaugh-Sells, Barnum & Bailey, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West, but *not* by the Ringling Bros. show! As Apps notes, why the Ringlings chose to allow their subsidiaries to sign, but did not sign themselves, is a mystery.[39]

Due to the nature of their work, advance men were masters of mobility and geography on both large and small scales – "walking gazetteers," as circus historian Charles Philip "Chappie" Fox once put it.[40] In their popular survey *The Circus in America*, Chappie Fox and fellow circus historian Tom Parkinson laid out a laundry list of the types of advance men and their areas of expertise: billposters knew "every shed and fence in the nation;" billers knew "the principal streets of every city" and "the multitudes of little towns;" press agents knew the newspapers and their areas of circulation; contracting agents knew merchants, feed dealers, and show lots; general agents knew alternative routes; and all advance men were experts in hotels and restaurants.[41] Whereas roustabouts saw very little of the "outside world" during the season, and most performers only a little more, the advance team had an inverse experience – they spent very little time on the show grounds, and traveled on a separate train. Perhaps their degree of separation from the rest of the show and comparatively extensive contact with others, combined with other shared factors such as the danger and the seasonal nature of their work, is what

[38] Childress, *Circus Life*, 86.
[39] Jerry Apps, *Ringlingville USA: The Stupendous Story of Seven Siblings and Their Stunning Circus Success* (Madison, Wis: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2004), 155.
[40] Charles Philip Fox, *Billers, Banners and Bombast: The Story of Circus Advertising*, 1st edition (Boulder: Pruett, 1985), 71.
[41] Charles Philip Fox and Tom Parkinson, *The Circus in America* (Waukesha, Wis.: Country Beautiful, 1969), 53–54.

allowed them to develop a sense of class consciousness to a greater degree than did most of their colleagues during this period.

Up to this point, we have mostly considered only those employees in the lower "classes" of labor on the show, but it is important to remember that performers are laborers as well – despite the fact that they were generally not thought of this way at the time. And it is also important to consider that their experiences as workers were, for the most part, markedly different than that of the roustabouts and the billposters. Even those "kinkers" (the circus word for all performers) who were not "stars" were still compensated and treated far differently from most other laborers, typically earning $25-50 per week (the same as billposters), as well as receiving better accommodations and generally not being required to do any manual labor. The most skilled performers sometimes earned up to $500 per week, and the true celebrities as much as $1,000. Sideshow performers' salaries varied widely (as did their social treatment), with natural "freaks" earning hundreds of dollars per week, and those with unusual talents such as sword swallowing earning amounts similar to other basic performers.[42]

There was, of course, some overlap between the experiences of kinkers and roustabouts. Although they had more opportunity to rest and to take time for themselves, kinkers were in some cases just as much subject to the ruthless march of the circus's operating schedule. For example, Stuart Thayer notes an account by circus press agent Charles Day that describes how in the early days of the free street parade, the crowd would follow the circus straight from the railroad depot to the show lot, and the performance would begin as soon as they had paid and entered the big top. With no break between the parade and the afternoon performance, riders did

[42] Childress, *Circus Life*, 67–70.

not even have time to dismount before the show began.[43] Kinkers also risked limb and sometimes life in the course of a day's work, especially acrobats and equestrian performers. And just as with the roustabouts, the show usually did not assume any responsibility for accidents that occurred. It was because of this that circus employees sometimes turned to the creation of mutual aid funds and taking up single collections for indigent employees.

Especially for those who were not stars, finding employment could also pose a challenge. Kinkers, like most laborers during this period, were sometimes subject to the uneven nature of seasonal employment in their own secondary labor market. In the off-season, many performers joined labor pools in the cities, just as roustabouts did. They especially toured the vaudeville circuits, although there they faced competition from professional actors and other performers who toured the circuits all year, and considered themselves in another class entirely – the "legitimate" stage. Other kinkers were immigrant laborers who would return to their countries of origin, as part of a larger cycle of laboring famously explored by Michael Piore in his seminal 1979 work *Birds of Passage*. Piore explored the nature of labor in industrial societies, demonstrating that industries relied on migrant laborers who were willing to work in poor conditions and for poor pay, and were willing to put up great deal of uncertainty in their situation. They were willing to do so, Piore argues, because their intention was not to settle and acculturate in the United States, but to earn a certain amount of money and to return home.[44] For many immigrant circus workers, though, the circus itself essentially became "home," and they returned year after year if treated well enough. And even for those workers who were American-

[43] Thayer, *Traveling Showmen*, 43. This anecdote took place in the earlier era of the smaller, and mostly pre-industrial circus, but such stories remained common throughout the era of the free street parade.
[44] Michael J. Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

born and acculturated (which accounted for many, if not most), they were still caught up in a system of unstable seasonal migratory labor, as demonstrated by Kim Moody.

Clowns could fall within a broad range of the circus hierarchy, but even the lowest clown had it better than any manual laborer, and even the highest clown was still subordinate to management and owners. This clown holding a rooster probably fell somewhere squarely in the middle. Circa 1920s, Breckenridge, Texas. Image courtesy of Basil Clemons Photograph Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries

And finally, it is worth returning to *Dumbo*, where performers as workers were a crucial element of the story. The clowns of the circus are not shown to be outwardly unhappy with their work, but they do mention that their newest act (which requires cruel abuse of poor Dumbo) will gain them newfound respect from their audience. After a series of especially well-received performances and conceiving of ways in which to improve the act, the clowns get drunk on champagne and go to "hit the big boss for a raise," confident that "we're gonna get more money/'cause we know that we're funny."[45] In reality, that confrontation would not have gone well for most performers. Even those who theoretically had leverage, like in the example of Pete Conklin, would not likely get what they asked for, and were forced to either accept what they were offered or to quit. Mostly, it would have been a good way for anyone but a star performer to get themselves fired, perhaps even red-lighted.

[45] YouTube Movies, *Dumbo*. It is also important to note that these fictional labor troubles were meant as a parody of the strike that had occurred at the Walt Disney company during production of the film. The clowns themselves are caricatures of some of the strike's leaders. For further reading on the Disney animator's strike, consult Lisa Johnson, "The Disney Strike of 1941: From the Animators' Perspective" (Rhode Island College, 2008).

Despite the fact that circus workers experienced class composition mostly in fits and starts, the experiences of circus labor certainly had the potential to radicalize individuals, or at least to make them more aware of the unequal power dynamic between labor and capital. One of the most prominent examples can be found in William Z. Foster, the famed labor organizer, syndicalist, and later Communist Party leader who spearheaded the nationwide steel strike of 1919. Foster worked a number of "unskilled" jobs in his youth, and continued doing so through the early years of his career in labor organization. One of these jobs happened to be on a "mud show" touring the Midwest in the summer of 1912. It is true that Foster was already well-versed in socialist politics by the time he joined the circus – he had already broken away from the Industrial Workers of the World and begun to form his own organization, the Syndicalist League of North America – but the evidence clearly suggests that his experiences on the show helped him to further develop his own philosophy. Although the name of which circus he traveled with has been lost to time – most wagon shows were not the type to publish route books – we have seen from the example of Pete Conklin that even on a smaller show, the relationship between labor and management could be contentious. And Foster did not have the relative position of privilege that Conklin had as a performer – Foster was working as a canvasman, not an easy job even on the wagon-based shows. Fellow radical Elizabeth Gurley Flynn believed this experience, which she seems to have considered to be beneath Foster, to have been formative for him: "His career as a writer began on a circus wagon, driving through the corn belt of Indiana and Illinois. Bill never scorned any kind of task especially if it served his organizing work."[46]

It was in part during his time with the circus that Foster wrote his first of many pamphlets, simply titled *Syndicalism*. In the pamphlet, Foster presents the principles, theories,

[46] Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Labor's Own William Z. Foster: A Communist's Fifty Years of Working-Class Leadership and Struggle* (New York: New Century Publishers, 1949), 18.

and methods of syndicalist revolution, as well as empirical evidence to support the cause and rebuttals to common objections from both capitalists and socialists. Although *Syndicalism* contains no direct references to the circus industry, Foster would later in his career draw upon those experiences to illustrate his understanding of class struggle and class composition, and of American working-class culture in general. In his 1939 book of autobiographical sketches, *Pages from a Worker's Life*, he recalls that even though the circus show was of poor quality, locals were thrilled with it, and could recall even small details from the same show's performances in years past. Biographer Edward P. Johanningsmeier believes that those experiences informed the way *Syndicalism* was written, arguing that "Having lived most of his life in large urban environments, Foster had difficulty comprehending the lives that people in these rural communities led. … His was a radicalism that was profoundly antinostalgic. He had little use for or interest in the kind of theatre and traditional emotive symbolism that was then sweeping parts of the West and Midwest."[47]

In his 1937 pamphlet *What Means a Strike in Steel*, Foster delivered an apocryphal anecdote that illustrated the resiliency of the traveling circus, and the drive to organize and mobilize labor, no matter what it takes:

> A boss canvasman was explaining to a visitor how vitally important it was that the cook-wagon should arrive early on the circus lot in order that the men could breakfast, or else they would not put up the big top.
>
> Said he: "No cook-wagon; no breakfast, and no breakfast, no work," and he explained therefore, that they always used the precaution of having eight of the strongest horses to pull the cook-wagon over the muddy roads.
>
> "But," inquired the visitor, "suppose the roads are so poor that your eight horses can't pull the cook-wagon, what then?"
>
> "Oh, then," said the circus boss, "we put on more horses, and if they can't do the job we get out old Babe the elephant, to push it from behind."

[47] Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster*, (Princeton University Press, 2014), 58, http://www.degruyter.com/princetonup/view/title/508368.

> "Still," persisted the visitor, "suppose the roads are so terribly bad that even all these horses and old Babe together can't haul the cook-wagon through the mire, how about that?"
>
> "Oh hell," declared the boss with finality, "we just put on more horses and more horses. The damned cook-wagon simply has to go through."
>
> It is in this spirit of unconquerableness that the workers' leaders must face the eventuality of a national steel strike.[48]

This raises the question, why did Foster and other labor leaders not think to apply this philosophy of "unconquerableness" to organizing the circus industry? There are many answers, of course: the circus was a comparatively small industry, dwarfed by giants like oil and steel, and there were bigger fish to fry; "unskilled" laborers on the circus struggled to develop a sense of class for themselves; and the sense of solidarity between the skilled and unskilled, men and women, and different ethnicities in the circus was fleeting at best. Perhaps the most significant answer is that the problems inherent in organizing transient labor (and in this case, a transient industry) were too great to overcome. How do you hold meaningful strikes or protests when the factory can just pick up and leave, and throw you out on the way? The choice for many, it seemed, was either to be a "happy-hearted" roustabout, or to be red-lighted, a potentially fatal punishment. Of course, there did come times when workers finally realized that they had the power to halt the circus in its tracks, as we will see.

[48] William Z. Foster, *What Means a Strike in Steel* (Workers' Library Publishers, 1937), 20, https://www.marxists.org/archive/foster/1937/01/what-means-strike-steel/index.htm.

CHAPTER THREE

INSULT AND INJURY: THE BARNUM & BAILEY EUROPEAN TOUR

By the 1890s, the Barnum & Bailey circus had become a veritable institution, employing an army of well over a thousand people and hundreds of animals, and adored by many thousands of Americans who would gladly shut down all other business for "Circus Day." Although P.T. Barnum died of a stroke in 1891, the show to which he lent his name and his mindset continued to grow at a rapid pace – and to make money hand over fist – thanks to the shrewd management of his partner James A. Bailey. America simply could not get enough of the circus, and despite there being dozens of other shows to see, both big and small, Barnum & Bailey had largely conquered the market – which meant, naturally, that the time had come to expand into new markets.

For the biggest and most popular circuses to travel overseas was nothing new by the 1890s. As early as the 1830s, American shows had traveled South America and the Caribbean. In 1877-78, the Cooper, Bailey & Co. circus traveled to Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Java, and other islands in the South Pacific.[1] European shows, too, had toured the global entertainment circuit throughout the nineteenth century. But American shows did not penetrate the European market until the 1880s. The reasons for this are numerous, but the most significant is that Europe had plenty of circuses of its own – the market was saturated with established names. But those shows, culturally rich as they were, barely resembled "The Greatest Show on Earth." Significantly greater in size, much more bombastic and hyperbolic, and aggressively nationalistic, the American circus had become a much different animal than its European predecessor. And it was time now for this cousin to come for a visit.

[1] Wittmann, "The Transnational History of the Early American Circus."

Circuses and Wild West shows began traveling to Europe in the 1880s, with Buffalo Bill being the first prominent example. William F. Cody took the Wild West overseas for the first time in 1887 as part of the American Exhibition, a world's fair held in London in conjunction with Queen Victoria's golden jubilee. Seeing how well Cody's show was received by both royalty and commoners, Bailey followed suit, using his experience traveling in the South Pacific two decades prior to take a small version of Barnum & Bailey to do a short run in London in the winter of 1889-90. It was the wonderful reception (and receipts) of the London run which led Bailey to arrange an entire European tour – a feat never before accomplished by an entertainment enterprise of this magnitude.

Cover image from the satirical Italian magazine La Rana*, 1906. American circus entertainers had a broad-ranging influence on culture and society in Europe. This issue of* La Rana *contained a fake parody interview with Buffalo Bill regarding Italian politics. Image courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West.*

Just getting the show to Europe proved a spectacle and a challenge far greater than putting on the show usually was. On this trip, as on all trips, the departments traveled separately,

although not *as* separately as they usually did on the trains. The first group to depart on October 11, 1897, was, naturally, the advance agents, along with a handful of kinkers. They were followed by billposters on October 16, more performers and "curiosities" on October 30, and the rest of the performers, musicians, and "freaks" on November 6. On November 12, most of the razorbacks, roustabouts, equipment, animals, and management (minus Bailey, associate director Joseph T. McCaddon, and press agent R.F. "Tody" Hamilton) began their voyage.[2] Even more steamer trips were required to bring over the rest of the cast, crew, and equipment, and the final voyage did not take place until February 20, 1898. This traveling process would later be repeated in a similar but condensed fashion when the circus moved from the United Kingdom to the European continent.

As if the labor of the circus were not already spectacular enough, to see a show loaded onto an ocean liner to be carried away to the Old World was truly a sight to behold. In preparing for the voyage, James Bailey had personally inspected the cargo hold of the S.S. *Massachusetts* (dubbed "the Modern Noah's Ark" by press agent Harvey L. Watkins) and meticulously laid out the positioning of the show's stores of cargo, equipment, wagons, and animal cages. To carry it all would actually require two separate journeys. "The task of stowing a cargo like ours was so vast, complex and peculiar and one which never occurred but once before, that all of the New York papers devoted columns of space illustrating and describing the process of the work, some of them deeming the matter of sufficient importance to send special representatives across the ocean with us to write an account of the trip," Watkins noted in the route book for the European tour.[3]

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[2] Harvey L. Watkins, *Four Years in Europe, the Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth in the Old World Seasons 1897-1901* (Harvey L. Watkins, 1901), 3–5, https://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/digital/collection/p15990coll5/id/2767.
[3] Watkins, 3.

The work required to transport elephants was especially wondrous to onlookers, as their specially constructed cages were lifted high by a floating derrick and carefully placed on the deck of the ship. The show arrived in London on November 24, and it took three days to unload and transport it from the docks to the Olympia exposition center in West Kensington. And as if they did not have enough work to do, the show's crew then encountered a serious "stumbling block." London County officials required the construction of a massive fireproof asbestos curtain on one side of the Olympia, and because this had not been anticipated by management, it required the manual labor force to work "day and night" to complete it in time for the show's scheduled opening date of Boxing Day.[4]

The circus was well-received in London and across the UK, with "straw houses" (sold-out shows) at nearly every stand. There were a handful of negative incidents, which were par for the course – an injured aerialist, a perishing monkey, occasional storms. Members of the British Royal Family visited at the opening stand, and the show earned high praise specifically from the Prince of Wales.[5] In every department, the show's laborers spent the winter of 1898 working hard to prepare for the next season, being "kept busy from early until late" for several months. Management was stretched thin, as several top men returned to the United States to work on Buffalo Bill's Wild West, in which Bailey had become a partner and manager in 1895. Wagons were repaired, altered, and painted; new seating was constructed and tent stakes replenished; and the train cars were overhauled. The roustabouts were also tasked with constructing a massive 40,000-gallon tank for newly conceived aquatic demonstrations. So as always, the work of putting on the circus was arduous, continuous, and dangerous. Which, as always, meant that

[4] Watkins, 6–7.
[5] Watkins, 9.

roustabouts and other laborers were going to be seriously injured in the course of that work. But there was something different about it this time around.

"It was during this time," Watkins wrote, "that some of the attaches conceived of the idea of organizing the Benevolent and Protective Order of Tigers, a mutual benefit society having for its aims the care and assistance of any of their number who might become ill or meet with accident." Although practically a side note in Watkins' narrative, the Benevolent Protective Order of Tigers (BPOT) quickly became an important feature of life for many employees of the show. By the time the route book of the European tour was published in 1901, the organization was said to have over 250 members and a "flourishing" treasury.[6] The Tigers' roster lists only 168 members, but it is very possible that many members who did not remain with the show for the entire tour were forgotten and not included in the roster, or in the route book at all.[7] Regardless, up to this time the American circus had been an industry in which any form of labor organization was almost non-existent, and class composition developed only in fits and starts. Mutualism was present in various forms, but was previously unheard of on this scale. Because it provides such clear evidence of solidarity among workers much earlier than class in the circus is usually examined, this was a development of far greater significance than any circus scholar has yet recognized. It is a moment at which the processes of class composition finally began to create a tangible level of class consciousness in the circus industry.

There is, however, precious little information regarding the "Tiger Club," as it was sometimes called by its members. Yet there still exist a few crucial records which provide some background on the BPOT. Its founder, Jacob "Big Jake" Posey, briefly describes its beginnings in his autobiography. The route book for the Barnum & Bailey tour of Europe describes the

[6] Watkins, 20.
[7] Watkins, 105.

genesis of the society and mentions several other events from the four-plus years the circus spent abroad. It also includes a membership roster and a photograph of officers of the Tiger Club for the year 1901. Of equal importance are two surviving copies of the constitution and by-laws of the society, from 1900 and 1903. A few other primary sources exist, especially trade paper articles and mentions in other route books. George Conklin briefly refers to the Tiger Club in his memoir, calling it "a mutual benefit society which has done much good in caring for members who have been sick or met with accident."[8] Conklin himself, as well as his nephew Peter Jr., were members of the Tiger Club, joining at its founding in 1898.[9] Perhaps because the primary records are so few, in the secondary literature references to the Tiger Club are essentially non-existent. And yet, the Tiger Club must have been a significant part of showfolk's lives, and it existed at least until the time of Conklin's writing in 1921. It is therefore imperative to cobble together the story of the Tiger Club from these disparate scraps.

The last known remaining artifact of the BPOT, a single cufflink. Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Before we do so, however, it is important to note that the Tiger Club was not the first example of a mutual aid society in the industrial circus, and that the circus also has a long history of charitable giving and of informal mutualism. A predecessor (or perhaps a cousin) to mutualism in the circus was the benefit performance, a practice which has roots in English Restoration theatrical management practices. The actual salary paid to most performers was meager, so to supplement their income, their contracts generally stipulated that they would be

[8] Conklin and Root, *The Ways of the Circus*, 271.
[9] George's brother Pete, of pink lemonade fame, was not working for Barnum & Bailey at this time, and I have not been able to determine whether or not he too ever became a member of the Tiger Club.

entitled to a benefit performance once per year. At least half of the proceeds – and perhaps all, depending on the system – from a benefit performance would go entirely to the performer being honored. Thus, in order to maximize the amount of money they would receive, the performer would enlist their network of friends, family, and colleagues to drive ticket sales. This meant that the benefit performance soon became an indicator of one's popularity. Quite the ouroboros, the existence of this practice was soon used by ownership and management to justify paying even poorer salaries. It also spread to most other entertainment industries, especially the circus. In both the UK and the US, the practice of benefit performances remained commonplace until the second half of the nineteenth century, when performers began to have greater success in negotiating higher direct salaries.[10] This also is another instance in which circus labor has influenced modern popular culture. John Lennon famously immortalized one such benefit performance in The Beatles' 1967 song "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite," the lyrics of which are taken almost verbatim from an 1843 circus herald which he stumbled upon in an antiques shop.[11]

Benefit performances were given almost exclusively for the benefit of star performers and not any other employees, but broader forms of mutualism were common as well, especially beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Taking up single collections of money for fellow employees so that they could afford medical treatment, passage home, or in the worst-case scenario, a funeral and burial, was a commonplace practice well into the twentieth century. However, there exists no evidence of organized attempts at sustained mutualism until the 1890s,

[10] For more information on the history of benefit performances, consult Catherine Hindson and Heather S. Nathans, *London's West End Actresses and the Origins of Celebrity Charity, 1880-1920* (University of Iowa Press, 2016).
[11] Jordan Runtagh, "How Beatles' '... Mr. Kite!' Grew Out of an Old Circus Poster," *Rolling Stone* (blog), May 24, 2017, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/beatles-sgt-pepper-at-50-how-an-old-circus-poster-led-to-mr-kite-126370/.

at which time dedicated sick funds for circus employees first appeared. In July 1890, while touring in Indiana, employees of the Barnum & Bailey circus formed a mutual aid society called the "Chorus, Ballet, and Professional Sick Fund." The society was said to be "a benefit for all who may become sick or unable to work," but the name implies that only performers and skilled workers would have been members.[12] There is no evidence that this professional sick fund continued to exist beyond the season of 1890, and it clearly no longer existed in 1898, when the Tiger Club was formed. Its exclusionary nature surely contributed to its brief and unsuccessful existence.

There is also one example of a mutual aid fund outside of the Barnum & Bailey show during this period. In 1895, employees of the Sells Bros. circus formed a mutual fund for performers and musicians, and in 1896, after merging with the Adam Forepaugh circus, this morphed into a more open "Mutual Aid and Protective Society." The Forepaugh-Sells circus route book for the 1896 season refers to this society as "a distinct and original feature," which further speaks to the likelihood that the Barnum & Bailey sick fund did not last. Although we cannot be certain about the Barnum & Bailey sick fund's membership base, the Forepaugh-Sells sick fund allowed all employees to join:

> Any and all persons connected to the show were privileged to membership by payment of the weekly dues of twenty-five cents. Members meeting with an accident or incapacitated for work were cared for. During the season the benefits paid out amounted to about $150, leaving a balance of something like $500, that was equally divided among the members at the season's termination.[13]

[12] Harvey L. Watkins and Bert Davis, *Barnum & Bailey Official Route Book Season of 1890* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Courier Co., 1890), 48, https://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/digital/collection/p15990coll5/id/2472.
[13] James D. DeWolfe and H. P. Matlack, *Route Book Forepaugh and Sells Bros. Combined Shows Season 1896* (New Orleans: L. Graham & Son, 1896), 74–75, https://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/digital/collection/p15990coll5/id/1599.

But despite appearing successful, just as with the Barnum & Bailey sick fund, there is no evidence that the Forepaugh-Sells sick fund continued to exist. And the fact that the remaining funds were divided among its members rather than being saved suggests that perhaps it was not intended to be permanent. Childress believes that the membership dues for this fund may have been more than roustabouts – or anyone beyond performers – were willing and able to pay.[14] Although this may have been true, the cost of membership in the Tiger Club must have been somewhat less prohibitive, given that some roustabouts, razorbacks, and other manual laborers are present on its earliest membership rosters, and even served as officers.

So despite these earlier examples, the available evidence clearly shows that the Tiger Club was the first mutual aid society in the circus to achieve any degree of longevity and success. It was also the first of these societies to have members across multiple shows, which was made possible in no small part due to the network that had been created by James Bailey's investments in the Buffalo Bill and Forepaugh-Sells shows. Micah Childress states that circus employees never had any "pan-circus" form of labor organization, but given the existence of members in not only Bailey-managed shows, but the John Robinson circus as well, the Tiger Club was certainly a "pan-circus" society which operated in many ways as a forum for workers' collective action.[15]

What was different about the Tiger Club? Why specifically was it formed, and what was it that made it more successful than previous attempts at organized mutualism in the circus? For this information, we look first to its founder, Jacob Albert "Big Jake" Posey. A physically imposing but personable man, Posey was a career teamster and a second-generation circus employee. Born in 1863 in Cedar Grove, Indiana (a town not too far from Cincinnati), Posey

[14] Childress, *Circus Life*, 81.
[15] Childress, 83.

grew up around the circus and even put his own acts for friends. When Posey was a child, his father quit his job with a stagecoach line and joined the John Robinson circus as a boss hostler, and Posey followed in his father's footsteps as a horse driver. As a young man, he worked for a passenger bus company before joining the Van Amburgh circus in 1880 at age seventeen. Like the earlier example of Pete Conklin, creator of the earliest version of pink lemonade, Posey also developed over the course of his career the agency to move between jobs as he pleased and to ask for the salary he felt he deserved. For the first seventeen years of his career, he worked not only for circuses as a teamster, but also performed such jobs as managing a pool hall, driving a horse-drawn streetcar, and supervising street sweepers, just to name a few.[16]

In 1889, Posey answered an ad in *Billboard* for a boss hostler position on the Walter L. Main circus at sixty dollars an hour. He was offered and accepted the job, but a few days before he was meant to report for duty, Main wrote Posey to tell him someone else had offered to do the job for fifty dollars a month. Posey replied that this other man should be given the job, as Posey "would not take it for fifty-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents."[17] It was also this agency that would lead to Posey joining the Barnum & Bailey European tour. Early in 1898, Posey was working on the Ben Wallace Circus and Horse Fair, which he believed to be "the best-equipped show on the road." But things went sour when one day Posey arrived on the lot in Pittsburgh to find that all of the hay that had been gathered for the horses under his charge had been taken by the elephant men to feed their own animals. Despite effusive apologies from Ben Wallace, Posey was furious, and quit the show after the next stand in Monongahela City. He then traveled to Cincinnati, where he visited Frank Wright's saloon, and to his astonishment, found a telegram

[16] Jacob Posey, *Last of the Forty-Horse Drivers: The Autobiography of Jake Posey* (New York: Vantage Press, 1959), 9–24.
[17] Posey, 31.

waiting for him from none other than James Bailey.[18] Posey had worked for Barnum & Bailey in 1896, but as long as he lived, he never understood how Bailey could have known to send for him specifically at Wright's Saloon in Cincinnati on that Saturday morning.[19] However it happened, there is no doubt that the addition of Posey's imposing presence to the program changed the course of circus history.

In his memoirs, Posey tells us that the BPOT grew out of what was initially a social club formed by the workingmen of the Barnum & Bailey show. Many, if not most, of these workers were Americans whom James Bailey had brought over. The summer before the European tour was to begin, Bailey had posted a notice at the show's cookhouse saying, "All those who desire to remain with the show and make the trip to England apply at Mr. Bailey's office before closing in Philadelphia, Pa., October 9, 1897."[20] Although many men took this opportunity, it was apparently in some cases a hard sell. Posey himself did not initially choose to go, but he was not the only one. Bailey instructed Posey to poach some men from the Ringling Bros. circus, which he was unable to do. "Those I wanted did not want to change; those who wanted to go I did not want," he wrote.[21] For the employees who did go, those who had stayed with the circus through the end of the first season in Europe were paid a bonus of ten dollars for each month they had been working. With extra time and money on their hands – their room and board were still being paid for by the show – the men began gathering at a dance hall in the city of Stoke-on-Trent, where the circus was wintering. Dues of two shillings per week were gathered for their social club and spent on entertainments, such as a cakewalk. After some weeks of these gatherings, which became known for their rowdy but congenial nature, the effects of class composition on

[18] Posey, *Last of the Forty-Horse Drivers*, 41.
[19] Sam Abbott, "55-Year-Puzzle: How Did Jim Bailey Locate Jake Posey?," *Billboard*, June 28, 1952.
[20] Posey, *Last of the Forty-Horse Drivers*, 40.
[21] Posey, *Last of the Forty-Horse Drivers*, 42.

this group began to take hold.[22] Apparently inspired by the Shakespeare quote "one touch of Nature makes the whole world kin," Posey said that he mulled over the idea of a mutual aid society for weeks before bringing one together. On the evening of December 3, 1898, eighteen employees of the show (whose names have sadly not been noted) gathered to inaugurate the Benevolent Protective Order of Tigers, a secret society which they would later note was "the first real benefit society ever established in the Circus business.[23]

It was not, however, only a sense of fraternity that brought the employees of the circus together. A 1905 article in the *New York Clipper*, summarizing a banquet speech by Charles Stock, Superintendent of Lights for the Barnum & Bailey show, adds some more details to the narrative of the day the Tiger Club was formed:

> The social gathering was held in the evening of a day when a canvasman had been seriously injured. This man had no money and few friends, and a small sum was raised for his benefit by subscription, and queries were raised as to what would become of the injured man, as it was impossible for him to gain admission to the hospitals because of the stringent rules in force. Someone suggested that they form a little club and have it pay so much weekly for the support of any of its members who should happen to be injured. This was the beginning of what was known as the Benevolent Protective Order of Tigers.[24]

This story is likely to be true, unfortunate as it is that the name of the injured canvasman had already been lost – if it had ever been known to begin with. Based on the narrative in the route book, it is likely that the unidentified roustabout was injured doing construction work, either on new seating or the aquatic performance tank. Furthermore, Posey claimed in his autobiography

[22] Posey, *Last of the Forty-Horse Drivers,* 43–44.
[23] Jacob Posey, *Constitution and Bye-Laws* [sic]. *B.P.O.T. Founded 1898.* (Etruria, Stoke-On-Trent, Staffordshire, England: Walter Goodall, Manufacturing Stationer and Printer, 1903), 1–2. In the text, the quote is misattributed to "Scotland's famous poet," presumably meaning Robert Burns.
[24] "New York Clipper Excerpts 1900-1909," https://classic.circushistory.org/Clipper/Clipper1900s.htm.

that during the European tour, the Tiger Club funded the burials of thirty members and paid to send "many" ill or injured members back to the United States.[25]

But such incidents were commonplace, of course. As has been demonstrated, many circus employees had endured poor treatment and working conditions for decades by this point. Management providing for sick or injured workers was largely unheard of in the industrial circus, even though serious injuries were commonplace and an understood risk, whether one was a canvasman or an equestrian. So why did what started apparently as a standard, one-time collection become a thriving mutual aid society?

For one, the BPOT was partially funded by Bailey himself, and perhaps other owner-proprietors as well. Posey said, almost in passing, that "All fines imposed on the personnel of the show were turned over to the club by Mr. Bailey."[26] No one was credited for coming up with this system of funding the Tiger Club, but it was quite ingenious and beneficial for the circus management. Essentially a form of welfare capitalism, it allowed Bailey to make his employees a little happier by providing them with both leisure money and an emergency fund at no actual cost to him. It may have also encouraged his employees to police themselves, as they knew that the fine money would go towards their activities. And it also meant that when disaster struck, no employee would have an excuse to come to the circus management, for the Tiger Club now existed to (hopefully) provide for their needs. As a general rule, circus management was loath to help anyone who was injured or ill, perhaps in part because this was such an everyday occurrence in circus life.

But circuses were, of course, not unusual in refusing to provide for those employees who met with misfortune in the course of their duties. In the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, most

[25] Posey, *Last of the Forty-Horse Drivers*, 44.
[26] Posey, 44.

employers fought tooth and nail to avoid compensating injured employees. In the early twentieth century, US employers and the legal system relied specifically on the doctrine of "contributory negligence" in assessing such matters. As legal scholar Nate Holdren explains, "injured employees could win lawsuits only by proving that they bore no fault for their injury, did not know they were in danger, and that fault rested solely with their employer. Much of the time employees could not meet this standard."[27] Circus employees were certainly unable to meet this standard, given how commonly one was expected to meet with accident.

To add insult to injury, the contracts of manual laborers and performers alike were designed specifically to absolve the circus companies of any and all liability. Childress gives the example of an 1896 contract between the Ringling Bros. show and performer Lee Ingham, in which "the Ringlings renounced all culpability for any damage Ingham sustained, regardless of whether he incurred the injuries while performing or in any other capacity as an employee. The wording is significant, because Ingham was always considered to be an employee in some capacity."[28] As salaried workers who lived and spent most of their time in a traveling company town, circus employees were essentially never "off the clock," and management frequently took advantage of this. The widespread standards of "contributory negligence" harmed many thousands of workers in the United States, as workplace injury was a regular occurrence across the board – a 1913 study estimated that a full ten percent of the United States' workforce of eighteen million waged workers suffered serious mutilation of the body each year. This number, which did not account for less grievous bodily harm, "amounted to some such injury every nine minutes, and [this] estimate was likely low."[29] This estimate is also incomplete due to the fact

[27] Nate Holdren, *Injury Impoverished: Workplace Accidents, Capitalism, and Law in the Progressive Era*, Cambridge Historical Studies in American Law and Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 20.
[28] Childress, *Circus Life*, 79.
[29] Holdren, *Injury Impoverished*, 64.

that it was focused on waged workers, excluding salaried employees like circus workers, who surely faced at least as much danger as their waged counterparts.

So again, we return to the question: why now? Given that there are no clear answers in the primary sources, we can only speculate as to the reasons. Perhaps the greatest difference between this tour and previous ones is obvious: geography. Jake Posey's reference to The Bard was not simply waxing poetic, but served as a double entendre which very much reflected the reality the show's employees faced while touring Europe. In the original text – found in *Troilus and Cressida*, Act III, Scene iii – the word "nature" refers to the inherent character of something. This certainly applied, but in this context, we can also see it as the new environment in which the circus was existing. Not only was the show in a foreign land, but the traveling itself was so different as to change the social geography of the working environment.

First, the multiple steamer trips across the ocean likely played a role in breaking down barriers between groups of employees who normally would not interact. Then, there was the fact that the show was now also doing stands of unusual length – they stayed in London for months, and other locations for weeks. Even when they began to travel, their "runs" were of significantly shorter distances, and they often stayed in place for two days, both circumstances that allowed them more time for leisure and camaraderie. It is true that the largest American circuses often did opening stands of a few weeks – the Barnum & Bailey show famously held weeks-long opening engagements in Madison Square Garden for many years. But a few weeks together in New York is quite different from many months together in London. It stands to reason that these radical new working and living arrangements would have resulted in greater communication and interaction between circus workers who otherwise would have seen each other very rarely, if ever. On several occasions, different departments of the show traveled together on the same train

in groupings previously unheard of. And this schedule continued for over four years as the Barnum & Bailey show made its grand tour across the European continent.

In addition to the formation of the BPOT, another process of class composition was taking place in the Barnum & Bailey circus during that momentous winter in England, amongst one of the most outcast groups of all. The "freak show," to use the most commonly recognized term for the public exhibition of persons with physical and mental disabilities and abnormalities, was a standard component of the circus for about a century, roughly from the 1840s through the 1940s. Although it may have seemed obvious to contemporary observers, how exactly being a "freak" was defined has been a subject of scholarly debate for decades. Social scientist Robert Bogdan, in his seminal 1988 work *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, argued that being a freak was a social position that was inherently defined by others. "All freaks were creations of the amusement world: the freak show and the presentation made people exhibits, not their physiology."[30] Even those who were "self-made freaks," such as tattooed people, sword swallowers, and snake charmers, were part of a group of people that were defined from the outside by larger social forces. But Bogdan also notes that due to the fact that all showpeople were to some degree outsiders, "freaks" also found themselves to some degree in solidarity with their fellow employees.[31]

Over the years, scholarship in the field has built on Bogdan to present a more complex interpretation of what it means to be a "freak." Whereas Bogdan emphasized the importance of the "freak" as a type of social role that was rigidly created by outsiders, literature scholar Rachel Adams argues that "freak" is a fluid category of identity created both internally and externally,

[30] Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, first paperback edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 234.
[31] Bogdan, 74.

and one that requires a delicate balance in order to stimulate the imagination. The freak show was always a cultural institution which both the performers and audience have used as a way of exploring a sense of identity and what it means to be "normal," Adams argues:

> Fraudulent, thrilling, exploitative, and sometimes deeply moving, sideshows are places where unlikely individuals come together to contemplate the strangers within and the strangers without. Often those who hope to see the freakishness of others are unsettled to feel a shock of recognition as the bodies onstage remind them of their own tenuous grasp on normality. And those who look down from the platform repeatedly remind us that the things they want and do are not so very unusual after all. These shifting relationships between self and other, sameness and difference, are at the heart of our most fundamental sense of identity, both individual and collective.[32]

It is because of this two-way relationship, and because of the social circumstances of working in the amusement industry, that the sideshow performers were in many cases just as much "part of the family" as any other member of the traveling circus.

This grappling with identity was demonstrated clearly in a famous event that has come to be known as the "Revolt of the Freaks." On January 6, 1899, a large number of the Barnum & Bailey circus's sideshow performers reportedly threatened a labor strike, a secret meeting having been called by Annie Jones, a famous "Bearded Lady." Jones had gathered them together to protest the continued use of the word "freak" to describe them. They formed a council and demanded that a new, less offensive descriptor be determined and used in advertising, and adopted a resolution drafted by Jones to be presented to James Bailey. These events were recorded by Charles B. Tripp, the "Armless Wonder," a man born without arms who had developed from a young age beautiful penmanship using his feet. This served him both as a performer and as an employee, in which capacity he was often called upon to serve as a secretary. The recorded information about this so-called "Council of Freaks" was leaked to the

[32] Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 228.

press, which immediately milked it for all it was worth. Newspaper columns were filled, and letters poured in supporting the sideshow performers and offering suggestions of what other words might be used. Finally, the word "Prodigies" (suggested by the Reverend Canon Basil Wilberforce, Chaplain of the House of Commons) was settled upon, and the newly-minted "Prodigies" held a second meeting on January 15 to adopt a resolution in favor of officially adopting the term. Bailey was given one week to make the change official, and he did so to great approval among both his employees and the general public. And again, this proved rich fodder for press coverage, even further boosting the circus's already high profile.[33]

This poster from the Barnum & Bailey European tour uses both the words "prodigies" and "curiosities" to describe the sideshow performers. That it is dated 1898 further complicates the narrative of the "Revolt of the Freaks." Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

[33] Watkins, *Four Years in Europe*, 21–22; John Lentz, "The Revolt of the Freaks: A Classic in Circus Publicity," *Bandwagon* 21, no. 5 (October 1977): 26–29; Michael M Chemers, "4. Pathology and Prodigy," in *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 85–101.

For decades, there has been debate over the degree to which the so-called "Revolt of the Freaks" was genuine, a publicity stunt, or somewhere in between. Many scholars believe that this entire incident was fabricated from the beginning, the brainchild of Barnum & Bailey's master publicist R.F. "Tody" Hamilton. This certainly seems possible – if not outright certain – at first glance. The linguistic flair and hyperbolic claims that are hallmarks of circus advertising can be traced almost entirely to his outsized influence. Once described as the man who "discovered the adjective," Hamilton is said to have written more than two million words of advertising copy per year. He was also perhaps the first ad man to truly *manufacture* news on a grand scale, putting on all kinds of events and spectacles simply for the sake of generating publicity.[34] And indeed, knowing the work of "Tody" Hamilton, there were contemporary reporters who believed the entire "Revolt of the Freaks" to have been orchestrated by the press corps and management of the circus.[35]

In 1977, circus historian John Lentz was the first scholar to make the case that the "revolt" was a stunt, and this has been taken as gospel by many in the decades since. However, Lentz's argument lacks direct evidence. He instead asserts that because Bailey himself arranged for open presentations of the sideshow performers to the press in the weeks beforehand, and because information about the conflict was leaked to the press, the events must have been entirely fabricated. More recent scholarship has uncovered additional details that seem to support this narrative. In his work *Pioneers of Promotion: How Press Agents or Buffalo Bill, P.T. Barnum, and the World's Columbian Exposition Created Modern Marketing*, natural foods

[34] Joe Dobrow, "Remembering the Man Who 'Discovered the Adjective' — Tody Hamilton, the Octosyllabic Artist," *Medium* (blog), August 17, 2016, https://medium.com/@jdobrow/remembering-the-man-who-discovered-the-adjective-78eeb5ba4992; Joe Dobrow, *Pioneers of Promotion: How Press Agents for Buffalo Bill, P. T. Barnum, and the World's Columbian Exposition Created Modern Marketing* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 35–46.
[35] Lentz, "The Revolt of the Freaks: A Classic in Circus Publicity," 26.

marketing executive Joe Dobrow refers to the "Revolt of the Freaks" as "Tody" Hamilton's "crowning glory." Delivering a seemingly smoking gun, he quotes a 1903 interview with Hamilton in the *New York Sun* in which Hamilton explicitly admits to fabricating not only the 1899 "revolt," but a new one every few years after that. He believed it to be a ridiculous notion that scientists were writing "about the final awakening of personal pride on the abnormal specimens of the human race." "Why, that went so far," Hamilton said, "that I almost dreamed that I was ashamed of myself."[36] Was this not a real strike, then, but a stunt truly spun out of whole cloth by a shameless huckster?

Hamilton was such a huckster by his own definition, and it is for that very reason that he should not be taken at his word. It was, of course, in his own interest to claim credit for the "revolt," because it both garnered him more fame and denied the performers their agency. And despite Dobrow's evidence, there are those researchers who see the incident as at least partially genuine. Dramaturgical scholar Michael M. Chemers argues in his book *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* that the "revolt" contained elements of truth, and that the sideshow performers certainly took advantage of their involvement in the "revolt." After all, even if they, the press, and the public were all being manipulated, that does not mean they had no agency in the course of events.[37] Furthermore, the fact that so many sideshow performers joined the Tiger Club and were visibly active members is evidence that they had a desire to improve their station, and were involved in the development of class composition within the circus industry. In 1907, James Morris, a sideshow performer who exhibited the effects of Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, and was thus known as the "Elastic Skin Man," spoke to the *New York Times* regarding yet another "revolt" possibly fabricated by Hamilton. "There is only

[36] Dobrow, *Pioneers of Promotion*, 292–94.
[37] Chemers, "4. Pathology and Prodigy," 97–101.

one organization in the world where prodigies are admitted without question, and that is the Benevolent Order of Tigers. This order has been incorporated under the laws of Connecticut, and it does a great deal of good in the way of looking after its sick members and providing proper burial for them when dead." Morris as well as two other prominent sideshow performers were actually interested in forming their own such organization, but this never came to pass.[38]

The fact that the first "revolt" was centered around language rather than physical working conditions is also important. Regardless of who made the final decision, the choice of the term "prodigies" reflects both the desire of sideshow performers to be elevated to a greater stature, as well as the scientific (or perhaps pseudoscientific) understanding of human development of the day. "The Revolt of the Freaks hijacks the medicalization of human difference and makes people with disabilities the victors, not the victims, of Darwinian evolution," Chemers argues.[39] Looking at the "Revolt" through this lens, what seems most likely is that there was some real event that precipitated the affair, which almost certainly took the form of an actual or threatened strike. Bailey and his press corps may have chosen to kill two birds with one stone – by leaning into the strikers' demands (fabricated or otherwise), they could both placate the sideshow performers as well as generate a flurry of press.

This rapid development of collective action – itself strong evidence of class composition – was not the only dramatic transformation the Barnum & Bailey Circus underwent in the winter of 1898-99. Soon after the formation of the Tiger Club, the show was reorganized at a financial level as well. When P.T. Barnum died in 1891, Bailey purchased his interest in the circus from his widow, and from that point forward Bailey had been the sole owner/operator of the show. But

[38] "Human Prodigies Society: Organization to be Formed by the Freaks for Business Benefits.," *New York Times,* January 28, 1907, 4.
[39] Chemers, "4. Pathology and Prodigy," 99–100.

in February of 1899, Bailey decided to go public with the company, apparently because of the massive business that the circus was doing in London. The Barnum & Bailey Circus's total number of shares was set at 400,000, of which Bailey purchased 133,333 – the maximum amount permitted by the London Stock Exchange. Next, significant portions were given to his top lieutenants. Then, the remainder were sold at the rate of £1 plus a premium of five shillings, with the excess amount being set aside as working capital. According to Watkins, the sale of Barnum & Bailey stock took the world by storm, and the shares sold rapidly in amounts both large and small. Taking perhaps its final great leap into a truly industrial organization, the Barnum & Bailey Circus had now become a publicly traded limited liability corporation.

The concept of limited liability has deep roots in English capitalism, but its modern form was still only a few decades old at the time of Barnum & Bailey's incorporation. The basic idea is that an individual investor's financial liability is limited to the amount of capital one has invested in the business, and one's personal assets are not subject to seizure for company debts. Thus, the transition to limited liability was a smart one for Bailey for several reasons. Although it was very unlikely, it was always possible that the European tour could turn out to be a financial drain. An announcement and prospectus in the *London Standard*, however, showed a calculation of a 25 percent dividend with additional capital remaining, quite a massive yield.[40] The incorporation, then, could also serve as a way to make even more money on top of that generated by ticket sales, concessions, and merchandising. Either way, neither his nor any other investors' personal fortunes were at risk – although, as one-third owner, Bailey was certainly still invested deeply. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, Bailey and his top men were still able to maintain both financial and artistic control over the entire enterprise, for they were not only the

[40] "Barnum & Bailey (Limited)," *The London Standard*, February 20, 1899.

circus directors, but also served as the company's board of directors. For a man that owned one circus outright and controlled interest in others, the decision was a no-brainer.

Why incorporate in England, though, when Barnum & Bailey was an American company? Firstly, although the show was based in the United States, the nature of the business meant that Bailey dealt heavily in international trade, especially in animals. Secondly, there is the simple logic that because the show was traveling in Europe, it made more sense to incorporate there to take advantage of the direct connections Bailey was making with rich

Stock certificate for 100 shares in Barnum & Bailey, Ltd., 1904. From author's personal collection.

investors during his travels. Finally, and most importantly, the London Stock Exchange was the center of the global financial system at the turn of the twentieth century. Incorporation in London provided access to "a much higher volume of trading and access to investor capital," especially

through connections to the German and French stock exchanges.[41] It was for these reasons that the decision to incorporate on the London Stock exchange proved to be a shrewd one, resulting in the immediate and substantial sales of stocks in Barnum & Bailey, Limited.

As the company grew, the Tiger Club quickly became an essential aspect of its operations. Throughout the tour, membership was said to be well over 200 persons (a fact difficult to verify but that is reasonably possible), and the coffers remained full. All of the show's departments were represented in the membership, but some far better than others. Some groups of manual laborers on the show, such as train men, waiters, and horse drivers, joined the Tiger Club in droves. Many star performers and bit players alike joined, as did most sideshow performers and musicians. Most of management were either official or honorary members as well. Although some canvasmen were members, they were poorly represented in comparison. Of the 168 members listed on the 1901 roster, only five are tent men. Four more are seat men, who also fell under the canvas department.[42]

Interestingly, however, two canvasmen served as officers – 1st Assistant of Canvas Department Thomas McAvoy as Financial Secretary, and Big Top Man Lawrence Sullivan as Outer Guard. These men were not your typical roustabouts, who were largely anonymous itinerant laborers that tended not to stay on a show too long. Both McAvoy and Sullivan were career canvasmen who had served under Bailey's management in seasons prior and became known quantities. And although little else is known about Sullivan, McAvoy certainly met with his share of accident and injury, as almost all canvasmen were guaranteed to do. Traveling with

[41] John Martin Handel, email forwarded to author by David Baillargeon, March 3, 2022.
[42] Watkins, *Four Years in Europe*, 105. Twenty-seven members were not otherwise mentioned in the route book, and their jobs could not be identified. Eight of these twenty-seven were women. It is very possible the men could have been roustabouts or razorbacks who would have remained anonymous if not for their membership. The women may have been wives or even daughters of identified members.

the Buffalo Bill show in 1896, he had been moderately injured in a train wreck and more seriously injured by a kicking horse.[43]

But why are the roustabouts otherwise so poorly represented overall? Perhaps the cost of dues was still prohibitive for them, as Childress argued regarding the Forepaugh-Sells sick fund. Perhaps even with the show's new geography, they were still physically separate enough as to hinder interaction with other departments. Perhaps even in Europe, they still did not stay with the show for its entire run. Or perhaps, due to the circumstances of their lives and jobs, they simply preferred not to commit themselves to a secret society. Whatever the reason, they are the only class of employees on the show with such minimal representation.

The Tiger Club had not been formed a moment too soon, either, for in the summer of 1899, it was called upon for the first time to bury an employee of the show. Perry Albright was a sideshow performer billed primarily as "the Skeleton Dude," hailing originally from Kokomo, Indiana, and was already highly regarded when he joined the Barnum & Bailey European tour. Measuring just over five feet and weighing less than fifty pounds in adulthood, Albright's body was most likely affected by an extreme form of progressive muscular atrophy, as was the case with other "living skeleton" performers who had come before him. His hands were said to resemble claws, with "legs and arms no thicker than broomsticks."[44] In earlier years, Albright had also been referred to as "the human shadow," and it was said that "wind blew right through him."[45] His typical appearances involved dressing in fancy clothes (hence the "Dude" appellation) and recounting personal anecdotes about his daily life, and he often engaged in

[43] Charles R. Hutchinson, *Official Souvenir Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World 1896* (Buffalo: Courier Co., 1896), 194, 206, https://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/digital/collection/p15990coll5/id/9994.
[44] "Freaks at Olympia," *The Era*, December 17, 1898.
[45] "What Is Doing on the Stage," *Philadelphia Times*, November 7, 1897.

mock weddings to "fat lady" performers.[46] Albright had been a participant in the "Revolt of the Freaks" and was listed in newspapers as one of the signatories to the original resolution set forth by Annie Jones.[47] Despite whatever hardships he faced, he apparently quite enjoyed touring, and had plans to visit the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900.[48]

On June 17, 1899, Perry Albright died aged only twenty-nine years, perhaps of tuberculosis.[49] His funeral and burial were arranged by a fellow employee, and his headstone in the Ansfield Cemetery in Liverpool (which still stands as of 2018) was paid for by the Tiger Club.[50] This, despite the fact that, according to the *Pharos-Tribune* newspaper of Logansport, Indiana, in 1898 Albright was apparently quite well-off, earning "as much salary in a week as many young men earn in a month."[51] And he also would have been responsible for purchasing and maintaining the lavish, expensive costumes that were part of his public persona. Also strange is that the 1901 Tiger Club membership roster includes a "deceased" section, but Albright is not listed on it. Presumably this is simply a mistake, as it is unlikely the Tiger Club would have provided for his burial were he not a registered member in good standing.

Albright was ultimately replaced by another well-regarded "Skeleton Dude," John W. Coffey. Coffey, who also worked occasionally as a barber, was older and had been performing much longer, and consequently billed himself as the "original Skeleton Dude." He was not – that honor goes to Issac W. Sprague, who began working in the 1860s and had once worked for Barnum himself – but Coffey was still a familiar presence whose performance style was very

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[46] "Catches 'em Hard - The Kokomo 'Living Skeleton' Stirs up the East - Draws Crowds of People and Physicians from Far and Near," *Logansport Pharos-Tribune*, January 9, 1898, 3.
[47] "Freaks in Council," *The Era*, January 14, 1899.
[48] "Catches 'em Hard."
[49] "Community History in the Making," *Kokomo Tribune*, July 9, 1949.
[50] Watkins, *Four Years in Europe*, 26; "Perry Albright (1870-1899) - Find A Grave...," n.d., https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/188546591/perry-albright.
[51] "Catches 'em Hard."

similar to Albright's. Coffey took his act a step further, however, by advertising himself more explicitly as an available bachelor and flirting with female members of the audience. He often married, or pretended to marry, both fellow performers and women he met.[52] He also made additional money through the sale of photographs of himself, a common practice for circus performers.[53] In the months before leaving for Europe, Coffey was working the museum circuit when his ways began to catch up to him. In May 1899, he was sued by Edwin Worth, a museum owner, for failing to exhibit himself and his latest wife. He claimed to a reporter that he would give up performing entirely in favor of management.[54] This did not come to be, and Albright's death opened up a lucrative new position for him.

After joining Barnum & Bailey, Coffey became a registered member of the Tiger Club, but ultimately decided not to stay with the show. Upon his return to the United States, Coffey returned to the museum circuit and continued working until at least 1904, but disappears from the record after that.[55] The date and manner of his demise are unknown, although some have claimed that he died a pauper. Because he probably was no longer a circus performer, and because he likely died before the advent of other performers' unions, there was no one to provide for him.

The death of Perry Albright was far from the only time the Tiger Club was called into action during the Barnum & Bailey tour of Europe, but strangely, it is one of only two times that its assistance is directly mentioned by Watkins. Yet over the course of the season, several other members of the Tiger Club met with accident and injury. The next recorded need for assistance came on August 1, when Superintendent of Horses Thomas Lynch was kicked in the leg by one

[52] "Wonderland!," *Buffalo Courier*, July 13, 1890.
[53] George Conklin, "My Worst Fight," *Boston Post*, June 18, 1921.
[54] "The Skeleton Dude," *Ottawa Daily Republic*, May 15, 1889.
[55] "The Nickelodeon 164 Main St. Opens Tonight," *Fitchburg Sentinel*, January 1, 1904.

of the bandwagon horses. The leg was broken, and he required treatment in a hospital in the town of King's Lynn for several weeks. He rejoined the show as soon as he was able, at Glasgow on October 1, still requiring a cane to walk.[56] Such an arrangement was only possible for the higher-ups in the circus, at least before the formation of the Tiger Club – an injured roustabout was unlikely to have the money to be treated and then rejoin the show wherever it was, and was also unlikely to have the desire to do so. But Lynch was soon able to return to his duties in full, and later took over direct control of the ring stock department, as its superintendent William Smith had been killed in a train wreck on July 6.[57]

Horse-related injuries were by far one of the most common in the circus, whether one was a workman or a performer. In Lancaster on October 12, Fedor Jeftichew, a sideshow performer best known as "Jo-Jo The Dog Faced Boy" was kicked in the mouth by a racehorse as the show was getting set up in the morning.[58] Jeftichew was a world-renowned performer by this time, he and his father Adrian having long exhibited their bodies affected by a medical condition called hypertrichosis, which caused excessive growth of hair. It is therefore strange that nothing more related to his injury or recovery is recorded in the route book. Given that the injury was also seemingly not documented in newspapers or other sources, it must have been surprisingly minor (if it did indeed happen).

The next injury – yet again involving a horse – occurred on September 19. Michael Mullahey, a night watchman in the baggage stock department, was kicked in the head by a workhorse. The injury was serious, and Mullahey was taken to a hospital in Arbroath, Scotland, where he was eventually nursed back to health.[59] Mullahey, like most of the other employees

[56] Watkins, *Four Years in Europe*, 30, 34.
[57] Watkins, 84.
[58] Watkins, 36.
[59] Watkins, 33.

profiled here, was experienced compared to the average circus laborer. He had worked for Barnum & Bailey since at least 1897, and apparently his injury was not especially physically nor mentally traumatizing in the long term, as he continued to work for them until at least 1905.[60] Prior to that, he had worked at least one season on the Adam Forepaugh shows as a canvasman in 1893, and likely had toured with them for multiple seasons.[61] Either way, he was certainly well-known to management by this time, as Joseph T. McCaddon, Bailey's longtime director, had also managed the Forepaugh shows when Mullahey worked there. This is likely the main reason Mullahey's injury was recorded in the route book.

In a streak of good luck, it was another ten months before the next recorded injury of a Tiger Club member. Towards the end of July 1900 in Magdeburg, Germany, Billy Wells, a sideshow performer known as the "Iron Skull Man," suffered a bout of heat exhaustion while helping to supervise the raising of the canvas tents. The work was being supplemented by extra laborers, as it often was, which meant that additional management was required. Wells was sent to the hospital, and it was rumored that he had died until he returned to the lot that evening.[62] It may seem unusual that a sideshow performer was supervising temporary roustabouts, but this was not unheard of. All employees in the circus, except for the biggest celebrities, had clauses in their contracts requiring that they make themselves "generally useful" and perform other duties when necessary, but on the largest industrial shows, it was rare that the performers were made to do so.[63] Wells was yet another well-regarded sideshow performer, and maintained a good

[60] Harvey L. Watkins, *The Tour of 1897. A Daily Record of the Triumphs of the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Courier Co., 1897), 24, https://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/digital/collection/p15990coll5/id/15967; Charles Andress, *Route Book of Barnum & Bailey 1905* (Charles Andress, 1905), 21.
[61] Frank S. Redmond, *Official Route Book of the Adam Forepaugh Shows: Presenting a Complete Chronicle of Interesting Events and Happenings, and Valuable Data, for the Season of 1893.* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Courier Co., 1893), 14.
[62] Watkins, *Four Years in Europe*, 47.
[63] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 67.

relationship with the show even when he was no longer with it. In 1905, Billy Wells contracted tuberculosis, and although he was no longer a member of the Tiger Club, a large sum of money was raised for his treatment by employees of the Barnum & Bailey circus.[64]

The rest of the year passed seemingly without major incident for Tiger Club members. On November 3, 1900, the Tiger Club held a banquet celebrating the end of the traveling season, which was praised by the *New York Clipper* as a successful event, attended not just by members, but also by about 250 people associated with the circus at large.[65] Yet another year passed without any incident recorded in the route book, and on January 3, 1901, the Tiger Club held an even larger banquet than the last – and one described in much more detail. It was said that over 300 members and guests attended, and the ballroom of the Continental Hotel in Vienna was lavishly decorated with national flags and flower garlands, much of which was used to frame an immense portrait in the center of the room of James A. Bailey, both employer and benefactor – who was not present himself, as he had already returned to New York for the holidays.[66]

Was Bailey truly a benefactor? How was Bailey perceived by others as a boss, manager, and colleague? He provided funding for the Tiger Club, yes, but beyond this, what was his reputation? As a general rule, most historians have interpreted Bailey as a hard-working and straight-dealing manager. Circus historian William Slout claimed that employees often referred to Bailey as "a worker from Workville," a tireless man and extreme micromanager, fretting over even the smallest detail.[67] One of the better primary sources for understanding the relationship between Bailey, his management, the star performers, and rank-and-file employees is the memoir

[64] Andress, *Route Book of Barnum & Bailey 1905*, 80.
[65] Watkins, *Four Years in Europe*, 57.
[66] Watkins, 65.
[67] William L. Slout, *A Royal Coupling: The Historic Marriage of Barnum and Bailey*, Revised edition (Borgo Press, 2009), 13.

of Fred Bradna, an equestrian who joined the show with his wife Ella just before the difficult season of 1903. Bradna remembers Bailey as "quiet, peace-loving and, in fact, timid."[68]

On the other hand, Janet Davis argues that, due to having spent so many years in show business, Bailey was a "tight-fisted [and] autocratic" manager that "bristled when challenged."[69] Fred Bradna too made clear that Bailey's managerial style was flawed. For example, Bradna claimed that Bailey delegated all difficult interactions to his managerial staff. "Mr. Bailey relied heavily on his staff, but the personnel worked in the dark, unbriefed concerning his policies."[70] Bradna also claims that Bailey's wages were very low in comparison to industry standards, that there was no standardization to his bonus system, and that he was so displeased by idleness that he put his staff to work on Sundays whether there was actually work to be done or not. Still, Bradna ultimately remembers Bailey fondly, and claims that most others found him pleasant overall: "I never heard of his being grossly unkind or unreasonable to anyone in the circus family, to all of whom, from the least workman to the richest shareholder, he was available from the moment he took his seat before his tent."[71] The relationship between Bailey and his employees was sometimes strained and clearly complicated, but it seems overall that he was liked despite the tensions he sometimes caused with his business practices.

The triumph of the Tiger Club's banquet was immediately followed by tragedy, when the show learned of the death of Frank Trowbridge, a rosin-back groom in the ring stock department. On December 27, Trowbridge had been kicked by a racehorse – this is the extent of the information provided about the incident. But he was either kicked somewhere vital, or complications arose from his hospitalization, because on January 6, news came that Trowbridge

[68] Bradna, *The Big Top*, 32.
[69] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 55.
[70] Bradna, *The Big Top*, 33.
[71] Bradna, 33–35.

had died of his injuries. The Tiger Club took full charge of settling his affairs, and provided him with a funeral and burial in Vienna on January 8.[72] Trowbridge was yet another longtime employee, having worked with Barnum & Bailey for at least one season prior to the European tour.[73]

Already in its brief existence, the Tiger Club had come to be well-regarded not only within the Barnum & Bailey show, but by showfolk at large. A 1900 article in the *New York Clipper* detailing its annual banquet stated that "The B. O. T. have done some noble things during the past year, and the organization has been the means of binding the various departments of the show in closer friendship than ever before existed. The order has been established as a permanent institution."[74] Given how common accident and injury was, the Tiger Club had come to be seen as a useful and necessary society. And to be clear, several other misfortunes occurred throughout the European tour – such as when the majority of the show came down with the flu while in Vienna in December of 1900 – but the ones profiled above were those that happened to listed members of the Tiger Club. Those who were not members would have had to fend for themselves, as always. We also know, thanks to Jacob Posey, that there were injuries that went unrecorded in the route book. These likely occurred especially among roustabouts, razorbacks, and other manual laborers.

In 1902, it finally came time for the Barnum & Bailey circus to make its triumphant return to the United States. It crossed the ocean in piecemeal fashion yet again, to no less acclaim than the first time. But due to the drastic changes that had taken place during the European tour, the show and its employees returned to the United States quite different than when they had left.

[72] Watkins, *Four Years in Europe*, 66.
[73] Watkins, *The Tour of 1897*, 25.
[74] "New York Clipper Excerpts 1900-1909."

From canvasmen to “prodigies” to star performers, understandings of class consciousness were stirring – the genie could not be put back in the bottle. And the American circus landscape, as it turned out, had changed in their absence as well.

Officers of the Tiger Club in 1901. Jake Posey is seated in the first row, third from the left. The fact that these men dressed well and had an official portrait taken for the route book speaks to their higher status in the circus hierarchy. Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

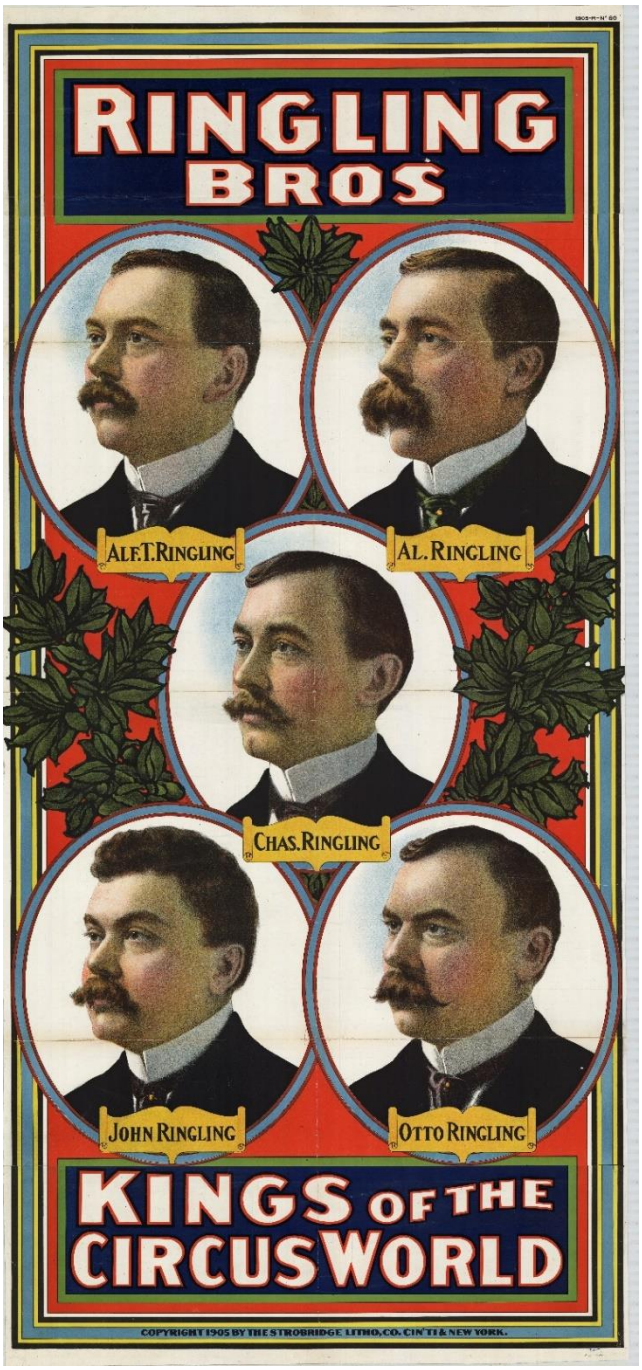
CHAPTER FOUR

AN INVASIVE SPECIES: THE TIGERS, CLASS COMPOSITION, AND THE GREAT CIRCUS WAR OF 1903

The Barnum & Bailey European tour was a massive success, both financially and critically, but it also resulted in some unforeseen consequences. Although Bailey had been for two decades the undisputed king of the circus industry, upon his triumphant return, he found that he would have to go toe-to-toe with some younger competitors that had become serious contenders for the throne. Having had an opportunity to hone their craft and build their business in the absence of the Barnum & Bailey circus, the "Boys from Baraboo," those "seven stupendous siblings" of the Midwest, had by 1903 made themselves known across wide swaths of the country as the premier circus to wait for.

The Ringling brothers came from a modest upbringing, and were unlikely candidates to become some of the most wealthy and famous titans of industry the United States has ever known. Their father, August Frederick Rüngeling, was an artisan harness maker from Germany who, despite being very skilled, met with misfortune in his business endeavors and often had difficulty making ends meet. He moved the family through Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota as he attempted to make a greater success of himself, weathering the economic effects of the Panic of 1857 and the Civil War, and the family finally settled permanently in Baraboo, Wisconsin in

1875. August and his wife Salome Marie Juliar, despite economic uncertainty, grew their family as they migrated, and by the time they were finished, there were seven brothers in all: Albert Carl "Al" (1852–1916), Augustus Albert "Gus" (1852–1907), William Henry "Otto" (1858–1911), Alfred Theodore "Alf T." (1861–1919), John Nicholas (1866–1936), Carl Edward "Charles", (1863–1926), and Henry William George (1869–1918). There was also a Ringling sister, Ida Loraina Wilhelmina (1874–1950).



A 1905 poster featuring portraits of five of the Ringling Brothers. Gus and Henry were less heavily involved in the business, and thus were not as often featured in portraits. Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

As children, the Ringling brothers found themselves inspired by circuses, and soon began attempting to imitate the acts they saw, performing for their friends and neighbors, initially charging one penny for admission. In 1884, after more than a decade of practice in backyards and town halls (while the older brothers also maintained more traditional jobs), the Ringling brothers seized upon an excellent opportunity to begin touring their own proper traveling circus. In the summer of 1883, Al Ringling had worked for veteran

showman Fayette Ludovic "Yankee" Robinson (b. 1818), whom Al convinced to help him form a circus, with Robinson lending his expertise, his *matériel*, and his name. The tour of the wagon show, titled "Yankee Robinson and Ringling Bros. Great Double Shows, Circus, and Caravan," was a success, but sadly, Robinson took ill late in the summer, and died in September of 1884. The Ringling brothers then purchased the entirety of his outfit, becoming bonafide circus proprietors. This development was large enough to put them on Bailey's radar for the first time, although they were not yet seen as a significant threat.[1]

The Ringlings, as far as Bailey was concerned, were yet another second-tier competitor to deal with, rather than being on the same level, and he had smaller scale shows of his own that he could use to help contain them. While the Barnum & Bailey show was touring Europe, Bailey sent to tour the U.S. both Buffalo Bill's Wild West and the Adam Forepaugh circus, which he had purchased after the death of its proprietor, Adam "Addie" Forepaugh Jr. Forepaugh and his son had once been Barnum's greatest competitors. Now, Bailey could use the show to hold his company's territory against his many new competitors. But this did not deter the Ringlings, who, thanks to the brief but significant mentorship by "Yankee" Robinson, were able to make gains of both small amounts of territory and large amounts of brand recognition in those few years. And in the autumn of 1902, the Barnum & Bailey circus arrived back in the United States, where a weary but determined Bailey realized he would have to take every measure possible to compete with the Ringlings in the upcoming season. He quickly ordered new wagons, new menagerie animals, and as large a big top canvas as had ever been created.

Because the Barnum & Bailey show had returned, and because work in winter quarters among all of the major circuses was being ramped up so heavily, it became well-known among

[1] For further reading regarding the Ringling brothers, the origins of their show, and their roles in the organization, consult Apps, *Ringlingville USA*.

those following show business news that the competition would be greater in 1903 than it had been in the years immediately preceding. “It is prophesied that this country will see a great circus war next season,” a Michigan journalist wrote in the January 20, 1903 evening edition of the *Muskegon Chronicle*. “There will be a red-hot advertising campaign and a cutting and slashing of prices such as all circusdom has never witnessed.” Though his language sounds apocalyptic, the reporter was pleased with such a scenario; “Let the merry war go on, the public will be interested beneficiaries.”[2] This turned out to be a prescient prediction. Later in the spring, as the shows had begun making their way through their respective territories and specific dates were being finalized, the war began to heat up. On April 14, a journalist for the *Republican* in Springfield, Massachusetts reported on a rivalry between Ringling and Barnum in booking advantageous dates. Ringling Bros. tentatively committed to play the city on June 9, and Barnum & Bailey decided to move their date from July 20 to a preemptive appearance on June 5. This would force Ringling Bros. to choose a much later date, assuming they did not forsake playing the town at all. The reporter also noted that “those interested” expected that the overall strategy for the season would involve Barnum & Bailey leading the way, and for the Forepaugh and Sells show – in which Bailey owned a controlling interest – to follow Ringling Bros.[3] By July, when just about every show had been on the road for a month or so, the *Patriot* in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania reported that Bailey’s shows were giving “deliberate battle” to the Ringling Bros. circus.[4]

It is worth noting that according to the Ringling Bros. route book for 1902, James A. Bailey and one of his publishing agents visited the show on May 26, and likely on the agenda

[2] *Muskegon Chronicle* (Muskegon, Michigan), January 20, 1903, p. 4.
[3] “Rivalry Between Circus Companies,” *Springfield Republican*, April 14, 1903, 8.
[4] *Harrisburg Patriot*, July 4, 1903, 5.

was planning circus routes for the next season together to avoid overlap.[5] If the report from the *Springfield Republican* was accurate, it would mean that Bailey used the meeting at least in part to undercut the Ringlings, rather than work with them. Whether that specific instance was real or not, the employees of the shows certainly saw that the competition was more serious than usual, particularly in terms of billing. In a May 24 interview with a Canton, Ohio paper, G. W. Goodman, the manager of Ringling Bros. Advertising Car #3, spoke openly about the established use of "opposition gangs" in circus advertising. "They are out for the purpose of billing against other shows… Sometimes there are lively scrimmages to secure coveted privileges in advance of the other fellows." In this case, "the other fellows" were the Barnum & Bailey circus; confirming the ongoing rivalry, he said, "Just now we are 'bucking' Barnum & Bailey 'down east' in New Jersey and adjoining states."[6]

The reports of this war are complicated by the fact that the routes of the shows very rarely came close to each other, leaving accusations of such direct competition in doubt. In late May, the Ringling Bros. show traveled through upstate New York and spent the first half of June in Canada, and the Barnum & Bailey show traveled through eastern Pennsylvania in May and into New Jersey in early June. They did occasionally pass through the same city within a close window of time. The shortest of these windows was at Albany, New York, which the shows visited within five days of each other – the Ringling circus on May 30, and the Barnum & Bailey circus on June 4. Throughout the season, the closest these two circuses ever came to each other on the same day was a distance of over 200 miles. It would seem, despite the talk of a "Great

[5] *The Circus Annual: A Route Book of Ringling Brothers World's Greatest Shows Season 1902* (Chicago: Central Engraving and Printing, 1902), 17, https://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/digital/collection/p15990coll5/id/17356/rec/6; Apps, *Ringlingville USA*, 104.
[6] "Show Bills. Circus Man's Story of Paste and Billboard," *Canton Repository*, May 24, 1903, 14.

Circus War," that the assumed routing agreement kept the two biggest shows a comfortable distance apart.

Still, reporters were eager to take notions of a circus war as far as they could, and when, for example, Ringling Bros. was denied a license to play in Boston, it was insinuated that the management at Barnum & Bailey was behind the decision.[7] Louis E. Cooke, a veteran press agent who was currently serving as the general manager of the advance department for Barnum & Bailey, not only denied those specific allegations, but even that the Great Circus War was occurring at all. On the other side, Charles H. Davis, legal adjuster for the Ringling Bros. show, was unsure if the opposition from Barnum & Bailey was as forceful as reporting suggested, but he was nevertheless troubled by the circumstances. "Circus wars are not what many people think they are," he told the reporter. "I have never known opposition from Barnum & Bailey's circus before. If it is true, as the report goes, it is the first time that the thing has happened." (That, of course, was in part because the Ringling Bros. show had not yet grown large enough to be a direct threat to Barnum & Bailey before 1903.) Davis further noted that he would have his advertising agents on the ground investigate the matter.[8] Circus historian Fred Dahlinger notes that conflicts like these in specific places, although troublesome, were not uncommon when routing the circus. "Municipalities working against specific shows wasn't unknown, and in some instances railroads refused to contract to haul a circus if they were already booked to handle another."[9]

But even more troublesome was the looming threat of labor organization on a scale hitherto unknown in the circus. On March 25, just one week after the Barnum & Bailey circus

[7] "Help Up by Mayor Collins," *Boston Herald*, May 6, 1903, 12.
[8] "Says There Is No War," *Boston Transcript*, May 9, 1903, Barnum and Bailey Press Clippings, Ringling Museum Archives.
[9] Fred Dahlinger, notes to the author, August 2, 2017.

had opened in Madison Square Garden to great acclaim, the *Springfield Republican* reported that seventy-two horse drivers employed by the show had organized a Teamsters union.[10] There are over 100 drivers listed in the route book.[11] There seems to have been a gap in labor organizing activity after that – or at least a gap in reporting such activity – but then May became a month of non-stop challenges to Bailey's management. On May 11, the *Boston Herald* reported that the entire crew of bill posters for the show joined the local chapter of the Bill Posters' and Billers Alliance of America.[12] Actually, given that billposters were among the earliest circus employees to unionize – and indeed, to demonstrate a realization of class consciousness – that they would not already have been members is somewhat surprising. It is possible that many of these employees had taken up their trade more recently than others.

Then, immediately following the organization of the Teamsters came a replay of the famous "Revolt of the Freaks." The *Duluth-News Tribune* (reprinting from the *New York Sun*) reported on May 12 that the sideshow performers were demanding that they no longer be billed as "freaks" – either the advertising materials for the season would have to be destroyed and reprinted, or they would "adopt another plan of action." Supposedly, one performer, "Hugo the Giant," reported that he had been billed as an artist in his native France, and that his contract termed him an artist, and that he did not understand why he should not be advertised as such.[13] Although it is clear that the initial sideshow strike in 1899 was at least partially in earnest, whether or not this second instance was fabricated entirely by "Tody" Hamilton as a distraction

[10] *Springfield Republican*, March 25, 1903, 10.
[11] Charles Andress, *Day by Day with Barnum & Bailey Season 1903-1904*, 1904, 17–19, https://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/digital/collection/p15990coll5/id/9678/rec/3. The list is in the 1904 section, and this author assumes the list also represents the staff of the 1903 season. The section of the route book for 1903 strangely lists only the staff responsible for the museum and side show for that season.
[12] *Boston Herald*, May 11, 1903, 3.
[13] "Ultimatum of the Prodigies," *Duluth News-Tribune*, May 12, 1903, 4. The only giant listed in the route book for that season was not "Hugo", but the famous Capt. George Auger, so this report is seemingly either inaccurate or fabricated.

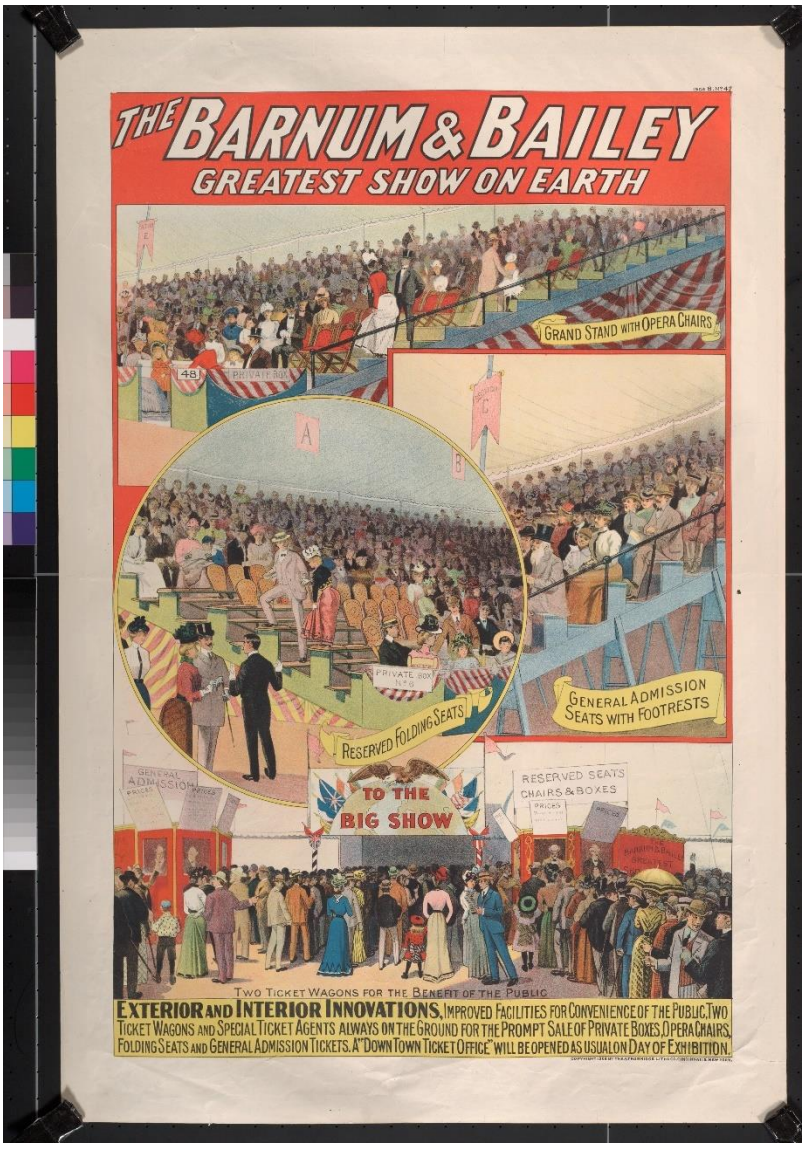
is unknown. Either way, the reports being printed in conjunction alongside the other labor troubles facing the show certainly affected the public perspective that the war was on and that Bailey was floundering in his leadership.

Taking the show on the road from its opening in Madison Square Garden had proved to be disastrous, and the labor troubles continued to mount as the circus lumbered through the Northeast. On May 12, the show's problems culminated in what may have been the first large-scale general strike in circus history. The circus was delayed in leaving Washington, D.C. for Baltimore until daylight due to a strike by 150 canvasmen, who were said to be asking for a $5 per month raise. Although it is not mentioned, they presumably also demanded changes in their working conditions, which had grown untenable. Forty policemen were sent to keep watch over the strike, which remained nonviolent, save for one punch thrown. According to a report in the Washington, D.C. *Evening Star*, the canvasmen were in the process of organizing a union, but if this was true, the union ultimately never materialized.[14] No mention is made of the Tiger Club, and given that members must have wanted to maintain Bailey's support and approval, their explicit participation was unlikely. Whether or not this strike was in any way connected to the activity by the Teamsters union said to have been formed in March is unknown, but labor struggles soon began to cast a dark shadow over the show.

Considering the conditions under which the canvasmen were working, and given the greater unity among employees that was being encouraged by the Tiger Club, perhaps Bailey should have realized that having discontented employees was inevitable. Even before the canvasmen had gone on strike, putting up the big top had seemed to be impossible. According to press releases, the gargantuan new tent held nearly fifteen thousand spectators (at least twice as

[14] "Circus Laborers Strike," *Evening Star*, May 13, 1903, 17.

many as previous seasons) and consisted of two-and-a-half acres of canvas supported by four eight-hundred-pound center poles and quarter poles weighing four hundred pounds each. In all likelihood, the canvas may not have been that much larger than previous seasons, but there is no doubt that the elements comprising the big top weighed more than was customary or necessary.[15] And in perhaps the worst decision of all, Bailey had ordered the construction of an entirely new seating arrangement, including grandstands with cast iron folding chairs designed after those he had seen in French opera houses. The new seating required a steel framework to be supported, a first for any circus. Roustabouts were accustomed to hard work, but this was far more difficult – unnecessarily so – than the work had ever been.



A 1903 poster advertising new amenities for the Barnum & Bailey circus, especially the improved seating, which turned out to be a disaster. Image courtesy of the collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the State Art Museum of Florida, Florida State University.

[15] Greg Parkinson, discussion with the author, December 11, 2018.

For the first time in its history not involving weather or other situations beyond their control, the Barnum & Bailey circus ground to a halt, missing performances and sometimes missing towns entirely. According to Fred Bradna, even with assistance from the cooks, technicians, three hundred horses and thirty elephants, the canvasmen often could not get the big top in place. Bailey called for all employees of the circus – "from general manager to star" – to work at getting the canvas up.[16] And for the stars to be called to do such work, although it had always been contractually obligated, was almost unheard of. While this all-hands-on-deck method managed to get the show running for its six-day stand in Philadelphia, the canvasmen, as well as the rest of the employees, soon realized the Quixotic nature of Bailey's plans for the tour. The situation soon grew so dire that at least once, Bailey offered free tickets to citizens of the town the circus intended to visit in exchange for assistance in raising the big top. In Philadelphia, this offer was gladly taken, mostly by hundreds of young men and boys.[17] Such assistance was not unheard of, but it had never been required on this scale. And for whatever reasons, Bailey did not always allow for this badly needed assistance. Businessmen from Shenandoah, Pennsylvania called the circus after hearing that their date had been canceled, gladly offering enough citizens to put up the tents, but management refused the offer.[18] According to the route book, the parade in that town was missed, but there was big attendance at the shows – the shows which never happened, according to the newspaper accounts.

Although the show managed to get moving, the strike by canvasmen continued, causing a number of missed dates and performances, and soon Bailey found himself forced to call in reinforcements, so to speak. On May 18, boss canvasman Charles McLean, one of Bailey's most

[16] Bradna, *The Big Top*, 30.
[17] Ibid.
[18] *Freeland Tribune*, May 22, 1903, 5.

trusted lieutenants, arrived at the show to find a way to handle the strike.[19] McLean had to be retrieved from Europe, where he had been working on the Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. With controlling interests in both the Wild West and Forepaugh-Sells, Bailey had stretched his most trusted management thinly across the Atlantic in an attempt to keep everything running like clockwork. Yet still the gears continued grinding. On the night of May 18, at a stop between the Pennsylvania towns of Lancaster and York – where the show did not go on – a "large number" of employees quit the show entirely.[20] Roustabouts quitting the show, even a couple dozen at a time, was not uncommon, but in this context, it exacerbated a situation that was growing worse by the day. By the end of May, the strike was beginning to sour business with towns, as in one instance in Camden, New Jersey wherein an agent for the circus attempted to have the licensing fee waived because only one performance had been given. The town's mayor refused. "Managers of the circus deny the report that a strike was responsible for the delays," the *Inquirer* in Philadelphia reported. "Canvasmen on the ground say the whole trouble was due to a strike."[21]

In almost every newspaper report of visits from Barnum & Bailey that season, Bailey is quoted as denying any strike was occurring, and that the delays and missed performances were simply the fault of the work being too much for the number of men the circus could carry with them. Bailey did put out advertisements in a handful of towns calling for laborers – both day laborers and full-time employees to replace those who had quit – but he usually got only a fraction of the men that he needed, only a handful of whom were up to the gargantuan task.[22]

[19] "Barnum & Bailey's Show Again Performing and Turning Away Crowds - Hiring More Men," *Harrisburg Patriot*, May 19, 1903, 6.
[20] "Hard Luck Still Follows Big Show," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 20, 1903, 3.
[21] "Big Circus Struck Snags in Camden," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 31, 1903, 5.
[22] "Green Hands Tie Up Show," *Topeka State Journal*, May 20, 1903, Barnum and Bailey Press Clippings, Ringling Museum Archives.

The public were invested in the strike as well, fearing that it might spread to the performers, maybe even bringing the circus to an early close that season. A June 3 article from a New York paper included the following poem:

> What care we for the subway strike,
> Or for the "L" train crews?
> But woe is ours if to freak
> The circus freaks refuse.
> What, ho! Ye walking delegate,
> In whom all evils Lurk,
> Come forth and face the populace.
> Is this your ghastly work?[23]

The strike brought a beleaguered Bailey, who due to his penchant for precision had a history of nervous breakdowns, stress that he feared he could not handle. In an unfinished biography of Bailey by his brother-in-law and business partner Joseph T. McCaddon, he is described as on the verge of yet another nervous breakdown due to the "labor troubles" of his organization.[24] In order to save face and keep the strike at arm's length, Bailey repeatedly and publicly refused to recognize not only any form of workers' collective action in his circus beyond the Tiger Club, but also that any strike could ever occur within his organization. Bailey was incensed by it all, and was working hard to put out the public relations fires caused by reporting of the canvasmen strike.

The strike had been going on for nearly two months, and with plenty of newspapers reporting on it, when Bailey put out a rebuttal to what he claimed were unfounded rumors in the trade papers, such as *Billboard* and the *New York Clipper,* on July 4, which was not only Independence Day, but his birthday. Written by the show's advance manager and Bailey's personal representative, Louis E. Cooke, the rebuttal dismisses reports on the strike flatly as

[23] "The Circus Strike," June 3, 1903, Barnum and Bailey Press Clippings, Ringling Museum Archives.
[24] A. H. Saxon, "New Light on the Life of James A. Bailey," *Bandwagon* 61, no. 2 (2017): 44.

false: “There has never been a strike; there has never been a cause for a strike.” Cooke also addressed the overall Great Circus War, claiming “the rumours were set afloat by petty shows seeking to make capital at our expense.”[25] Cooke spoke of “harmony” among all employees and across all departments. Although he does not mention the Tiger Club specifically, “harmony” was a word they used to describe their purpose as well. Cooke does admit in the article, as Bailey had been doing in interviews on the road, to the logistical and equipment problems that plagued the circus that season. Cooke writes of the “cumbersome” nature of the show, which some news sources claimed was the root of the issue, rather than wages and overwork.[26] Cooke set forth a laundry list of issues:

> The railroads have been strained to the utmost to handle our four trains, comprising 92 of the heaviest cars ever constructed… Then our new seating arrangements are the heaviest ever used… Instead of ropes, about the arena are used heavy nickel pipe rails. Our poles are immensely tall and equally heavy, and require horse as well as man power to erect them. We spread more canvas in our horse tents than is to be found in several of the advertised three ring shows, and our ‘menagerie top’ is larger than the ‘big top’ of any other circus. [27]

As any agent worth his salt would, Cooke spun these problems as amazements for the audience to behold and comforts in which to indulge – of course, that assumes that the show would overcome the problems caused by their attempts at such spectacle, a feat which they often could not perform.

Bailey continued to try different methods of ending the strike and moving the circus forward, putting his best men on the job. Previously mentioned was the retrieval of Charles McLean from Europe, whose arrival in the States preceded the mass exodus of perhaps as many as forty canvasmen. It is worth noting that McLean did not return to Europe and the Buffalo Bill

[25] “New York Clipper Excerpts 1900-1909.”
[26] Greg Parkinson, “James A. Bailey’s Last Parades 1903 and 1904,” *Bandwagon* 61, no. 2 (2017): 46.
[27] “New York Clipper Excerpts 1900-1909.”

show at the end of the season, and instead remained with Barnum & Bailey for the 1904 season to ensure that the show continued to run smoothly. Given that McLean's methods, whatever they were, were ineffective, Bailey then recalled from Europe another one of his top executives, associate director George O. Starr, to help him "extricate [the circus] from the trouble which encompass[ed] it." Starr decided that the best way to end the strike was to give the employees at least one thing they had asked for – a raise in wages.

> The country is more prosperous than ever before in its recent history, positions are more secure, wages are better, and men are more satisfied, Mr. Starr has decided, and bitter experience has shown it to Mr. Bailey. It has been impossible to lure men away to the hard and heavy work of the canvas, although the Barnum & Bailey circus is more considerate toward its employees than any organization of the character. … There has been no strike as heralded through the East. The Barnum & Bailey show is now paying as high as $1 an hour to the men who work on canvas and drive stakes. phenominal [*sic*] rate of wages has finally almost filled the depleted ranks, and to-day the circus is agin [*sic*] on a definite working basis.[28]

That Starr mentions an hourly wage is somewhat puzzling, but it would seem to suggest that he intended to end the strike by hiring primarily temporary waged laborers over salaried contract laborers. Of course, either way, the fact that many of the canvasmen had been replaced must also have contributed to the end of the strike. And Bailey, McLean, and Starr were seemingly willing to replace rebellious roustabouts by whatever means necessary. On November 18, after the season had ended, a press agent for the show is quoted as saying that at some point during these labor troubles, Bailey "imported a large force of Virginia negroes" for the first time, the work being too backbreaking for white men, according to him.[29]

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[28] "Circus Proves Our Prosperity," *New York Evening Telegram*, June 2, 1903, Barnum and Bailey Press Clippings, Ringling Museum Archives.

[29] "Effect of Prosperity," *Detroit Free Press*, November 18, 1903, Barnum and Bailey Press Clippings, Ringling Museum Archives. The press agent in question, George Bowles, is not to be found in the roster in the route book. The article claims he had left the show two months prior, so it is possible that he was accidentally left off the roster. An earlier article from May out of Fitchburg, Massachusetts also makes the claim about hiring African-American laborers, with no direct quote.

But the end of the strike was far from the end of workers' collective action during the 1903 season. The Tiger Club, as a matter of fact, was still going strong despite all of this, and presumably still with the explicit approval of Bailey and his lieutenants. A July 27 article in the *Evening Transcript* out of North Adams, Massachusetts, notes that a Tiger Club meeting was held that day in their town, in which sixty-five new members were inducted. The article further notes that the circus's members of the Teamsters union held their meeting that day, and that these men were also members of the Tiger Club, and many other employees of the show were members of both a trade union and the Tiger Club. [30] This is an intriguing statement, for we know that many billposters were members of their trade union, and that many horse drivers were Teamsters. But if any other circus employees were also members of unions before 1937, that evidence is not apparent.

While the Barnum & Bailey circus limped along in 1903 – Bailey himself having inadvertently hobbled it – the Ringling Bros. circus gladly filled the vacuum which Bailey had created, growing their business in the process. Although there is no direct evidence of collective action occurring, the Ringlings still had trouble with individual laborers engaging in resistance to authority. For example, on September 12 a ticket seller named Will Cross got drunk in several saloons across San Francisco. In one, he took in a watermelon he had purchased and haphazardly began to cut it on the bar. The bartender ejected Cross, at which point Cross drew his pepper-box pistol and "threatened to shoot up the street."[31] The fate of Cross after this behavior is unknown.

Regardless of whether or not an employee's behavior reached such an extreme, consumption of alcohol at any time was usually strictly forbidden by their contracts. Drinking,

[30] "Union of Circus Employes [sic] is Order of American Tigers," *North Adams Evening Transcript*, July 27, 1903, Barnum and Bailey Press Clippings, Ringling Museum Archives.
[31] *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 12, 1903, 9.

then, became a form of resistance to authority that is often referred to by historians of labor and class struggle as "infrapolitics." In his seminal 1990 work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, political scientist James C. Scott argues that there are two forms of interaction between the dominant and the oppressed: public transcripts, which consist of the forms of direct and open communication, and hidden transcripts, which consist of subaltern forms of resistance to oppression. In order to understand the working class, Scott argues, we must examine both their public actions and their private actions to get a better understanding of the ways in which they resist oppression. Scott defines infrapolitics more specifically like this: "For a social science attuned to the relatively open politics of liberal democracies and to loud, headline-grabbing protests, demonstrations, and rebellions, the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups is, like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum. That it should be invisible, as we have seen, is in large part by design – a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power."[32] So, for example, when drinking was done subversively and did not get so out of hand that an employee became a threat to those around him, it was a form of criticism of and resistance to power, a form of infrapolitics. Because the circumstances of the workplace made collective action difficult, and both collective and individual resistance could result in one's being red-lighted, hidden transcripts and infrapolitics became key ways in which circus employees could resist oppressive practices by management.

And as always, the employees were in danger from outsiders as well. In the dark morning hours of August 6, near Ogden, Utah, a night watchman named Paul Spearing attempted to eject a hobo from a train car and was attacked, taking a bullet to his right forearm. Spearing was taken to the hospital, accompanied by the circus's surgeon Dr. Arthur Gollmar (a cousin to the

[32] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 183.

Ringlings, whose family ran their own small circus), and his wound was dressed without removing the bullet.[33] Spearing was left in the Ogden hospital to recover, and about a month later, he returned to the show during its weeklong engagement in Los Angeles.[34] Again, although the Tiger Club is not directly mentioned here, it is very possible that they would have provided for the cost of his care and his transportation to return to the show, as both were expensive and generally reserved for stars and executives. For most employees, leaving the show for any reason meant leaving it altogether, at least for that season.

While Barnum & Bailey and Ringling Bros. were the two largest and most popular traveling circuses in 1903, the smaller circuses were in fact fighting each other more rabidly – although to some extent, these should be considered proxy wars, given that many of them were controlled at least in part by Bailey or the Ringlings. A journalist for the *Morning Star* in Rockford, Illinois, reported on May 14 on the ongoing Great Circus War, peppering the article with combat analogies. "Yesterday the real work of the combat was commenced," he reported, "though for several days past there have been side-line firings from both sides in the way of small stands of bills and banners," referring to advertising campaigns in the city by the Great Wallace and Forepaugh-Sells circuses. As noted earlier, the journalist who coined the term "Great Circus War" was pleased, as he believed the public would benefit. D.F. Lynch, the manager in charge of advertising for the Great Wallace circus, told the reporter that the circus benefitted from the war as well, saying,

> It draws a larger crowd, though not in proportion to the additional expense. But the fact that a circus comes out ahead in the war is worth more in advertising than in the matter of dollars and cents for the fact is sent out broadcast and is worth much in the next stand as an advertisement.

[33] *Ringling Circus Annual 1903*, 66.
[34] *Ringling Circus Annual 1903*, 70.

Lynch goes on to note that the smaller circuses such as his benefit from the popularity of Barnum & Bailey and Ringling Bros., and the war they waged against each other. Many thousands of people were turned away when shows reached capacity, and so were eager to see the next circus that came to town.[35]

The Great Circus War clearly had greater stakes for the smaller circuses (that were not controlled by Bailey or the Ringlings) than the larger ones. Competition between the first and second-tier circuses could be tight; for example, when the Ringling show arrived in Youngstown, Ohio on May 20, they were the third show to arrive in eight days, following on the heels of the Great Wallace Shows and Walter L. Main Circus![36] And this war was certainly not seen as a merry one by all, including the inhabitants of towns that got caught in the crossfire. In the previously mentioned May 14 issue of the *Morning Star*, there is also an article complaining of "the bill board nuisance." "The bill posters have made Rockford look like a veritable bedlam," the author grumbled. "Two circuses are competing and there is a natural rivalry as to the greatest and ugliest display."[37] Unfortunately, he did not specify to which circuses he was referring. A sarcastic journalist writing for the *Daily Republic* in Rockford noted that the bill posters had missed their courthouse, Carnegie library, and veteran's memorial hall, which was to be dedicated by the President in June. The reporter mockingly suggested that the bill posters ought to "get the stand built from which President Roosevelt is to speak to the multitudes June 3 and let

[35] "Circus War is on in Rockford," *Rockford Morning Star*, May 14, 1903, 3.
[36] *Ringling Circus Annual 1903*, 59.
[37] "The Bill Board Nuisance," *Rockford Morning Star*, May 14, 1903, 3.

the circus men decorate that with flaring posters and gay bunting, on which is printed truths about the greatest show on earth."[38]

A building in Troy, New York plastered with posters during the "Great Circus War" of 1903. This scene became commonplace throughout the Northeastern United States, where competition was the fiercest. Image courtesy of the collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the State Art Museum of Florida, Florida State University.

Not only were the second-tier shows, such as the famed John Robinson circus, caught up in the routing and billing wars of 1903, but they were certainly not immune to labor troubles either. Managers like Robinson approached the problems in similar ways to Bailey and the Ringlings. "Governor" John Franklin Robinson, Jr. (no relation to "Yankee" Robinson) was a skilled circus proprietor with a rich family history in show business. He was born almost literally into the circus – his father was an equestrian who had run away with the circus as a boy and started one of the United States' earliest "mud shows," and his mother was performing in the

[38] "Circus Men Overlook a Bet - Fail to Put Bills on Memorial Hall and Carnegie Building," *Rockford Daily Republic*, May 14, 1903.

ring in Linden, Alabama just a few hours before giving birth to him on November 4, 1843. At just six months of age, Robinson was "performing" in a big top act with his father, and by age two he was being trained as an equestrian. At the onset of the Civil War, Robinson temporarily left the show to enlist in the Union Army gunboat squadron, and participated in several battles, including the Siege of Vicksburg. Despite his absence, Robinson and his father before him had developed a well-oiled machine that continued touring in the North during the war, and he resumed control when he returned.[39]

But despite his best efforts, John Robinson's circus often met with challenges and misfortunes that led to his name being sullied. Most famously, in the so-called "Battle of Jacksonville" of 1875, members of the show got into a shootout with rowdy Texans, who had been soured on the circus by an unscrupulous show that had come through in recent years. Jacob Posey's father was present for this event, and claims that drunks surrounded the ticket wagon and the sheriff refused to protect the showfolk. The circus then armed themselves in preparation. Things stayed mostly tame until clown John Lowlow admonished a member of the crowd for standing and blocking the view of others, and the man responded by attacking him.[40] This resulted in a full-on battle – in which assailants wielded not only guns, but knives and clubs as well – that, when the smoke had cleared, resulted in four civilians dead and sixteen wounded, and one circus employee dead, six wounded.[41] The Robinson show understandably did not return to Texas for many years following this incident. From storms to train wrecks to gangs of toughs, the show so frequently had to pack up early and leave that soon the phrase "give 'em a John Robinson" became part of the circus lingo. This referred to a truncated performance, either

[39] "Thrills in Life Recalled as Word of J. F. Robinson's Death is Flashed," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 1, 1921, 8, 17.
[40] Posey, *Last of the Forty-Horse Drivers*, 11–12.
[41] "Thrills in Life Recalled as Word of J. F. Robinson's Death is Flashed."

through cutting certain bits or entire acts, and often decided abruptly.[42] In addition to the more immediate context, this saying was likely adapted from a common English phrase that has existed since the eighteenth century, "quicker than you can say Jack Robinson."

As for the labor troubles, although they were less significant for the Robinson show, they still presented a challenge. In Bellefontaine, Ohio, the *Bellefontaine Republican* reported that during their visit to the town on June 30, forty members of the show quit due to low wages. The reporter unfortunately did not specify what kind of employees they were. Individual "infrapolitics" were occasionally an issue as well, such as when, also on June 30, an employee got drunk, which was against the rules, and stumbled into a train, sustaining a broken leg and wounds on his arm and forehead.[43] Most significantly, John Robinson's employees were also the first (and seemingly only) showpeople outside of the influence of Bailey's management to form their own chapter of the Tiger Club. Whether or not this decision was one from top-down or bottom-up is unknown, but it is clear the group had the approval of Robinson and his management, for he had the group photographed and featured in that season's route book.[44]

Image courtesy of the collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the State Art Museum of Florida, Florida State University.

[42] "About the Robinson Circus | Terrace Park Historical Society," n.d., https://tphistoricalsociety.org/about-the-robinson-circus.
[43] *Bellefontaine Republican*, July 3, 1903, 4.
[44] W. L. "Punch" Wheeler, *John Robinson's Route, 1903, Story of the Trip* (Evansville, IN: Keller Printing Company, 1903), 76, https://digital.library.illinoisstate.edu/digital/collection/p15990coll5/id/10185.

The activities of the Tigers are mentioned numerous times in the diary entries of the 1903 Robinson show route book, although these entries unfortunately are not very detailed. On June 1 in Slatington, Pennsylvania, after the show had been on the road for about a month, the show's chapter began, as it "formed a temporary organization with Brother Carlisle in the chair."[45] This is referring to Ralph C. Carlisle, who was at this time a general superintendent on the Robinson show who would also come to serve as the recording secretary for their chapter of the Tiger Club. Carlisle, like so many other prominent Tiger Club members, was a circus veteran by this time. As early as 1890, Carlisle had begun working on circuses and Wild West shows in an unknown capacity.[46] Furthermore, it is very possible that Carlisle was at least partially responsible for bringing the Tiger Club to the Robinson show in addition to "Big Jake" Posey. Before joining Robinson's circus, Carlisle trouped with Barnum & Bailey on their European tour, serving as a forage agent, which is more or less what it sounds like – someone who foraged in town for any extra food, supplies, tools, medicine, etc. that was needed on the show lot.[47] Carlisle had a long and storied career, as he went on to become a show proprietor himself, operating his own small Wild West show from about 1905 to at least 1920, and taking on the nickname "Wichita Jack."[48]

The Tigers had truly become an invasive species. Within a week, the Robinson "jungle" of the Tiger Club was established permanently with 105 members.[49] They met frequently but irregularly, and not on the show grounds, but in rented facilities such as an opera house and a

[45] Wheeler, 21.
[46] "Billboard Excerpts 1911-1914," May 27, 1911, https://classic.circushistory.org/History/Billboard1911.htm.
[47] Watkins, *Four Years in Europe*, 101.
[48] "Billboard Excerpts 1907-1910," October 3, 1908, https://classic.circushistory.org/History/Billboard1907.htm; "Billboard Excerpts 1911-1914"; "Billboard Excerpts 1915-1917, 1919," March 27, 1915, https://classic.circushistory.org/History/Billboard1915.htm; "Billboard Excerpts 1920-1922," November 13, 1920, https://classic.circushistory.org/History/Billboard1920.htm.
[49] Wheeler, *John Robinson's Route, 1903, Story of the Trip*, 25.

hotel.[50] Within one month, the club had grown "to an enormous caliber," and was said to have over 200 members.[51] Robinson's route book editor, "Punch" Wheeler, clearly admired the Tiger Club and saw the need for their existence, as the entry for August 28 mentions that "It would be a good thing if the Tigers would meet again before the season closes for Mr. Schwab has had the backache ever since Erie Pa."[52] Unfortunately, for reasons unknown, by the next season, the John Robinson show either no longer had its own chapter of the Tigers, or it chose not to record their activities. The former is more likely than the latter. Of course, it is also worth noting that despite its apparent value, the Tiger Club clearly was not a full solution to the troubles of circus workers, as its existence did not prevent the exodus of employees that came about a month after the formation of the Robinson "jungle."

All of these mentions of Tiger Club meetings in both route books and trade papers lead us to the question: what might an average meeting of the Tiger Club have been like? Unfortunately, no minutes for the organization have survived – or at least, they have not been cataloged. And being a secret society, members did not openly discuss their rituals. But that practice in and of itself can give us some clues when taken in historical context, as can the surviving constitution and by-laws. In *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, historian Mark C. Carnes argues that secret societies were a phenomenon sustained largely by urban middle-class white Protestant young men. Economic considerations – the costs of membership fees and dues – in particular were a significant barrier to entry for most industrial workers.[53] Carnes further argues that secret ritual, although not always the primary reason that men joined fraternal orders, it is

[50] Wheeler, 27, 29.
[51] Wheeler, 35.
[52] Wheeler, 109.
[53] Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, Revised edition (Yale University Press, 1991), 3–4.

the most important commonality between all such organizations. “Fraternal ritual provided solace and psychological guidance during young men’s troubled passage to manhood in Victorian America.”[54]

But Carnes’ arguments do not fully explain the phenomenon of the Tiger Club, for which ritual seems secondary, based on the surviving sources. For example, the desire to improve labor conditions was certainly an aspect of many secret societies. The first major nationwide labor organization in the United States, the Knights of Labor, was originally founded as a fraternal secret society. The Tiger Club seemed to be caught in a place between being a fraternal society and a labor organization. Although the problem of money may have been what kept out certain workers, such as most canvasmen, the Tiger Club was more open socially, at least in theory, and its demographic makeup was somewhat more diverse than that of the Freemasons.

To be certain, the Tiger Club was organized much like other secret societies, although the result of their secrecy is that the specifics of their rituals have been lost to time. There can be little doubt that such rituals took place, although we can never know if they were as long and complex as those of other secret societies. Articles 40, 41, and 42 of the Tiger Club constitution establish the society as secret, forbid members to speak in public of any lodge business, and to inform potential members of the requirements for secrecy.[55] Entry to meetings required the use of passwords and hand signals, enforced by a Sergeant-at-Arms, as established by Article 10.[56] Among the fineable offenses was wearing a headdress without permission and not calling the lodge by its proper name.[57] Perhaps the most significant difference from the Freemasons and other fraternal orders was that the Tiger Club was not strictly fraternal; upon rechartering in the

[54] Carnes, 11–14.
[55] Posey, *B.P.O.T. Constitution, 1903*, 17–18.
[56] Posey, 10.
[57] Posey, 20.

United States in 1903, it began granting memberships to women.[58] Given the relative social and financial independence of many circus women, this is not especially surprising. And as we have mentioned, the "freaks" too were granted full membership in the ranks of the Tigers. Although circus culture was more often than not fractured and hierarchical, the twenty-plus year existence of the Tiger Club demonstrates that because of the insular nature of circus life, there were opportunities for and attempts made at greater unity, and at class composition. Secret societies, then, could "provide solace and psychological guidance" for more than just young white men.

To return to John Robinson, he, like the other proprietors, had the support of many of his employees. An excerpt from a poem printed at the end of the 1903 route book, written by Ballet Master John F. Raymond, demonstrates Robinson's reputation for being a benevolent employer, as well as the reputation of mutual aid among employees, who were members of many fraternal orders:

> To the insane, orphans and the poor
> Mr. Robinson gives a free, open door,
> And it's all done quietly, without ostentation.
> He helps all, no matter what's their station.
> And weekly all hands give, none can tell,
> How much for the sick in the City Hospital.
> When a man's hurt they are the first to lend a hand.
> They comfort the widow—bury him do you understand ?
>
> Like the wave falls on the sea sand,
> Meet them and give them a hearty hand.
> Sift thy brains of all bad thoughts without a sigh.
> These showmen are perhaps better than you or I.
> Mason's, Shriners, Elks and Tigers are these men.
> Please bring the circus back again.[59]

[58] "Tigers Take in the Women: Circus Benevolent Association Admits Female Performers to Membership in the Order," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 14, 1903.; Posey, 16.
[59] Wheeler, *John Robinson's Route, 1903, Story of the Trip*, 66–67.

Circus employees apparently did not see the irony that despite their boss' apparent generosity, they still often found themselves in a position of needing to help each other financially to recover from injury and misfortune. Just how common it was for circus employees, especially of the rank-and-file jobs, to be members of secret societies is not readily apparent. But some, like this poem would suggest, were extremely active in multiple fraternal orders. Jacob Posey, whose father had been a Freemason and had needed their financial aid, became a third degree member of the Masonic order during the Barnum & Bailey European tour.[60] Although he was excluded eight years later for failing to pay his dues, he was reinstated at a friend's request – in 1957 at age ninety-four![61] Another significant example, in the 1920s and 30s, was star performer and producer George Hartzell, whose stage name was "The Millionaire Clown." Hartzell, over the course of his travels, became a member of no fewer than eleven Shriner temples around the country![62] Ironically, however, there is no evidence to indicate that he was ever a member of the Tiger Club.

Perhaps no employees were more loyal to Robinson than his advance agents. As has been discussed, billposters and other advance men were often intensely loyal to their shows, and at no time was this more important than during a billing war. Interestingly, however, the public noted that Robinson's agents behaved quite gentlemanly during this season. A reporter for the *Evansville Courier and Press* in Indiana claimed that the Great Circus War brought "the biggest advertising war ever conducted … by two rival circus companies." The rivals in this instance were the John Robinson and Forepaugh shows (again, partially managed by Bailey). The Forepaugh agents, arriving second, contracted for every space that was not already taken,

[60] Posey, *Last of the Forty-Horse Drivers*, 11, 48–49.
[61] "Lodge History - Josiah Wedgwood Lodge," n.d., https://www.josiahwedgwoodlodge.org.uk/lodge-history.
[62] Temple membership certificates in the George Hartzell Papers, 1917-1940, Milner Library Special Collections, Illinois State University, Circus and Allied Arts Collections.

including residential homes. Especially fierce was the battle for space on streetcars, telegraph and telephone poles, and even windows.[63] But retaliation by Robinson agents is nowhere to be found in the newspapers, which based on reports of other billing wars is unusual indeed. An article in the *Cameron County Press* in Emporium, Pennsylvania makes special note that advance man L. H. Heckman of the John Robinson circus was straightforward in his dealings and "a gentlemanly agent." "He knows just what he wants and gets that which pays his employer without splitting hairs," the journalist reported.[64] After the show had come and gone, a later report in the same paper mentions that "Press Agent W.L. Wheeler [the manager of the advance department] was untiring in his efforts to make all feel at home and found it no hardship to assist the ladies and children to get the best view of the animals and paint any features he thought might please them."[65]

Robinson's gentlemanly agents aside, the Great Circus War had been hard fought, and when the winter set in and the circus season of 1903 came to a close, the effects of the war and collective action by the soldiers who had fought in it could already be felt. For example, the billposters – one of the groups who had served on the metaphorical front lines of the war – felt they deserved more if such combat was to continue in the years to come. At the annual convention of the Bill Posters' and Billers' Alliance of America, held in Cincinnati in December, the two most significant topics on the table were a new uniform wage scale for advance agents (including billposters) and home rule for local chapters. Both employees and management of the circus industry was especially well represented; present were Peter Sells for the Forepaugh-Sells circus, advance managers Louis E. Cooke and W. H. Gardner of the Barnum and Bailey circus,

[63] "Posters Cover the Entire Town," *Evansville Courier and Press*, July 12, 1903.
[64] "A Gentlemanly Agent," *Cameron County Press*, June 4, 1903.
[65] "The Big Circus Came," *Cameron County Press*, June 18, 1903, 2.

W. E. Franklin of the Great Wallace circus, and several of the Ringling brothers.[66] The convention was a success for billposters; home rule was awarded, as well as advance of $15 per month from wages – quite a departure from the long-established practice of holdback.[67] In addition, it was decided that going forward, all circus billposting could be performed only by union workers.[68] This fight was the first of many between the billposters' union and circus manager-proprietors, who in the coming years would band together themselves in an attempt to stem the tide of organized labor in their industry.

As for the Barnum and Bailey canvasmen, although their organized activity had ended months earlier, the echoes of these events were still rippling through the news, and still being denied. The previously mentioned November 18 article in which a show press agent discussed the "importation" of African-American strikebreakers after the fact also denied that a strike had ever occurred. Workers' actions had clearly had an impact on the public perceptions of circus labor. And in the coming decades, the continued movement toward collective action by all workers in the circus would come to alter the industry irrevocably, for both employees and management personnel alike.

[66] "Billers," *Cincinnati Post*, December 7, 1903, 3.
[67] "Bill Posters Give Home Rule to All Locals," *Cleveland Leader*, December 9, 1903, 2; "National Bill Posters Agree On New Wage Scale For Advance Circusmen," New Orleans Times-Picayune, December 10, 1903, 12.
[68] "Will Do Circus Posting," *Daily People*, December 12, 1903, 1.

CHAPTER FIVE

"NOT 'A CIRCUS' IN ANY SENSE OF THE WORD": WORKING WITH THE WILD WEST

In May of 1907, after nearly a quarter century of critical acclaim and popular success, Buffalo Bill's Wild West was beginning to buckle under its own weight. In a series of events echoing the disasters of the "Great Circus War" a few years earlier, an arduous traveling schedule and lack of personnel threatened to grind the show to a halt, which had never happened before. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, who was for the first time operating the show without a direct partner, wrote a letter from the road to Joseph T. McCaddon, at that point the business manager of Cody's Wild West exhibition. Cody informed McCaddon that, due to a lack of laborers and management, they had reached the point of putting on only one performance per day, and they were just barely managing to do that. Cody complained that they did not have the necessary personnel to raise the canvas and install the seating – and even if they did, that they would still require McCaddon's direct supervision to do it properly and safely. As a result, they were hemorrhaging $5,000 a day in lost revenue. The concluding sentence, written in a postscript on the back of the letter, sums up the seriousness of the situation in no uncertain terms: "We must have men – or its [*sic*] all off," Cody told McCaddon bluntly.[1]

Wild West exhibitions, for all their similarities to shows like Barnum & Bailey, were not in fact circuses. Buffalo Bill and other Wild West show proprietors would frequently insist that audiences and commentators understand the difference. Contemporary critics often drew the obvious comparisons, but usually were keen to treat the Wild West as its own entity. In the circus, the lines between fantasy and reality were intentionally blurred, and the audience was

[1] William F. Cody to Joseph T. McCaddon, May 25, 1907, William F. Cody Collection, McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, MS006, Folder MS6.14.08, Item MS6.0194.

invited to ponder where each began and ended. Comedy and drama were dosed out in equal measure in a unique blending of low and high arts. In Wild West exhibitions, those lines were still blurred, but less explicitly and intentionally so. Men like Buffalo Bill, Pawnee Bill, and "Doc" Carver strove to create programming that was as close to their own experiences as possible, but exaggerated the recreations to be even more thrilling and fantastical for their audiences. "The Wild West Show has very little of the circus element in it. It is a bonâ-fide attempt to reproduce in the heart of our desert of bricks and mortar the reckless, daredevil life of the plains," a reporter for *Spare Moments* magazine remarked in 1892.[2] Wild West exhibitions were also not fully industrialized, ranging from "mud shows" to mid-size enterprises. Even Buffalo Bill's Wild West, despite being one of the most popular entertainments in the United States and Europe for about thirty years, never reached anywhere near the size or magnitude of the Barnum & Bailey or Ringling Bros. operations. They employed very few if any roustabouts, train men, and other manual laborers, and maintained a far less rigorous traveling schedule than circuses of any size. For these reasons, the Wild West is perhaps best referred to as a "cousin" of the circus, sharing many of the same sensibilities for spectacle, but with significant differences in managerial and logistical needs. Managing a Wild West show was a unique challenge to which few men were up to the task. Because of this, the marriage between the circus and the Wild West was a largely unhappy and ultimately temporary one.

[2] "About Well-Known People. Colonel William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill)," *Spare Moments*, July 23, 1892, https://codyarchive.org/texts/wfc.nsp12588.html.

It is not as if William Frederick Cody was not a man accustomed to hard work, for by 1907 he had been working continuously for fifty years. Born in 1846 near LeClaire, Iowa Territory, Cody began his career as a teamster and messenger at age eleven following the death of his father. By the time he was a teenager, he had begun to make his name in the West as a skilled rider, messenger, and scout for both military and civilian operations. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, Cody built his reputation among the social elite as the most sought-after hunting guide on the frontier, providing immersive Western experiences to sport-hunting tourists. Essentially a mobile one-man show, a trip with Cody would involve not only guided hunting, but campfire stories, practical jokes, and perhaps a viewing of traditional Indian dances or even staged attacks.[3] It was also at this time that he earned his nickname, though not for his themed entertainment services. In 1867, Cody took a contract as a buffalo hunter, to provide workers on the Kansas Pacific Railroad with meat, and he stayed on this job for eighteen months. The epithet "Buffalo Bill," given to him by the railroad workers, was meant to be derisive – they grew tired of pound after pound of bison meat for their meals – but Cody took it as a badge of honor. The name was cemented when he supposedly defeated another semi-legendary plainsman,

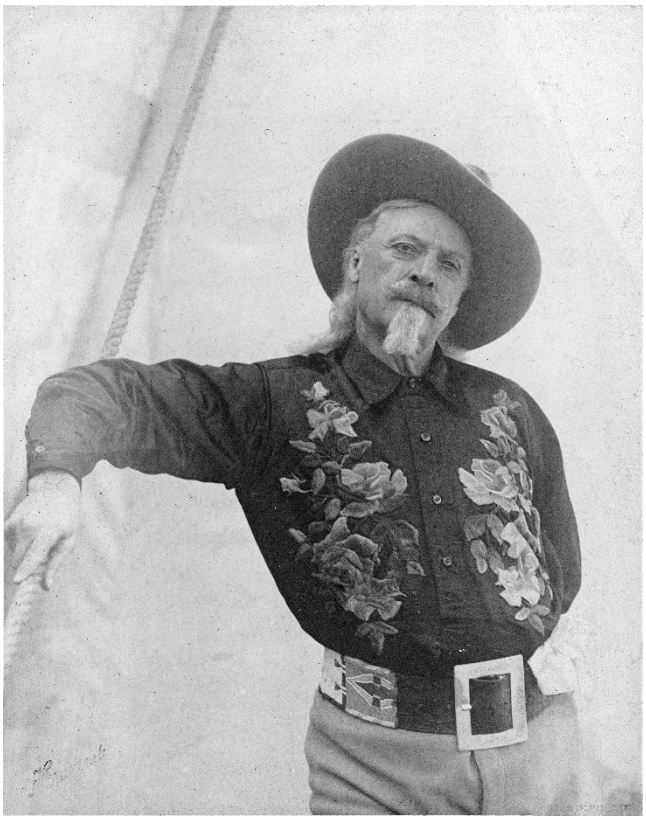


Photo of William F. Cody, circa 1907. Image courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West.

[3] Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and The Wild West Show* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 140.

William “Medicine Bill” Comstock, in a hunting contest. There had been many people called “Buffalo Bill” on the Western frontier throughout the nineteenth century, but by the 1870s, Cody was *the* “Buffalo Bill.”

Contests, colorful nicknames, and other forms of spectacle were a normal, even essential, part of life in the American West. Indeed, part of the reason that Cody ended up in show business is that there was an inherent theatricality to life as a frontiersman, and such lives were for good reason the subject of dime novels, melodramas, and other popular entertainments. And even before becoming a theatrical professional, Cody played his part well, patterning his appearance and performance style after famous lawman and gunslinger James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok.[4] Hickok and Cody first met in 1858 on the plains of “Bleeding Kansas,” when Hickok was a twenty-two-year-old Jayhawker and Cody a twelve-year-old scout, and they maintained a lifelong friendship and working relationship. Their relationship was so close, in fact, and Cody appropriated adventures from Hickok’s life so heavily, that to this day they are often confused for one another by those uninitiated in the complexities of disentangling frontier tall tales. What is clear is that Cody “looked upon Hickok as a hero, a replacement for the father and the older brother he had lost.”[5] By the time he was an adult, Cody had fully transformed himself into a version of Hickok. Like Hickok, Cody was tall of build and sharp of features, and he grew flowing locks down to his shoulders. Cody also adopted Hickok’s costume, a fringed buckskin suit which accentuated his slender frame. Cody further added to the look a pointed goatee and a wide-brimmed hat worn high and back on his head, framing his face. Indeed, his appearance as a scout on the plains was just as flamboyant as it would later be as a celebrity in the arena, and he

[4] “Long Biography,” William F. Cody Archive: Documenting the life and times of Buffalo Bill, https://codyarchive.org/life/wfc.bio.00002.html.
[5] Warren, *Buffalo Bill’s America*, 60–62.

looked not unlike the dashing horsemen of early modern Europe. In a 1911 article in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, General Nelson A. Miles remembered his colleague Cody as "a prince" among scouts and a "handsome" man that was reminiscent of "the cavaliers of old."[6]

The importance of theatricality to the point of deception in Gilded Age American life cannot be overemphasized. Buffalo Bill was not all that different from his contemporary P.T. Barnum, particularly in terms of knowing how to generate and maintain publicity. Barnum, that most marvelous master of humbug, famously blurred the line between reality and fiction and encouraged his audience to determine which was which – and if they could be separated at all. He trusted in the reasoning skills of his audience. Buffalo Bill also made efforts to respect the intelligence of the public and to encourage them to consider the nature of fact versus fiction, and to determine where the "real" Buffalo Bill began and ended. Although he strove for realism in his performances (or at least told the audience this was his goal), he also understood that it was good business to engage with those who would call him out as more of a showman than a frontiersman. "Rather than quash these disputes," biographer Louis S. Warren writes, "the savvy performer often encouraged them as a means to keep the attention of his audience."[7] And also like Barnum, Cody knew the power of presenting himself and his adventures as the genuine article through narrative – both men sold copies of their autobiographies, embellished and at times even fabricated, at performances.

By the 1870s, Buffalo Bill's "frontier theatrics," as Warren has deemed his early adventures, had grabbed the attention of numerous authors and dramatists in the East, who began to write dime novels and stage plays based on his exploits. In 1869, at Fort McPherson in Nebraska, Cody met Eastern journalist and story writer Ned Buntline, who was actually looking

[6] Nelson A. Miles, "Rounding up the Redmen," *Cosmopolitan*, November 1911.
[7] Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America*, xii.

to interview and write about "Wild Bill" Hickok. But Buntline was so taken with Buffalo Bill that within a few months he had published the first chapter in the first serialized story about Cody, titled *Buffalo Bill, the King of the Border Men*. Cody began to take more interest in this legendary version of himself, and after attending a Buffalo Bill play in New York City in February 1872, he decided to take to the stage to play himself. Finding success immediately, Cody then formed his own theatrical troupe with fellow frontiersman John Burwell "Texas Jack" Omohundro, and for a short time, his idol and mentor "Wild Bill" Hickok. The "Buffalo Bill Combination," as it was called, put on spectacular stage performances that were part of a larger contemporary trend of "border dramas," involving semi-historical plotlines, heavy gunplay, and often live animals. The Combination was relatively popular (and profitable) and Buffalo Bill spent the next ten years acting in the fall and winter seasons, and returning to the plains to scout and guide in the summer months.

Cody's stage career was essentially a decade-long dress rehearsal for the exhibition he would become known for – the Wild West show. Realizing that the scope of his show had grown too large for the stage, on July 4, 1882 Cody organized an outdoor event at North Platte, Nebraska called the "Old Glory Blowout," which included riding, roping, racing, mock buffalo hunting, and more. The success of the Old Glory Blowout led to the development of a touring outfit, created in May 1883 when Cody teamed up with yet another popular plainsman, dentist-turned-sharpshooter William Frank "Doc" Carver. Carver, who had taken up life and work in Nebraska as Cody had, was known as "Doc" due to his first career in dentistry in North Platte. He was also commonly known as the "Evil Spirit of the Plains," an epithet he claimed was given to him by Brulé Sioux chief Spotted Tail for having killed a sacred white buffalo and silver bull

elk.[8] Carver had for a few years been operating a successful sharpshooting exhibition, touring both the United States and Europe, including performances for European royalty. He especially expanded his fame by offering numerous challenges to outshoot any opponent, including a series of contest exhibitions against world champion trap shooter "Captain" Adam Bogardus. Together, Cody, Carver and a third partner, press agent "Arizona" John Burke, pooled their resources both financial and theatrical to put on an outdoor extravaganza they called "The Wild West, Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition," which toured for a few months to great acclaim.

But despite the success, managing the exhibition quickly became impossible, for Cody and Carver had always had a combative relationship, which only grew worse when they became business partners. The "Evil Spirit" was well-known for his bad temper and jealousy of rival marksmen, especially the shooter who was getting top billing in the program – his longtime rival "Captain" Bogardus. Before long, these relationships and rivalries became too difficult to maintain, and so the show fell apart, the assets divided between the partners literally by flipping a coin. Despite the ignominious end to the enterprise, it was a relief, for Cody was, at least for now, "exorcized of the Evil Spirit,"[9] as Wild West scholar L. G. Moses so eloquently put it. Carver and Cody's contentious connection was not the only issue, for the exhibition had also been quite disorganized and mismanaged. Cody, who was primarily in charge of personnel, had great difficulty maintaining order among both the men and animals, in part due to his lack of experience in managing an enterprise of this magnitude. This led to a number of mishaps, including a stampede which saw the mayor and town council of North Platte, Nebraska nearly thrown from a stagecoach. "The show lacked adequate management," Wild West historian and

[8] Raymond W. Thorp, *"Wild West" Doc Carver: Spirit Gun of the West* (London: W. Foulsham and Co., 1957), 49–51.
[9] L. G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 23.

biographer Don Russell argues, "and needed discipline, to which neither Cody nor Carver contributed much."[10]

Understanding that he needed a disciplined partner experienced in theatrical management, late in 1883 Cody signed a contract with fellow actor and manager Nathan "Nate" Salsbury to create Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Although the gulf between them in personality was wide, they had some experiences in common. Salsbury, like Cody, was a man who had a difficult childhood, then spent his youth working and fighting before becoming a professional entertainer. Born in 1846 in Freeport, Illinois and orphaned at a young age, Salsbury ran away from his abusive stepfather's farm and joined the Union army. (In this way, Salsbury's story also mirrors that of James Bailey, an orphan who fled an abusive sister before joining the circus.) Also like Cody, Salsbury had spent the 1870s in the entertainment business, first as a performer and playwright, and then as a manager of an acting troupe, called "Salsbury's Troubadours," which was successful for more than a decade. Unlike Cody, however, Salsbury had a long history of desiring to work in the field of entertainment, writing as a teenager in 1860 that after having run away from his stepfather, he wished to join the circus.[11] His dream was deferred when he instead joined the Union army, but even then only partially so – he began his military career as a drummer boy, engaging in another brand of frontier theatrics. But he did eventually become a soldier proper, fighting in a number of battles with the 89th and 59th Illinois Infantry Regiments, and arguably this experience provided him with the discipline required to manage theatrical enterprises.

[10] Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 292–99.
[11] "Collection: Nathan Salsbury Papers | Archives at Yale," n.d., https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/resources/1432.

Historian Roger Hall, who in 1993 edited an edition of Salsbury's previously unpublished memoirs, argued that "Salsbury provided [Buffalo Bill's Wild West] with order, thorough management, and theatrical know-how."[12] In fact, if it had been up to him, Salsbury would have been in total control of the Wild West, the idea for which he claimed in his memoirs to have come up with by himself while touring with the Troubadours in Australia.[13] Salsbury's idea, involving putting together troops of horsemen from different cultures, means that he may in fact have been the originator of the "Congress of the Rough Riders of the World" concept that would be introduced to Buffalo Bill's Wild West a decade later. Either way, Nathan Salsbury was clearly the kind of man who wanted to be in charge. Don Russell argues that Salsbury, who was not particularly fond of Cody as a person, "had wanted Buffalo Bill as a figurehead… but Cody insisted on a share in management, particularly in personnel."[14] (This mirrors the activities of Barnum, as when his business partners believed they were investing in Barnum's name rather than his direct oversight.) In their original business contract, Cody was given broad creative control and specifically oversaw the cowboys and Indians, and Salsbury had control over the business management and logistics. But it is important to note that Salsbury had fairly significant creative control as well, especially in marketing to families and in determining the order of the acts in order to balance out the program.[15]

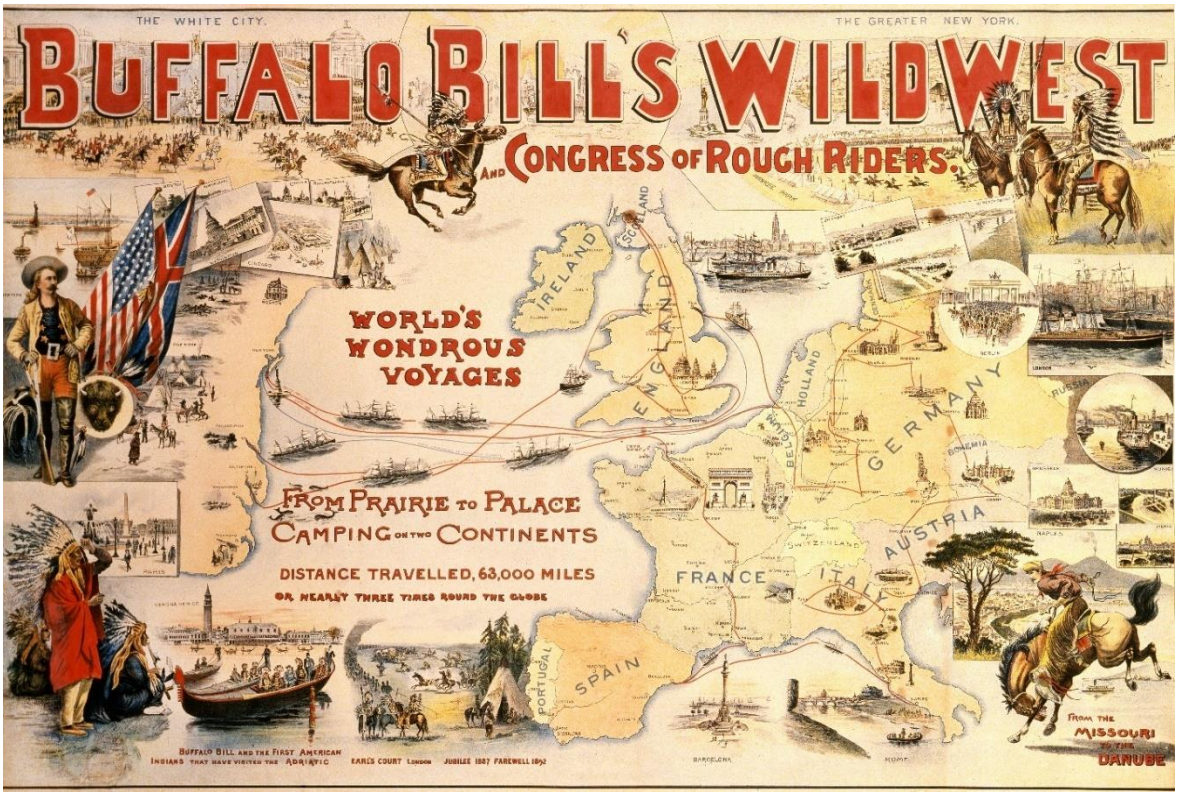
The partnership of Cody and Salsbury brought the show great success, despite a rocky start. In his memoir *The Wild West in England,* Cody says that when they took the show to New Orleans in the summer of 1884, it was "dumped into the Mississippi" when the steamboat

[12] Roger Hall, ed., "'Reminiscences' by Nate Salsbury," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 10, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1306199772/.
[13] Hall, 44.
[14] Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*, 301.
[15] Hall, "'Reminiscences' by Nate Salsbury," 10.

crashed, and they lost all of the show's equipment, materiel, and animals save for the horses, Deadwood stagecoach, and the bandwagon. But, thanks to Salsbury's stalwart management, they regrouped in just a week's time. The show enjoyed success from there on, and in 1887, Cody and Salsbury were able to gather a company of two hundred people – including Native Americans from at least five different tribes, "none of whom had ever been off their reservations prior to joining [Buffalo Bill's Wild West]" – to undertake a tour of Europe.[16] This was a longtime dream of Cody's and the first time a major American outdoor exhibition had ever done so. In order to fulfill this dream, however, it would require the labor of more than the two hundred performers and menagerie of animals he had gathered.

After arriving in London and making a few greetings, Cody and a few others "made a casual visit to the grounds, where the preparations for the stabling, the arena and the grand stand, with busy hundreds of workmen hastening their completions by night by the aid of *lucigen* [*sic*] lights and bon-fires, presented an animated scene, and a display of energy rarely witnessed in connection with an amusement enterprise."[17] (Cody had apparently never seen a proper circus, although this was to change sooner rather than later!) These hundreds of workingmen were kept busy indeed, constructing an arena, grandstand, stables, and even a real hill and forest for the Indian village. Cody noted that his visit slowed the work, and he was anxious for them to finish. "The interest evinced by the British workmen in my presence detracting somewhat from their attention to business, caused us to retire after a brief inspection."[18]

[16] William F. Cody, *The Wild West in England*, 1888, 702, https://codyarchive.org/texts/wfc.bks00011.html.
[17] Cody, 709–10.
[18] Cody, 710.



Poster for Buffalo Bill's Wild West, "World's Wondrous Voyages," 1894. Over the course of more than three decades, Buffalo Bill's Wild West entertained millions across the British Isles and the European continent, as well as in the United States. Image courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West.

As for Buffalo Bill's direct employees, like circus workers, they were never actually "off the clock." When not performing in the arena, the cowboys, Mexicans, Indians, and other performers lived on the show grounds in tent villages, and customers were encouraged to visit the encampments before and after the performances to witness and learn about their various lifestyles. Cody remembered that this exhibition of people was well-received in England. "The sight of the Indians, cowboys, American girls, and Mexicans living in their primitive simplicity, was very attractive to them, while the innate English love of horsemanship and feats of skill presaged an appreciative community which I must say from the first to last never disappointed us."[19] When the Royal Family visited the Wild West, they found themselves especially taken by the mixed-race baby of famed scout and interpreter John Nelson and his Sioux wife. When

[19] Cody, 718.

Queen Victoria herself attended a command performance, two Lakota women and their children were hurriedly summoned for her to inspect. Raising a child and maintaining a family is always a form of labor, but when living and working with Buffalo Bill, it became a form of performative labor as well.

Finally, after a year of both critical and financial success in England, the show's return to the United States again required supplemental labor, as Cody, who was not operating an industrial business like many of his counterparts, simply did not employ a large enough workforce to transport the show. But no matter who they worked for, the scene was just as much of a spectacle:

> All the teamsters for miles around had been engaged to carry the outfit of the exhibition and of the exhibitors across the island to Erastina, and the wharf was in consequence a confused commingling of express wagons, butcher carts carpenter's wagons and other kinds of vehicles, with horses attached generally on their haunches, in response to the excited demands of vociferous drivers. If this scene needed any further animation it was provided by the small boys dodging imminent death, and scores of pretty girls in their Sunday best, scurrying away from out the reach of the horses' indiscriminate hoofs.[20]

Interestingly, there are few, if any, instances in which the transportation and installation of an industrial circus is described as such chaos, even when it was sailed across the sea and back. The circus was a well-oiled machine, but the Wild West was wild, perhaps because James Bailey and Buffalo Bill did things very differently.

It may have been better for these workers that they were not actually employees of Buffalo Bill. As a manager of personnel, Cody was known to be strict in his demands, and to treat harshly those who did not meet his high standards. When drafting his memoirs, cowboy and bronco buster Harry Webb remembered the anger of Cody when he and his companions were performing poorly during rehearsals for the 1910 season. Twelve of the show's most difficult

[20] Cody, 765.

bucking broncos were brought out so that the riders could get accustomed to them. Webb mounted first and was just as soon thrown off the horse, a notorious, angry beast called "Blue Dog" that had killed someone the previous year. Buffalo Bill immediately rode out and berated Webb for his unsatisfactory performance, especially his short reaction time. Shortly thereafter, Webb's friend George "Gaspipe" Mullison mounted a bronco called "Dynamite," an animal not much less dangerous than "Blue Dog." Mullison appeared to have control at first, but was eventually thrown as well. To make matters worse, he landed in a spectators' box where four women were watching. Cody demanded from Mullison an "alibi" for such an unseemly end to his rehearsal. "No alibi a-tall, Colonel," Mullison panted. "That son of a bitch just tossed me so damn high the bluebirds coulda built a nest in my ass before I come down."[21]

Despite his tendency towards harsh words, Webb found Cody to be an ultimately sympathetic character due to his perception that Cody labored under great stresses, including his long-strained relationship with his wife, his devastating financial losses from investing in a failed gold mine, and the constant minor lawsuits that were a standard part of operating an outdoor entertainment business.[22] On the other hand, Webb also noted that the exhibition's performers and laborers worked under what he considered unreasonable and unfair constraints. He and his fellow cowboys found that Wild West contracts, like those of the major circuses, were not especially favorable to the employees, and that they conversely had major protections for the company and its management. Webb, Mullison, and others that joined that year at first felt great apprehension about signing with Buffalo Bill due to the strict contractual obligations:

> We couldn't find a single clause among the dozen that protected the "Party of the second part, etc." We could be fired and a "holdback" of five dollars a week withheld for the slightest interaction. Drinking, swearing, ogling girls, failure to ride, or refusing to ride

[21] Harry E. Webb, "Buffalo Bill, Saint or Devil?" (1982), 5–7, William F. Cody Collection, McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, MS006, Folder MS6.02.28, Item MS6.2144.
[22] Webb, 11.

> any horse assigned to us, along with oodles of other "Whereas's" had those contracts looking more like a Death Warrant than a contract! Get killed and the expense was on the corpse as the show was not liable for injuries.[23]

And yet, despite the seemingly unacceptable restrictions, the performers ultimately signed with the show because they felt the labor conditions were still preferable to cowboying, arguing that "frost-bitten noses and feet and fighting cattle in blizzards and belly deep snow talked loud on the side of Buffalo Bill. And sixty a month sure as hell beat forty!"[24]

Contracts on Buffalo Bill's Wild West, like most labor contracts of the time, were never exactly favorable to the laborers, but by the time Webb and Mullison had joined the show in 1910, they had become much stricter. This was in no small part because they had been for years written with the involvement of none other than James Anthony Bailey and Joseph Terry McCaddon. Although Cody was an incomparable performer and creative director, and a passable employee manager, a good businessman he was not, which led him to partner with the famed circus empresario. In 1894, despite a decade of entertaining millions to critical acclaim, Cody and the Wild West were in financial peril. The 1893 season, which played adjacent to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and saw the introduction of the "Congress of Rough Riders of the World," had been the most profitable to date, attended by over three million people. Despite this, the show was badly hemorrhaging cash. This was largely due to the exorbitant costs of preparing and opening the new season at Ambrose Park in New York, which revenue did not cover due to much lower attendance than had been anticipated. To make matters worse, Cody's longtime business partner Nate Salsbury had fallen seriously ill after being thrown from a horse, leaving him out of the picture in terms of both management and finances. And so yet again, Cody found himself in need of a partnership with a more disciplined businessman.

[23] Webb, 3.
[24] Webb, 3.

In Gilded Age show business, there was no more disciplined and hard-working manager than James Bailey. And so late in 1894, Cody and the absent Salsbury sold Bailey a one-third share in their show, and they made what one archivist of related materials rightfully called a "unique contractual arrangement." "Cody would supply everything pertaining to the performance (performers' salaries, livestock and props, lighting equipment, advertising material, programs and tickets, feed and groceries) and Bailey would furnish the cars, baggage stock and wagons, tents, seats, the cost of the show lots, licenses, and railroad transportation. Both parties would split the proceeds and concession profit."[25] But despite this relatively even share of the costs, materiel, and profits, Bailey's share of the managerial duties was exponentially greater – presumably because he wanted it this way. Over the course of their partnership, Bailey made a number of significant alterations and additions to the Wild West in order to bring it more in line with its cousin, the industrial railroad circus. Bailey's goal was to remake the show in an image he recognized, both intensifying the aesthetic and increasing the profit margins. He brought in more advertising revenue by selling slots in the programs, added additional entertainments and sideshows, increased the number of vendors, and created an overall more circus-like atmosphere.[26]

But the most significant and most immediate of all changes he implemented was the complete overhaul of the touring schedule. From the beginning, Buffalo Bill's Wild West had been designed to be more or less stationary compared to other outdoor entertainments. It did tour, but usually the exhibition would be set up in an arena, ballpark, or other permanent building

[25] Milissa Burkart, "Two Bills but Only One Wild West: The Joseph T. McCaddon Collection of William Frederick 'Buffalo Bill' Cody and Gordon William 'Pawnee Bill' Lillie Papers," *From McFarlin Tower* (blog), December 14, 2015, http://orgs.utulsa.edu/spcol/?p=3821.
[26] Liz Bowers, "This Is Not a Circus!: James A. Bailey Redefines Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show - Buffalo Bill Center of the West," March 27, 2019, https://centerofthewest.org/2019/03/27/james-a-bailey-and-buffalo-bill/.

and be presented for long stands, often weeks or months at a time. Under Bailey's management, the show would now travel on the rails and be presented under canvas, and it would move daily or nearly daily, as the circus always had. This new arrangement would cause Cody challenges for many years to come, and the new statistics were staggering indeed. Don Russell calculated that "Bailey provided railway cars and equipment to send the show to 131 stands in 190 days in 1895 over a route of 9,000 miles. This required fifty-two railway cars, ten more than Barnum and Bailey used, and fourteen more than transported Ringling Brothers." The following year, the show traveled 10,000 miles to 132 stops.[27] And this was just the beginning of what would turn out to be a long association.

A partnership between Cody and Bailey might seem logical at first, as the circus and the Wild West might seem quite similar. However, the two businesses had been understood differently prior to this merger. Cody had long insisted that the Wild West was not a circus, and famously refused to use the word "show" in describing it. He and his business partners went to great lengths to promote their enterprise as something new and entirely different from circuses. A poster advertising the original incarnation of the show with "Doc" Carver proudly proclaimed "No Tinsel, No Gilding, No Humbug! No Side Show or Freaks."[28] Of course, to say there was "no humbug" was itself a humbug, the degree of which the audience debated, but it is true that the Wild West was something quite different from the traditional circus in many ways. In the program for the 1902 season, Cody and Salsbury described the show thusly:

> It is not "a circus" in any sense of the word. It differs from everything commonly known as a "show". Its tents are different. Its programme is different. Its people are different. Its plan and scope is different. Its very announcements are different, and the whole ensemble is totally dissimilar from anything the ingenuity of man has heretofore conceived or devised. It is the one only, the solitary, exception in the great sea of amusement that relies

[27] Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*, 379.
[28] Moses, *Images of American Indians*, 1.

> on its originality, realism and worth for its power to please. It is in fact and feature a grand example of genuine merit, and therein lies its lusty, virile strength.[29]

The way he saw it, Cody was striving to be a sort of documentarian, preserving in his own way a version of frontier life that some, like historian Frederick Jackson Turner and photojournalist Edward S. Curtis, believed was soon to be disappeared forever. "There is but little of the old-time circus glamor surrounding Colonel Cody's show," a reporter for the Omaha *World Herald* remarked in 1899, a few years into Cody's partnership with Bailey. "It is distinctly original, such as man never essayed before, and which man cannot possibly consummate again for lack of material."[30] This statement was partially referring to the cowboying and sharpshooting of the white frontiersmen like Buffalo Bill, but even more so to the cultural practices of the Plains Indian entertainers who performed in the exhibition and displayed their model village, and whom some believed would eventually become extinct along with most or all Native Americans.

Historians and the public have often criticized Wild West shows and their proprietors for the stereotypical images of Plains Indians that the exhibitions created and spread, but the reality is far more complex. It is true that popular entertainments contributed to the bastardization of Native American cultural practices, but it is important to note that "Show Indians," as they were called, were aware of this, and had at least some agency within the conditions under which they labored. Historian L.G. Moses argues that Native Americans were able to use their employment in Wild West shows to recreate and preserve parts of their cultural heritage that would otherwise have been erased by white reformers who desperately wanted Indians to assimilate to a traditional yeoman farmer lifestyle, rather than adapt their own ways of life:

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[29] William F. Cody and Nathan Salsbury, *The Rough Rider Annual* (Courier Co., 1902), 2, https://codyarchive.org/memorabilia/wfc.mem00274.html.
[30] "Buffalo Bill's Show Draws Best Attendance Ever Attracted to a Performance in Omaha," William F. Cody Archive: Documenting the life and times of Buffalo Bill, September 19, 1899, https://codyarchive.org/texts/wfc.nsp04727.html.

> Indians who performed in Wild West shows... had known life before the reservation experience profoundly altered their cultures. They were members of a transitional generation, one that encountered for the first time the full weight of comprehensive government programs to eradicate native life. That they re-created portions of that life for public consumption caused great distress among Indian Bureau personnel and members of the protectionist associations.[31]

"Show Indians" actively defied the Bureau of Indian Affairs and larger reformist instincts by engaging in both cultural practices such as the grass dance and in recreations of violent historical events.

In more practical terms, working on the Wild West was a way to earn money – far more than they were able to earn living on the reservation. The Department of the Interior, which realized it could not stop this practice entirely, worked hard to find ways to accuse Buffalo Bill, Nate Salsbury, and others of exploiting and mistreating the Native Americans placed in their charge. More often than not, they were completely thwarted by the Native Americans themselves. In an 1889 meeting with acting Indian Bureau commissioner Robert V. Belt, Chief Rocky Bear of the Oglala Sioux laid out in no uncertain terms that he and his fellow Native American performers were perfectly happy being employed with Buffalo Bill's Wild West. He testified to Belt that they had never been mistreated, and that it was a practical employment. "If [the show] did not suit me, I would not remain any longer," Rocky Bear said. "If the great father wants me to stop, I would do it. That is the way I get money. If a man goes to work in some other place and goes back with money, he has some for his children." Rocky Bear, who had been touring with the Wild West for several years at that point, had always been able to send money home when he wanted to, and on the day of that meeting, his pockets were filled with three hundred dollars' worth of gold coins.[32]

[31] Moses, *Images of American Indians*, 8.
[32] Moses, 101.

For his own part, Cody also believed what he was doing was noble, especially in comparison with those who would prefer to obliterate Native American culture through whatever means necessary. Decades spent on the frontier with Native Americans – either fighting them for the Army or working with them as a scout – led to him developing a respect for them, and that respect was more or less mutual. The Lakota Sioux, the people with whom he worked the longest and the closest, even gave him a playful nickname, "Pahinhonska," meaning "long hair," which was later shortened to "Pahaska."[33] Cody had a distaste for federal Indian polices and agents, whom he rightly saw as less than knowledgeable about Native American cultures and less than honest in their dealings. In a newspaper interview in 1879, during his days jumping between the plains and the stage, Cody famously summed up his opinions on Indian affairs with the sentence: "Every Indian outbreak that I have ever known has resulted from broken promises and broken treaties by the Government."[34] According to Moses, a few years later, as an employer and manager of Native Americans, Cody "insisted that Indians he employed were to be admired and understood" and "saw the employment of Indians in the shows as a method to ease the transition of a proud and capable people to the cultural demands of the majority."[35]

As for James A. Bailey, he does not seem to have ever been particularly concerned with such cultural and political nuances. He was concerned only with putting on the greatest and most profitable spectacle possible. Bailey and Buffalo Bill did have some similarities as managers, it is true. Both were seen as incredibly hard workers, and as demanding yet accessible bosses. However, they were also quite different in their philosophies of show business. Bailey was a man

[33] Joanita Monteith, "Pahaska Tepee: 'The Gem of the Rockies,'" *Points West Online* (blog), April 3, 2016, https://centerofthewest.org/2016/04/03/points-west-online-pahaska-tepee/.
[34] "Buffalo Bill's Views | The Celebrated Indian Fighter on the Indian Problem," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 28, 1879, https://codyarchive.org/texts/wfc.nsp00271.html.
[35] Moses, *Images of American Indians*, 8.

concerned with logistics and profits above all else. This characteristic of Bailey's was most famously described in a memoir by circus veteran Charles Griffin: "When Bailey picked up a newspaper he did not first turn to the baseball score, nor did he stop to read the news of the day until he had first scanned the market reports and ascertained the price of cattle, hogs, flour, potatoes, cotton, tobacco, butter, eggs, etc. That told him more than the most thrilling headline — that was his barometer to business conditions."[36] In short, Bailey was a manager first and a showman second. The opposite was true of Buffalo Bill, who saw himself as an entertainer, and to some degree an educator, above all else. Of course, money did still matter to him, and he chased profits through many business ventures, especially the founding and development of the town of Cody, Wyoming. But when it came to the Wild West, his first goal was always to put on the most entertaining and spectacular show, whatever the cost, business details be damned.

Creative and logistical differences between the railroad circus and the Wild West aside, the first years of Bailey's tenure of managing Buffalo Bill's Wild West seems to have gone smoothly, all things considered. In 1911, press agent and sportswriter Frank Winch recalled in a biographical work that, for the first five years of the Bailey-Cody partnership, the exhibition "continued with undiminished éclat throughout the length and breadth of the land, the Dominion of Canada, and as far West as San Francisco, *even including many prosperous cities younger than itself*, now ornamenting the redeemed wilderness, and transforming the dark and bloody region of its birth."[37] Cody meant primarily to document the West as he saw it, but it is clear he

[36] Charles Eldridge Griffin, *Four Years in Europe with Buffalo Bill* (Albia, Iowa: Stage Publishing Co., 1908), 15–16, https://codyarchive.org/texts/wfc.bks00009.html.
[37] Frank Winch, "Thrilling Lives of Buffalo Bill, Col. Wm. F. Cody, Last of the Great Scouts and Pawnee Bill, Major Gordon W. Lillie (Pawnee Bill), White Chief of the Pawnees," William F. Cody Archive: Documenting the life and times of Buffalo Bill, 1911, https://codyarchive.org/texts/wfc.bks00013.html. Emphasis in original.

was just as instrumental in transforming it into something new. All the while, his own show was also being transformed into something new.

The success of those early years of collaboration between Bailey and Cody was brought to a screeching halt in 1903, for then came the "Great Circus War," in which no major show was spared from combat. Due to Bailey's poor decision making, perhaps exacerbated by poor mental health and exhaustion from the European tour, the 1903 season of Barnum & Bailey was undoubtedly the worst it had experienced up to that point, at least from a logistical and managerial perspective. And on top of that, he had two other shows to manage, Forepaugh-Sells and Buffalo Bill. In order to maintain a presence in Europe and to simultaneously reduce the amount of competition in the United States and Canada, Bailey sent the Wild West on another European tour while he returned his primary show to the United States. "This [also] had the practical aspect of permitting an exchange of transportation and other equipment," Don Russell notes.[38] But the practicality of this decision began and ended there, at least on Bailey's end of things. Although Bailey had for years had agents in foreign countries to procure more attractions, by overseeing massive productions on both sides of the Atlantic simultaneously, he stretched his network of managers impossibly thin. Without men experienced in keeping the roustabouts in line – either by the carrot or the stick – things began to fall apart. As discussed in Chapter 3, in order to handle the strikes and walkouts by large groups of canvasmen on the main show, as well as the numerous other problems the show was facing that season, Bailey was forced to move his two most valued lieutenants from Buffalo Bill's Wild West in Europe back to Barnum & Bailey in the United States. Charles McLean and George O. Starr, both at this time boss canvasmen, were certainly Bailey's best hope for putting things right. Both were seasoned circus veterans by

[38] Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*, 439.

1903, and they presumably had good rapport with most roustabouts, regardless of how long they had been with the show.

We have relatively little information on Charles McLean, affectionately known as "Pop" in his later years. He had begun working in show business at least as early as 1873, and likely earlier, for at that time he was "Master of Pavilions" for P.T. Barnum's "Great Traveling Exposition and World's Fair."[39] By 1882, he had moved over to the position of boss canvasman (sometimes called "Master" and sometimes "Superintendent") for Barnum, and it was this position he most often was in through the rest of his career.[40] McLean even already had experience with Wild West shows before joining Buffalo Bill, as he worked on Pawnee Bill's "Historical Wild West and Mexican Hippodrome" in 1893.[41] Apparently the events of the "Great Circus War" did not sour him on the job too much, for he continued to work for Barnum & Bailey through at least 1906.[42] And he continued working with both Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill as well. The final record of his work is in 1911, when he was helping manage the front of house on Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Great Far East.[43]

As for Dr. George O. Starr, on whom we have significantly more biographical information, he too was well established by the time of the "Great Circus War," in particular having years of experience managing the transatlantic aspects of the show. Starr was born in 1849 in Bethel, Connecticut, and came from "an eminent professional family" of New York dentists and first became a professional physician trained in dentistry and pharmacy before

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[39] Richard A. Arnold, *Statistics of P.T. Barnum's Great Traveling Exposition and World's Fair for the Season of 1873* (Philadelphia: W. Mann, Printer, 1873), 17.
[40] Alvaro Betancourt Stewart, *My Diary or Route Book of P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth and the Great London Circus for the Season of 1882* (Providence, Rhode Island: A. B. Stewart, 1882), 3.
[41] Captain A. G. Shaw, *Pawnee Bill's Historical Wild West and Mexican Hippodrome Official Route Book Season of 1893*, 1893, 10.
[42] Charles Andress, *The Barnum and Bailey Annual Route Book and Illustrated Tours 1906* (Charles Andress, 1906), 16.
[43] "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Pawnee Bill's Far East Season 1910-1911," 1911.

eventually joining show business.[44] In the 1870s, he became interested in working in show business after a series of visits to Barnum's Museum, and began to involve himself in both indoor and outdoor entertainment enterprises in Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Brooklyn. In 1879, he joined P.T. Barnum's organization as a press agent, while also remaining engaged in managing theaters and an opera company. Within a few years, he had dedicated himself solely to the circus, and in 1887 became Barnum's foreign agent in charge of procuring acts and animals from Europe, India, and Africa.[45] Barnum & Bailey's foreign connections flourished under Starr's management. In 1890, Barnum, Bailey, and third partner James Cooper purchased the Adam Forepaugh circus from the estate of Adam "Addie" Forepaugh Jr., making Starr the foreign representative of that show as well. By 1895, Starr had established the circus's foreign offices in London, Paris, Hamburg, Berlin, and Cairo.[46] Because of these experiences, Dr. Starr was well positioned for what was perhaps his greatest achievement, designing and executing the Barnum & Bailey grand tour of Europe, for which he deserves even greater credit than Bailey himself.

In 1906, following the death of James Bailey at age fifty-nine from erysipelas, a bacterial infection of the skin, Starr became the chairman and managing director of Barnum & Bailey. In an interview with *New York Times* reporter Steven Chalmers, Starr called upon his medical background to compare the infectious nature of the circus's atmosphere and way of life to a true "microbe," a "bacillus," which he had discovered and studied. Starr, like Barnum, with whom he shared a birthplace, was also prone to practical jokes and "Yankee cuteness." He told Mr. Chalmers that in order to truly understand the "circus microbe," he would have to travel with

[44] "Dr. Frederick James Starr," *Items of Interest: A Monthly Magazine of Dental Art, Science and Literature*, 1903, 153–55.
[45] Andress, *The Barnum and Bailey Annual Route Book and Illustrated Tours 1906*, 24.
[46] George E. Hardy, *The Barnum and Bailey Official Route Book Season of 1895* (Buffalo: Courier Co., 1895), 20.

them for a day. The only problem was, there was precious little extra space, the staff informed them gravely, and he would have to sleep with the tigers. Only after dinner and retiring to his assigned train car did Chalmers learn that he was rooming with members of the Benevolent Protective Order of Tigers, whom he found far more agreeable than the wild jungle beasts he expected.[47] Thanks to his amiable and creative nature, Starr was well-respected both inside and outside of the world of the circus, and his ability to bridge the gap between management, employees, and the public, was crucial to the success of Barnum & Bailey in its final years.

Ultimately, "Pop" McLean and Dr. Starr were able with some effort to solve the 1903 strikes and mass quitting on Barnum & Bailey, although it ultimately required both raising wages and making the work less Quixotic – both things Bailey himself was loath to do. But this was also a pyrrhic victory, for the workingmen of the show had at that point already gained much ground in their continued efforts toward more control and better conditions. Furthermore, the departure of McLean and Starr for the States and their extended absence left Buffalo Bill without the two most important managers that he desperately needed, because Bailey had so increased the size and magnitude of Cody's show. However, we unfortunately can only speculate as to the degree to which the management of manual labor was an issue on the European tour. One of the few mentions of manual laborers employed directly by the Wild West comes from the memoir of circus illusionist, lecturer, author, and occasional manager Charles Eldridge Griffin, most commonly known as the "Yankee Yogi," who wrote a memoir of the 1903-1906 tour called *Four Years in Europe with Buffalo Bill*. While traveling in France, Griffin remembered, a stock car was derailed due to a misplaced switch. The railroad crew worked for over two hours to replace

[47] Stephen Chalmers, "George O. Starr, Discoverer of the 'Circus Microbe': James A. Bailey's Successor Inoculates a Novice with the Fever of the Chariot and the Cymbals -- Some Snapshot Impressions of Circus Life and a Railroad Caravan," *New York Times*, 1906.

it, to no avail, at which point the circus's razorbacks stepped in and got the job done in fifteen minutes.[48] In the future, resolving problems such as this became much more difficult as the show continued to grow. The inaccessibility of managerial staff to Cody, and their seeming disinterest in his opinions on the best practices for managing the Wild West, was an issue that would plague his business for many years to come.

Between the "Great Circus War," competition with other shows in Europe, a serious outbreak of the infectious disease called glanders amongst the horses, and the illness and death of both Nate Salsbury and James Bailey, the Buffalo Bill's Wild West tour of 1903-1906 was chaotic to say the least. It was in the middle of this chaos – and arguably, because of it – that the Wild West employees initiated their own "jungle" of the Tiger Club, of which Buffalo Bill was made an honorary member. When the Barnum & Bailey European tour ended, Jacob Posey, who had not initially cared to go to Europe at all, chose to stay there to work with Buffalo Bill. Although he never mentions spreading the Tiger Club to the Wild West in his memoir, we can reasonably assume it was Posey who organized their "jungle" of the BPOT. The Wild West Jungle was active, but how active is difficult to say. One of the only references to its activities during this time comes from Charles Griffin, who mentions members visiting the grave of a Barnum & Bailey employee named Henry Clark in Békéscsaba, Hungary, who had been buried there by the Tigers in 1901.[49]

Cody himself apparently quite liked the Tigers, for he became not only an honorary member, but an actively engaged one. Like many prominent men of his time, including some circus men, Cody was quite devoted to fraternalism and secret societies. This fact has been strangely overlooked by biographers; Don Russell does not mention it at all, and even Louis S.

[48] Griffin, *Four Years in Europe with Buffalo Bill*, 62–63.
[49] Griffin, *Four Years in Europe with Buffalo Bill*, 78-79.

Warren, whose work is otherwise exhaustive, only mentions Cody's first initiation into the Platte Valley Lodge in passing. But Masonry was an important part of Cody's life, as he was a full and well-regarded member of the Freemasons, its appendant bodies the Knights Templar and Scottish Rite, and its offshoot the Shriners.[50] He also maintained membership in at least two other prominent social orders, the Elks and the Eagles, and was said to be "always delighted to meet his fraternal brethren."[51] Because of the secrecy of these organizations, we know nothing about his activities in them. Seemingly the only mention of a specific meeting in the primary sources comes from *The Wild West in England*, where Cody describes being a frequent honored guest of the lodge in Manchester, where his "brothers" presented him with a gold watch in 1887.[52] Cody continued to rise through the "degrees" of Masonry throughout his life and was especially active in his later years. When he died in 1917, he was given a full Masonic funeral, which was attended by 15,000 people, perhaps the largest Masonic funeral in United States history.[53]

Cody was a dedicated "brother" not only in Masonry, but with the Tigers as well. A man who truly believed in equality, and in the good that fraternalism could do, he greatly appreciated Jake Posey's leadership of the BPOT. At a ceremony on October 16, 1904 in Glossop, England, Cody and the Tigers presented Posey with an engraved silver serving tray as a gift for his services to the organization. "To Jacob Posey, a man with a heart," it reads, "from his Brother Tigers with Buffalo Bill's Wild West."[54] Posey would remain president of the organization at

[50] "Bro. 'Buffalo Bill' Cody: Freemason & Frontiersman," The Grand Lodge of Ohio, August 13, 2020, https://www.freemason.com/bro-buffalo-bill-cody-freemason-frontiersman/.
[51] William F. Cody, *Scrapbook*, 1914, 41, https://codyarchive.org/memorabilia/wfc.scr00002.html.
[52] Cody, *The Wild West in England*, 760.
[53] Doug Skiba, "The 100th Anniversary of Buffalo Bill Cody's Burial Is June 3, 1917," *Golden History Museum & Park* (blog), June 3, 2017, https://www.goldenhistory.org/remembering-an-epic-event-100-years-later/.
[54] Jacob Posey, *Last of the Forty-Horse Drivers: The Autobiography of Jake Posey* (New York: Vantage Press, 1959), inset images.

least as late as 1906, when, as a written resolution in one of Joseph McCaddon's scrapbooks shows, Posey called a meeting on May 30 to mourn the death of James Bailey.[55]

Whether he wanted to or not, Cody was compelled to continue his partnership with Bailey and then his estate for many years in order to keep the Wild West running. This was in no small part because Cody suffered a series of financial and personal setbacks in 1902 and 1903, including the failure of a gold mining venture in Arizona he had invested in and the death of his longtime business partner Nate Salsbury. But because of this continued association, two major recurring problems took hold in Buffalo Bill's Wild West: a lack of management and a lack of labor. Barnum & Bailey during this period had approximately 1,200 to 1,300 employees at any given time. The Wild West had about half of that most of the time, just 600 to 700. This simply was not enough men, especially to do the work of putting up the canvas and seating, as Cody would complain to Joseph T. McCaddon in 1907. Circuses quite often had to enlist local help for this work or for more menial tasks, and they paid for this supplemental labor in free admission, but Cody often found that even this practice did not help them to get the show set up in a safe and timely manner. Lack of personnel would be bad enough, but Cody found himself just as frustrated over the lack of direct management, an area in which he had always required assistance. Bailey and his most important managers were more often than not in New York, London, or traveling with the Barnum & Bailey show rather than the Wild West, and Bailey's death in 1906 only exacerbated the problem. While touring Europe in 1906, Cody told McCaddon that the managers were making poor routing choices that were badly hurting the business. As the man on the ground, he felt they should be listening to his advice. "Whenever we

[55] Jacob Posey, "Resolution Regarding the Death of James Bailey," May 30, 1906, McCaddon Collection of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, Scrapbook 17, Box 33, Princeton University Library Special Collections, https://findingaids.princeton.edu/catalog/TC040_c01579.

get to a town where we could make some money, we over play the town, and we should not have been in this Hungarian Country, which is solely a farming country in the midst of harvesting. No Show would think of going into North Dakota during harvest."[56]

Things did not improve when the Wild West returned to the United States. During the 1908 tour, McCaddon and the managerial staff suggested that, in order to cut costs, Cody should send his Mexican riders home, as the managers considered the act unnecessary. "Its [*sic*] simply impossible to cut the Mexicans out. You say they will hardly be missed," Cody replied in a letter to McCaddon. "You Gentlemen sitting in New York are in no position to tell exactly what will be missed." But Cody was not done berating McCaddon, with whom he had bad blood for several years at this point. In addition to making poor creative decisions, the managers were not providing enough manual labor to get the show up and down, and they had routed the show so that it was forced to follow the Ringling and Barnum circuses. Cody called them out. "The show was evidently sent out this season to go broke," he complained. "That's the way it looks to all showmen. The way this show was routed to follow either the Ringlings or Barnum Circus the entire season would have killed any show on earth but this one."[57]

McCaddon had begun managing Buffalo Bill's Wild West following Bailey's death in 1906. McCaddon was experienced, having first worked as a manager for the Adam Forepaugh show and then Barnum & Bailey, but he was also not anywhere nearly as skilled a showman as James Bailey had been. In fact, McCaddon had famously failed in launching his own circus in Europe in 1905, simply called McCaddon's International Shows. This circus failed spectacularly, despite his own extensive experience with running a large circus in Europe. Interestingly enough,

[56] William F. Cody to Joseph T. McCaddon, July 6, 1906, Profiles in History, https://profilesinhistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Historical54-FINAL-updated-121412-72dpi1.pdf.
[57] William F. Cody to Joseph T. McCaddon, October 26, 1908, Profiles in History, https://profilesinhistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Historical54-FINAL-updated-121412-72dpi1.pdf.

this failure was in no small part due to the fact that McCaddon's show could not compete with Buffalo Bill's Wild West! McCaddon's International Shows disbanded in Grenoble, France in August 1906, after less than a year in operation, and he fled the country to escape his creditors, leaving his employees stranded. The French government provided the showfolks, many of whom would have been Americans, a small daily allowance until contributions could be raised through private charity for their passage home. In the meantime, McCaddon's wife, who accompanied him on the ill-fated tour, died of heart issues in London, but McCaddon was arrested before he could return home to the United States with her body. At some point during this period, McCaddon had also resigned from his position as a director of the Barnum & Bailey show, and it was either the embarking on this tour or its failure that was the likely cause. The one-two punch of Bailey's death and McCaddon's resignation left George O. Starr as the sole chairman and managing director of the Barnum & Bailey Circus, although McCaddon was still involved with the management of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. The entire situation caused McCaddon to remain in dire legal and financial straits until at least 1911.[58]

By 1907-1908, when things had gotten so bad that Cody was reduced to performing a significant amount of manual labor himself, he was over sixty years old. The touring schedule itself was already grueling, and being made to drive canvas stakes in the summer heat made him quite angry, and reasonably so. If he could not retire, he at least wanted to be rid of his partnership with the Bailey estate, but to break the bond seemed impossible. For one, James Bailey's widow Ruth still owned two thirds of the Wild West – Salsbury's stock had been

[58] "J.T. McCADDON ARRESTED.: American Whose Circus Failed Accused of Fraudulent Bankruptcy," *New York Times*, October 1, 1905, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; "MRS. J. T. McCADDON DEAD.: Wife of the Circus Man a Victim of Heart Trouble in London," *New York Times*, September 20, 1905, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; "BONDING COMPANY LOSES.: Must Pay Express Company $7,592 for Circus Stranded Abroad," *New York Times*, June 17, 1911, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

purchased upon his death. Even worse, there was also an unresolved dispute regarding an additional loan to Cody. When he began to make money again, he borrowed a loan of $12,000 from Bailey, and claimed to have paid it back and sealed the deal with a handshake. Unfortunately, if Cody did pay back the money, he may have been given a receipt – Bailey was not the kind of man who would conclude a business arrangement on a handshake only – but he no longer had it. Without any documentation, the Bailey estate believed Cody must still owe them money, and he was given six months to pay his debts. The frontier hero had come to a point that he needed a hero himself. It was another frontier Bill who came to his rescue.

Gordon William "Pawnee Bill" Lillie was born in 1860 in Bloomington, Illinois, where his father operated a flour mill. Illinois was still very much a Western state during this time, and Lillie developed a love for "frontier theatrics" as a child. His mother read to him from the serialized stories of Ned Buntline, and each fall he and his siblings visited a nearby Indian reservation. When the mill burned down in 1876, the family moved to Wellington, Kansas, where Lillie became more directly acquainted with Native Americans, in particular a Pawnee man named Blue Hawk. Soon thereafter Lillie left home to make a life for himself, and eventually reached Indian Territory, where he reconnected with Blue Hawk and lived among the Pawnee, assisting in hunting and building homes. As the Indian Bureau agents tightened their grasp upon the Pawnee, Lillie would also serve as their interpreter and intermediary. Lillie became famous in the West not only for general frontier exploits, but as an advocate for Indians and their rights. In this way, he became known to many as the "White Chief" of the Pawnee. In 1881, when William F. Cody sent a representative to Indian Territory to acquire Pawnees for his upcoming Wild West exhibition, the Indian Commissioner would only allow them to leave if they were placed in the charge of Pawnee Bill. While developing his cattle ranch and starting a

family, Lillie toured with Buffalo Bill and a smaller show for a few years before launching his own exhibition in 1888. His skill as a manager of Indian labor was a common refrain in press coverage of the show. When Pawnee Bill's Wild West debuted, the Kansas City *News* noted that "very few men had the knack of managing Indians. Pawnee Bill is one of them. He is quiet, and that suits them; he is patient, and that suits them better; he is personally brave, and that suits best of all, as the Indian has a contempt for any emotional weakness. The Pawnees are devoted to him."[59]

Pawnee Bill and Buffalo Bill, circa 1905. Image courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West.

Managing a Wild West exhibition was seen among showmen as a difficult endeavor due to the diversity of its performers, many of whom were believed by white managers to be too uncouth to make good employees of such a large business. Pawnee Bill once asked John Ringling, the *de facto* leader of the Ringling Brothers, why he had never purchased any interest in Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Ringling responded that he wanted no part in managing those types of performers. "Those cowboys, Indians, Mexicans, with all those guns, tomahawks, and war clubs, kept the Bailey end of the show in dread all the time. Wait till you open and are out on the

[59] For further reading on Pawnee Bill, consult Glenn Shirley, *Pawnee Bill: A Biography of Major Gordon W. Lillie*, expanded reprint (Stillwater, Oklahoma: Western Publications, 1993). Quotation from page 119.

road. You'll have trouble. They'll scalp you," Ringling told him. To this, Lillie replied that he was "one of them," identifying with both cowboys and Indians at once.[60] For both Lillie and Cody, spending a life on the frontier and becoming the type of person that some contemporaries referred to as "white Indians" gave them a special insight into managing their shows that men like Bailey and Ringling were simply never able to develop.

Lillie was not just a good personnel manager, but a good businessman as well. His show, which would eventually add international riders and become Pawnee Bill's Wild West and Great Far East, was not remarkably different than Buffalo Bill's. They competed fiercely with each other for many years, and often poached employees from one another. Even the famous "Little Sure Shot" Annie Oakley moved back and forth between them! The biggest difference was that Lillie's operation was financially solvent. In 1898, for example, after ten years of touring and ranching, despite a few mishaps, he owed no money and had $65,000 in cash, plus personal assets.[61] Lillie was in general very good with money, whereas Cody was not, although many of the financial misfortunes that befell Cody were beyond his control. Regardless, Lillie had always carefully avoided having his show become a circus, and steered a wide berth from the large industrial circuses and the corporate backroom deals that defined much of their operations. It was this practice and experience that put Lillie in a position to rescue Cody from the situation with the Bailey estate. In 1908, despite all of their differences, and against the wishes of his wife and business partner May, Lillie decided to merge his show with Cody's. He not only purchased both Ruth Bailey's and Cody's shares, but also paid off Cody's remaining loan balance and negotiated interest on all notes away. Taking it one step further, Lillie gave back to Cody a one-half share of the exhibition's profits, which would rest with Lillie until he could buy back an actual stake in

[60] Shirley, 182.
[61] Shirley, 146.

ownership. After almost fifteen long years, Cody was finally free of the grasp of the Bailey estate, and he had a skilled business partner that he could trust, perhaps more than any that had come before.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Great Far East, colloquially referred to as the "Two Bills Show," opened in 1909 and was a great success, packing houses and bringing in plenty of revenue. The labor troubles and managerial headaches that had plagued Cody and his show faded away, like waking from a long nightmare. Although there is little direct evidence, it is likely, based on what is known about Cody, Lillie, and their lieutenants, that the new organization maintained a good rapport with its employees, and the employees among each other. Sadly, further misfortune was on the horizon for Buffalo Bill from which even Pawnee Bill could not rescue him. During this period, it became clear to both employees and managers alike that they would all need assistance at one point or another. Whether they needed treatment in a hospital or someone to beat back the financiers, members of both classes in the circus knew that something had to be done to provide for them. Employees knew that the company was unlikely to help them in their time of need, and managers knew that they were stronger together than separately. Cody knew this more than most, and so it was he who would soon spearhead the charge to expand the amount and type of assistance available to all showmen.

CHAPTER SIX

LIKE WATCHING A TRAIN WRECK: THE END OF THE CIRCUS'S GOLDEN AGE

It was almost always misfortunes and tragedies that contributed the most to class composition in the circus. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, there were numerous events--from bankruptcies, to war and pestilence, to a horrific train wreck--that helped to further cement a sense of class among showpeople. It was only through banding together, it seemed, that they would be able to find success despite these hardships. This sentiment became common amongst not only the workers, but the managerial class of the circus as well. Eventually, thanks to a stronger sense of shared experiences, along with the rise in unionization associated with the New Deal era, class consciousness would finally be realized among circus workers in the late 1930s, in the form of official unionization of all employees from top to bottom in the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus. Unfortunately, this series of events also ultimately sent the circus industry into a financial and cultural decline from which it never fully recovered. The circus could withstand many challenges from the outside, but given that its internal structure relied on the exploitation of workers who had little recourse, and on keeping a strict class hierarchy intact, the organization of circus employees under one banner brought the big top billowing down.

Just as the processes of class composition were taking place among the lower ranks of circus employees in the early twentieth century, so too was this happening among the owners and managerial staff. Sometime in early February 1913, a large "jackpot" session (an informal gathering of showmen, often on the show lot, to swap stories and commiserate) took place in the Chicago offices of *Billboard* magazine. "From this meeting emanated a desire to organize a club," according to a 1953 retrospective in *Billboard*, "in order to have a place where showmen

could meet *on an equal footing*, where they could be at home, where rancor of opposition could be forgotten, and where they could meet and discuss business."[1] These things could surely have been accomplished through membership in the Tiger Club, but whether or not these men were members is unknown. And perhaps, because of its fraternal nature, meetings of the BPOT were places of brotherhood more than business. What is clear, however, is that just as the employees of Barnum & Bailey had realized fifteen years prior, the eminent showmen were beginning to understand that they had more in common than not, and that by organizing, they could all benefit.

In the early twentieth century, outdoor showmen were far from alone in realizing the power they had to lift each other up and to control the direction of their industry. In his seminal treatise on managerial capitalism, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business*, business historian Alfred D. Chandler argued that the complexities of American business brought on by the Industrial Revolution led to the development of "a new economic function – that of administrative coordination and allocation – and the coming of a new subspecies of economic man – the salaried manager – to carry out this function." Furthermore, Chandler noted that historians had largely ignored "the ascendancy of the manager," arguing that managers had more control over the way businesses operated than did the entrepreneurs or financiers. Managers became a class of their own, with the goal of securing their positions and increasing the profits of their enterprises. Using both defensive methods (limiting competition and securing supplies) and productive methods (adding new units to the business), managers were able to make themselves even more necessary in operating increasingly complex industries. And, as their necessity increased, so too did their power, which decreased the influence of

[1] "SLA Celebrates Anniversary," *Billboard*, June 27, 1953. Emphasis added.

owners, financiers, and the workers themselves over decision making. Managerial staff had become the true titans of industry by 1920.[2]

Although it was a smaller industry by far compared to the railroads, steel, or oil, the circus was certainly no exception to these developments. James Bailey, for all his reputation for micromanaging certain aspects of the business, was also well-known for delegating many decisions to his managers, especially Joseph T. McCaddon. As a whole, the route books for circuses of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, wanting to project their industrial nature, are full of praise for the managers who made the show run like clockwork. Of course, route books were often written by someone with a management role. As circuses grew, they added more rings, sideshows, concessions, and other units, which led to further growth of the managerial staff. Circus owners maintained their influence and power, and financiers in many cases were able to foreclose shows or otherwise force their hands. But with only a handful of notable exceptions prior to the 1930s, decisions made by circus management were not strongly affected by workers or unions. Circus and other outdoor show business managers had only existed as a class for a couple of decades, but in that time, they had become a powerful force.

Following the 1913 meeting at the *Billboard* offices, the showmen moved quickly to act on their rapidly developing desires. On February 19th, a group of approximately forty outdoor showmen met at the Saratoga Hotel in Chicago to discuss forming a social organization for their benefit and betterment.[3] The meeting was chaired by U. J. "Sport" Herrmann, a wealthy Chicago businessman and yachtsman who at various times had interests in billboard advertising, a chain of theaters, radio, and even the Boston Red Sox. Herrmann was also said to have worked on

[2] Alfred D. Chandler Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 1993), 484–98.
[3] "Showmen's League of America - About Us," http://www.showmensleague.org/about-us.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West early in his career, but in what capacity is unknown.[4] The result of this meeting was the foundation of the Showmen's League of America, a social order dedicated to promoting friendship and fellowship among showfolks, and to caring for the needy among them. An elephant with its trunk uplifted was adopted as the League's symbol, a board of governors was formed, and a full slate of officers was elected.[5]

The managerial class of the circus and Wild West were well-represented within this group. Buffalo Bill Cody, circus proprietor and performer Charles Andress, superstar equestrian, ringmaster, and proprietor Rhoda Royal, veteran press agent Louis E. Cooke, manager (and cousin to the Ringlings) Fred Gollmar, and Wild West show proprietor George Arlington were among those elected to the League's first administration.[6] Cody, who had both relied on the help of others and was a charitable man himself, had been elected the organization's first president. Charles Andress, a well-known show owner, illusionist, legal adjuster, and author, was elected vice president. Cody had many reasons to believe such an organization would be beneficial, even necessary. It was, after all, the charity of Pawnee Bill that had extricated him from a terrible financial and managerial situation, although Cody later found himself in hot water yet again. In the summer of 1913, only a few months following the founding of the Showmen's League, Buffalo Bill's Wild West was foreclosed on by unscrupulous business magnate Harry H. Tammen, co-owner of the *Denver Post* and the Sells-Floto Circus. Cody had borrowed a significant amount of cash from Tammen, and his inability to pay his debts when they were called in all at once resulted in the end of Wild West exhibitions for both Cody and Lillie. Lillie

[4] Biographical newspaper clippings uploaded to "U J 'Sport' Herrmann (Unknown-1939) - Find A Grave," https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/198043204/u-j-herrmann.
[5] "Showmen's League of America - About Us."
[6] "SLA Celebrates Anniversary."

retired to his cattle and bison ranch in Oklahoma, but Cody was reduced to performing as a mascot in Tammen's show.[7]

The vice president of the Showman's League was elected due primarily due to his prominence in show business and amiable nature. Charles Andress (1852-1933), known affectionately as "Uncle Charley," was a kindly and respected showman who by this time was retired to his large ranch in Barton County, Kansas. He began his career in show business at age ten performing ventriloquism and playing the fiddle, and by age twenty he had started his own wagon show. Calling it "Andress' Carnival of Novelties," he would later claim to be the first to use the word "carnival" to describe an organized exhibition. During his time as a circus owner-operator, Andress had a vision for grand winter quarters for his shows that he would call "Andressville," but this ultimately never came to pass.[8] In the 1890s, after a series of mishaps and bad business partnerships, he began performing and lecturing in the Ringling Bros. sideshow, and then became their legal adjuster. For reasons unknown, Andress later moved to Barnum & Bailey, but in the worst possible year to do so – 1903. In 1907, Andress retired from the circus, but remained active in the show business community. Andress had also made himself known to a wide variety of showmen as a skilled photographer and circus documentarian, compiling several route books and scrapbooks. As such a beloved figure among showfolks, it is no shock that he was then elected to the vice presidency of the Showmen's League.

The Showmen's League seems not to have been very significant during its early years, perhaps in part due to the existence and popularity of the Benevolent Protective Order of Tigers. Commentary on the organization in trade papers was even less frequent than what could be

[7] "Long Biography," William F. Cody Archive.
[8] Veronica Coons, "Andress Club and Andressville, through the Years," *Out of the Morgue - Great Bend Tribune* (blog), May 29, 2013, https://www.gbtribune.com/news/local-news/news2/out-of-the-morgue-24/.

found on the BPOT, at least prior to the 1920s. According to the fortieth anniversary retrospective in *Billboard*, "during its first few years, the League experienced the normal ups and downs that usually befall any new organization."[9] But contemporary commentary, where it can be found, was not always so rosy. In February 1915, two years into the League's existence, the following remark was buried in a larger section of *Billboard*: "Wonder what will become of the Showmen's League, if it will live or not, what will be done with the money on hand?"[10] The existence of capital on hand raises questions of why the League was struggling. Was said money still not enough to run the organization? Was there not enough enthusiasm, not enough active members? There are no immediately clear answers as to what caused these "ups and downs." Regardless, in 1918 a tragedy struck that would result in the Showmen's League being catapulted to a prominence that would last for decades.

The year 1918 was in general a rough year for the circus, as it was for everyone. The remaining Ringlings were at this point the kings of all circusdom, operating both their original show and Barnum & Bailey, purchased from Bailey's estate after his death in 1906. Despite owning two mammoth shows and having controlling interests in others – or perhaps it was because of this – they still were being forced to tighten their belts. Because so much labor, production, and consumption were being devoted to the Great War, "labor shortages were rampant. Business expenses were rising to unbelievable levels, and certain essential supplies needed for circus operations were simply not available," Ringling biographer Jerry Apps writes.[11] Obtaining new European performers was impossible, making the development of new acts nearly impossible. Circuses had special permission to travel by rail, but they faced serious

[9] "SLA Celebrates Anniversary."
[10] "Billboard Excerpts 1915-1917, 1919."
[11] Apps, *Ringlingville USA*, 198.

congestion and increased logistical difficulties. On top of all this, by the fall, a deadly influenza pandemic had taken hold of much of the world, and gathering in large crowds was either taboo or outright forbidden in most of the United States. In some ways, the playing field was being leveled, but this made competition between shows all the fiercer.

But, despite all of these troubles, a handful of circuses had kept on the road during the war – thirteen railroad shows, according to Apps.[12] One of these circuses was the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, the nation's third-largest show, and yet another mammoth enterprise that had been created through a series of partnerships and mergers. In the summer of 1918, the Hagenbeck-Wallace show was making its way through the Midwest and enjoying moderate success. It was even able to order new seating, canvas, and lighting for the show, and hoped to better meet audience expectations this way. In the wee morning hours of June 22, the show was making a jump to Hammond, Indiana, where it planned to obtain and properly roll the new tent that was being sent from Chicago. Around 4:00 AM, the second of the circus's two trains was briefly sidetracked when it became necessary to address a "hot box," the term for an overheated axle bearing. The Hagenbeck-Wallace show's cars were outdated and built primarily out of wood, and they were lit mostly by kerosene lamps, so fire was a serious risk that had to be addressed quickly. But the train was only partially on the side track, and five of its cars remained on the main track. Meanwhile, an engineer pulling an empty troop carrier fell asleep at the controls after increasing his speed to twenty-five or thirty miles per hour, believing he had a clear track for some time. After missing multiple stop signals and manual warnings from a

[12] Apps, 199.

desperate brakeman, the troop carrier bashed into the caboose and sleeper cars of the Hagenbeck-Wallace train.[13]

The crash was colossal, with multiple phases of destruction as the cars crashed into one another, crushing under the impact. Some of the train's four hundred passengers were thrown free from the wreckage, and others were pinned beneath heavy support beams. The wooden, oil-soaked debris burst into a fiery inferno, and additional explosions came when batteries for the electric lights in one of the sleeper cars caught fire as well.[14] The flames were too hot to allow for a wrecking crane to lift the remains of the train, and the only source of water accessible was shallow marshes. It was thirty minutes before first responders from nearby fire departments arrived on the scene. Those showpeople who were not badly injured did their best to rescue others, although the attempts were often in vain. When the smoke had cleared and rescue operations had concluded, over one hundred people were injured, and eighty-six were dead.[15]

As fate would have it, the Showmen's League, up to that point unremarkable to most in the industry, found itself essential, as it was prepared to provide funeral and burial for the unfortunate souls who had perished in the wreck. Sometime in the latter half of 1917, the League had purchased a section of 750 plots in the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Chicago suburb of Forest Park. Former sideshow manager Lew Nichols had made the proposal in 1916, and was made the first chairman of the Cemetery Committee. Nichols was also the owner of a monument company, and provided benches and posts made for the site at no cost to the League. The site was purchased for $1,500 and named "Showmen's Rest," becoming the first cemetery of its kind in

[13] For further reading on the Hagenbeck-Wallace circus and a detailed account of the train wreck, consult Richard M. Lytle, *The Great Circus Train Wreck of 1918: Tragedy on the Indiana Lakeshore* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2010).
[14] Lytle, 55–56.
[15] Lorraine Boissoneault, "The Hammond Train Wreck of 1918 Killed Scores of Circus Performers," *Smithsonian Magazine*, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/hammond-train-wreck-disaster-1918-killed-dozens-circus-performers-180969428/.

the United States. The first people to be buried there were fifty-six victims of the Great Circus Train Wreck, interred in a mass grave but with individual caskets. Some of those killed were famous performers and their family members, and many more victims were roustabouts, teamsters, and other laborers from the lower rungs of the circus ladder. Just as in life, most of them remain unknown. Even if their real names were known to others, many were burned or mangled beyond recognition. The grave markers are in several instances marked with nicknames like "Baldy," and in other cases, simply "Unknown Male" or "Unknown Female." Today, the Showmen's League holds an annual ceremony on Memorial Day at Showmen's Rest to remember all of those members who have departed, with special attention paid to the victims of the Great Circus Train Wreck of 1918.[16]

For their part, the Ringlings and other shows sent performers, animals, equipment, and supplies to help Hagenbeck-Wallace recover because, as the aphorism goes, "the show must go on." (And, perhaps, their shared experiences and the existence of the Showmen's League had in fact promoted some feelings of brotherhood among them.) Hagenbeck-Wallace ended up missing only two engagements in a single town – Hammond, Indiana – and was able to make its next scheduled stop in Beloit, Wisconsin.[17] But the Ringlings were in fact still not so well off themselves. In the winter of 1918, after experiencing "the hardest [season] since their early wagon show days," John and Charles Ringling (the last two surviving Ringling Brothers) made the difficult decision to merge their two shows temporarily, creating the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows (RBBB).[18] The new "Greatest Show on Earth" debuted at Madison Square Garden on March 29, 1919 to critical acclaim and massive profits, and this new

[16] "Showmen's League of America - Showmen's Rest," http://www.showmensleague.org/showmens-rest.
[17] Ibid.
[18] David C. Weeks, *Ringling: The Florida Years, 1911-1936* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1993), 71–72.

mammoth enterprise may have saved the organization from ruin. Certainly, it allowed the operation to continue expanding – by 1922, the combined show required one hundred railcars to transport.[19] Because it was so profitable, what had been intended to be a temporary way to stave off the worst effects of the war became a permanent change.

This 1923 poster uses the transportation required for the show as a selling point, to demonstrate just how "mammoth," to use a popular adjective in circus advertising, the combined Ringling Bros. and Barnum Bailey show had become. Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

If it hadn't been clear enough before, the Great Circus Train Wreck demonstrated that mutualism had become integral to the survival of the circus as an institution in America. In retrospectives and other secondary literature, the Showmen's League stepping in to provide assistance following that horrific event is always remembered as the event that made the League an indispensable show business organization. Why, then, was the Benevolent Protective Order of

[19] Apps, *Ringlingville USA*, 207–8.

Tigers on its last legs at that time? It had been spoken of for decades as a beloved fraternity, and yet it disappeared seemingly without reason. And, just as the Showmen's League was now doing, the Tiger Club had long provided for the funeral and burial of members who could not do so themselves. At what was likely the society's peak in 1905, the Tigers were said to have numbered over 3,000 members in Barnum & Bailey, Ringling Bros., John Robinson, Forepaugh-Sells, Great Wallace, and at least a few other shows.[20]

Although there is no direct evidence for what ultimately became of the BPOT, there are a number of likely causes. It is possible that the Tigers were still experiencing lingering effects from a schism in the group that occurred in 1910. In a mid-November meeting at the Bridgeport, Connecticut winter quarters of RBBB, the two generations of members of the group came to (metaphorical) blows over internal politics, with the newer membership accusing the older of stuffing the ballot box. It is possible, but not certain, that these factions were created by the combination of the two mammoth shows into RBBB, bringing together "jungles" of the organization that had previously operated separately. Whether it was time or shows that separated them, the older members were supposedly gaining extra votes by allowing members who had failed to pay dues for extended periods to continue casting votes. The meeting was adjourned by half of the membership storming out, carrying the BPOT's records with them. The result was the formation of a group of only sixty-five people, calling itself the "Independent Order of Tigers." They immediately held a meeting, elected officers, and added six new members. This internal struggle had apparently emptied the Tigers' pockets as well, for their treasury had dwindled from $4,000 to less than $200.[21] In March 1911, a legal case was brought against former BPOT treasurer George E. Fischer, who had taken the financial records when he

[20] "Tigers to Meet Here in Annual Convention," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 30, 1905.
[21] "Split in Tigers, Order of Circus Men, Means Suit," *Bridgeport Times and Evening Farmer*, November 30, 1910.

left for the Independent Tigers. In April, the case was decided in favor of the original BPOT, and the Independents were forced to pay the costs of the suit plus $1.[22]

In addition to this break in class composition, itself seemingly caused by the mounting changes to the circus industry, other factors were at play as well. The rise of the Showmen's League surely helped to overshadow the BPOT, which despite being influential among its members never managed to grow very large. The circus industry itself was also shrinking by the 1920s, through both corporate mergers and the loss of shows to bankruptcies. George Conklin, who may once have been the president of the Tiger Club, spoke fondly of the fraternity in his 1921 memoirs, and his language regarding it seems to be in the present tense. Still, the existing evidence suggests the Tigers were already beginning to fade from popularity as early as 1910, though it was still providing funeral and burial for members at least as late as 1915. But, for whatever reasons, by the early 1920s, the Tigers had gone extinct. Their genetic traits, however, continued to heavily influence the evolution of class composition in the circus.

"Roustabouts were so scattered and marginal to the world of organized unionism that they did not participate in institutionalized forms of resistance," Janet Davis argues. "They did not join unions, because their jobs were essentially invisible to the world of organized labor."[23] Although this was true (at least until 1937), the role of roustabouts in other forms of resistance, such as improvised strikes and the BPOT, should not be discounted. And it is also important not to discount the evidence of class composition occurring among other groups of circus employees. As we have seen, some billposters and teamsters actively participated in their respective unions for decades. More than once the billposters made significant, tangible gains for themselves

[22] "Tigers Case Heard," *Bridgeport Times and Evening Farmer*, March 28, 1911; "Old Tigers Win," Bridgeport Times and Evening Farmer, April 11, 1911.
[23] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 79.

through organized resistance, and made problems for circus managers who fought tooth and nail to not deal with unions. And the BPOT, although it was a society that worked with management rather than resisting it, certainly contributed to the organization of workers as a group, strengthening their ability to engage in collective action. Eventually, this resistance would take the form of actual unionization and the first real, organized strike supported by an organization. But it would take yet more chaos to get there.

Resistance of any kind surely became more and more difficult as circuses continued to merge under larger corporate umbrellas. Just as immigrant laborers had difficulty organizing due to the fact that *padrones* controlled so much of the secondary job market, circus employees likely found similar difficulties as impresarios reduced the circus job market. In addition to the merger of RBBB, Hagenbeck-Wallace, and others, the formation of a new enterprise also posed a threat to workers. It was the brainchild of Jeremiah "Jerry" Mugivan, who began working in circuses as a teenager and eventually became manager and part-owner of the Hagenbeck-Wallace circus. At the end of the 1918 season, Mugivan purchased what was left of Hagenbeck-Wallace after the train wreck. In 1919, Mugivan joined forces with the other owner of Hagenbeck-Wallace, Charles Edward "Ed" Ballard, and together they added several more shows to their holdings. In 1921, Mugivan, Ed Ballard, and third partner Bert Bowers consolidated their holdings under a stock company called the American Circus Corporation (ACC). In 1922, they constructed new a winter quarters campus in Peru, Indiana. By 1929, the ACC had purchased the holdings of at least eight different circuses, and was operating five different full-sized shows.[24]

[24] "Historical Perspective: Jerry Mugivan and the Ringling Bros. Circus," *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, https://www.tribstar.com/community/historical-perspective-jerry-mugivan-and-the-ringling-bros-circus/article_c5a12ad0-3772-52e6-bc34-181fdbb6bbaa.html.

Because of its rapid growth, massive holdings, and impressive geographical reach, the ACC had become a serious threat to the business of John Ringling, the last surviving Ringling brother. In the 1920s, the number of shows in the circus industry was shrinking smaller and smaller, the remaining shows were growing larger and larger, and competition was becoming that much greater. The Great Railroad Strike of 1922 dealt a blow to the circus industry that many shows could not survive. After already suffering from the lingering effects of World War I and the Spanish Flu, the nationwide strike by some 400,000 railroad employees brought the American circus to its knees. The result of not being able to move by rail – mud shows were by then few and far between – was that most small shows were sent into bankruptcy, and the larger corporations were left struggling for survival. RBBB survived perhaps only because John Ringling had numerous investments in railroads, and was able to use his influence to keep the show moving.[25] As the impresarios were set at each other's throats, Jerry Mugivan pulled no punches, often waiting for Ringling to book his dates and then contracting one of his shows to play towns a few days before. In the past, showmen had by and large refused to do this, and often met together with the specific intention of making routing agreements that would keep them out of each other's territory, or at least put a suitable block of time between them. But that was the past, and apparently Mugivan and his partners did not feel the brotherhood that was supposed to have been promoted by the Showmen's League.

In 1929, Mugivan managed a feat that would previously have been unthinkable. He booked a season opening engagement for his shows in Madison Square Garden, which had long been established as the opening venue for RBBB. John Ringling, feeling cornered and likely betrayed by the owners of the Garden, responded by simply negotiating with Mugivan and his

[25] Weeks, *Ringling*, 77–78.

partners to purchase the entire American Circus Corporation outright for nearly two million dollars.[26] He was now the owner and manager of the RBBB, Hagenbeck-Wallace, Sells-Floto, Al G. Barnes, John Robinson, and Sparks circuses. His rival Jerry Mugivan would die the following year.[27] With a virtual monopoly over the industry, and after over fifty years in the business, John Ringling was now the king of all circusdom.

Unfortunately, that purchase came just a few weeks before the stock market crashed in October 1929, leaving Ringling in more dire straits than ever. His wife Mable had died earlier that year, and the stress of these two events caused Ringling's health to decline significantly. His finances spiraled out of control, and his creditors began to feel nervous. His mansion, art museum, circus, and numerous other business interests were dangerously closed to being foreclosed upon. In 1932, as a result of Ringling's continuing illness, financial ownership of the RBBB changed hands, and as a result, the organization was restructured. Although John Ringling remained the president (with a reduced salary), Ringling's associate Sam Gumpertz, who was well-acquainted with the new investors in New York, was named vice-president and general manager.[28] Samuel W. Gumpertz (1869-1952), one of few men who could call themselves a close friend to John Ringling, began his career in show business as a performer, including serving briefly as a Rough Rider in Buffalo Bill's Wild West. He then moved on to theatrical management, and was responsible for the "big breaks" of Broadway producer Florenz Ziegfeld and escape artist Harry Houdini. Most famously, Gumpertz oversaw the development of Dreamland amusement park on Coney Island, which included a museum and sideshow that were

[26] This would be about thirty-two million dollars in 2021 according to the CPI Inflation Calculator, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm
[27] "Historical Perspective: Jerry Mugivan and the Ringling Bros. Circus."
[28] Weeks, *Ringling*, 235–56.

controversial and regarded even by contemporaries as exploitative.[29] Gumpertz and Ringling became acquainted through business dealings in New York, and soon became friends. However, as historian David C. Weeks notes, Ringling later came to regret this when Gumpertz was appointed to manage his show.[30]

John Ringling's history of chronic illness finally caught up to him in 1936, when he died of pneumonia, leaving massive debts and a complex estate to be wrangled. Ownership of the show was taken over by a financial trust, which in turn created a board of directors that was headed by Ringling's nephew, John Ringling North (JRN), as well as a chairman from the bank. Gumpertz remained the show's manager, against the wishes of JRN, who hated that Gumpertz had left "an increasingly ill and bitter Ringling closed out of any decisions relating to its operations."[31] The workers, it seems, were not especially fond of Gumpertz either, but as always, they had few ways in which to challenge management directly. Those days, however, were soon to come to an end. Changes in financial and managerial circumstances created serious instability in the circus, making the security of jobs and salaries more volatile than ever before, which in turn made the circus more vulnerable to the influence of workers and unions than ever before.

The New Deal, too, made it possible for the workforce of the circus to truly put their ability to engage in collective action to the test. With the passage of the Wagner Act and the creation of the Works Progress Administration's Theater Project, class composition in the entertainment industry began to develop at a rapid pace. The topic of labor had also become

[29] "Samuel W. Gumpertz," Coney Island History Project, May 22, 2015, https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/hall-of-fame/samuel-w-gumpertz.
[30] Weeks, *Ringling*, 85–86.
[31] "Promoter Brought Talents to Sarasota | Sarasota History Alive!," http://www.sarasotahistoryalive.com/history/articles/promoter-brought-talents-to-sarasota/.

The RBBB Canvas department in 1938. It is unknown whether this photo was taken before or after unionization and the resulting strike. Note the proportion of workers of color, who just a few decades prior were unheard of among the ranks of roustabouts. Image courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

central to American popular culture in the 1930s, as demonstrated by Michael Denning in his wide-ranging work *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Denning demonstrates that themes of labor and socialism were widespread in American culture during this period, and argues that "the CIO, the Popular Front social movement, and the artists and intellectuals of the cultural front embodied the democratic promise of the New Deal Era."[32] Due to these developments, both managers and audiences who did not agree with the Popular Front feared that the effects of the New Deal would soon reach the circus. And, at the beginning of the 1937 season, their fears were realized.

Perhaps the best direct account of the unionization of the circus from a manual laborer is to be found in the deposition of William Fraser, a remarkably longtime employee of RBBB.

[32] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, new edition (London: Verso, 2011), 464–65.

During the 1937 season, he was an elephant handler, but according to him, he had "worked in every capacity of the show except ticket seller" since he began working on and off with the show in 1918. Fraser said George Smith, a former manager of the circus and now a labor organizer, visited Madison Square Garden in April, around the time the show was opening, to encourage the circus's employees to join his union. Representing a relatively new organization called the American Federation of Actors (AFA), Smith attempted to entice the employees with a double raise in pay. Fraser was skeptical, it seems, and believed, correctly, that few if any employees were unionized prior to 1937.[33] There had of course been some of the billposters and the teamsters who were unionized, but this represented a relatively small number of circus employees as a whole. In fact, the drive by AFA would be the first attempt to organize all employees of the Ringling show (or any circus) under one union.

Founded in 1934, the AFA was a special division chartered by the Associated Actors and Artistes of America (commonly known as the "Four A's" or "4 A's"), which was itself a division of the AFL. The AFA was born of a desire to organize vaudeville and radio performers specifically, but quickly grew to encompass variety entertainment as a whole.[34] It had been preceded by several other attempts at organizing variety show employees, most notably the White Rats (1900-1917), the American Artistes Federation (1919-1926), and the Actors Betterment Association (1933-1934). But these unions were primarily aimed at the "legitimate" theater, with outdoor entertainment still being seen as something "less than" by observers both inside and outside the industry. Furthermore, unlike the social orders of the circus, these unions

[33] "Statement by William Fraser Taken on July 23, 1938, at the Office of Newman & Bisco, 165 Broadway, New York City.," 1–5, Circus World Museum, Robert L. Parkinson Research Library, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Business Records, 1911-1965, CWM MSS 36, Union Strikes series, unprocessed.
[34] "Organised Labor Movement, 1929 to 1937," *Monthly Labor Review* 44, no. 2 (1937): 312.

were open only to performers (and mostly white male performers), and there is no evidence of serious attempts by them to organize circus employees.

The American Federation of Actors was also a higher profile organization than those that had come before. The AFA's president during the unionization of RBBB, and the strike that followed, was Sophie Tucker, a beloved stage singer who was in the 1930s known as "The Last of the Red Hot Mamas" due to her continued heavy focus on sexuality in her act, long after such performance style had fallen out of fashion. As a vaudevillian, "Tucker had experienced the crowded, unsanitary backstage facilities… as well as cheap and uncomfortable rooming houses, low pay, and lack of security" that typified the life of a travelling performer in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. In general, these shared experiences were helping to create a shared sense of class among entertainers and industry employees in the early decades of the twentieth century, although the gap between the "legitimate" theatre and variety would still take more time to close. Regardless, it was because of these experiences that Tucker took her role as a labor organizer seriously, especially when it came to variety artists, even though they "were considered poor prospects as union members because they travelled so frequently," according to cultural historian Joyce Antler.[35]

Tucker was far from the only star involved in the AFA, which by 1937 had become a major organization boasting a membership of 15,000 people.[36] The executive council of the organization included such dignitaries as vaudevillian Eddie Cantor (who was a close friend to Tucker), burlesque dancer Sally Rand, and even the illustrious Bob Hope. Among its members were Rudy Vallee and Milton Berle. But, perhaps tellingly, only one council member was (primarily) a circus performer: Australian tightrope walker Con Colleano, commonly billed as

[35] Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: Jewish Women and the American Century* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 143.
[36] Ibid.

"The Wizard of the Wire." Colleano was born Cornelius Sullivan, but his mixed-race family took on a "Latin sounding name [which] allowed them to not only capitalise on the dark, swarthy appearance of their children, but to mask their Aboriginal identity, not a positive marketing point in the parochialism of the Australian outback. And when they did get their circus going, the Colleano family passed themselves off, not as Spaniards, but as Hawaiians!"[37] Although he came from modest beginnings in the Australian sideshow circuit, by the mid-1930s Colleano had become a center ring star attraction in the RBBB show. But despite the combined star power of the higher-ups in the AFA, the true ringmaster of the organization was its executive secretary, Ralph C. Whitehead.

RBBB manager Sam Gumpertz, rather than fight the organization of the employees, arranged for a closed-shop agreement with Whitehead, a former vaudevillian with a talent for talking. In Matt Holdzkom's 2015 master's thesis "More than 'Moon Gold and Marbles': Rationalization, Reform, and the Transformation of the American Circus, 1900-1940," which includes a detailed analysis of the unionization of RBBB, he notes that it isn't clear why Gumpertz would choose to go along with this arrangement.[38] Indeed, to not only work with, but actually encourage unionism, would have been previously unthinkable for a circus manager. Bailey's behavior during the 1903 strikes, as well as the years of fighting between circus managers and the billposters' unions, makes that clear. William Fraser's deposition does offer us a few insights, however. For one, he says Gumpertz agreed to unionize the workers on the condition that Smith no longer be involved. Gumpertz and Smith, for reasons unknown, apparently had bad blood between them running back many years. Gumpertz also likely knew he

[37] Mark St Leon, "Con Colleano - Circopedia," http://www.circopedia.org/Con_Colleano.
[38] Matt Holdzkom, "More than 'Moon Gold and Marbles' : Rationalization, Reform, and the Transformation of the American Circus, 1900-1940." (MA thesis, University of Louisville, 2015), 70–71, https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/2142.

would be leaving Ringling employment the following year, and Fraser suspects this may be another reason he chose to cooperate. Whatever the case, in May 1937, Ringling employees at every level either joined the union or were terminated. Fraser, because he was well-known and respected due to his longevity with the show, was then elected a "steward" of his department. Fraser said that, had it been up to the employees, they would have preferred Smith over Whitehead to be their representative to the AFA, and thus to the AFL at large, but the agreement between Gumpertz and Whitehead resulted in Smith being cast out.[39]

According to Fraser, most employees actually did not want to join the union at all, but the majority did so rather than be fired. According to *Billboard*, nearly every single employee – over 1,500 people – joined the AFA. The laborers, whether they wanted to join or not, by far benefited the most, receiving a pay boost of $30 per month, making the minimum wage now $60, on top of room and board.[40] What Fraser does not make clear is exactly why they would not have wanted to join. It would be tempting to blame a lack of class composition, as previous scholars have done in analyzing the relative lack of organized labor in the circus industry. But more likely, the opposite is true. Fraser makes a point of telling his interviewer over and over again that the circus men had no true representation on the council, especially roustabouts and razorbacks, and that this was a serious problem.[41] And, on top of lacking direct representation, Fraser said the men had no ability to make any agreements directly with JRN, which they would have preferred to do. Every decision had to be made and approved by Whitehead, who was apparently too busy with internal union politics to actually do his job as a representative of the

[39] "Statement by William Fraser," 19–20.
[40] "Big Show Flies AFA Banner," *Billboard*, June 5, 1937, 3, 96.
[41] "Statement by William Fraser," 9–10.

AFA. In short, circus men likely did not want to join the union because they did not feel it represented them, either as individuals or as a group.

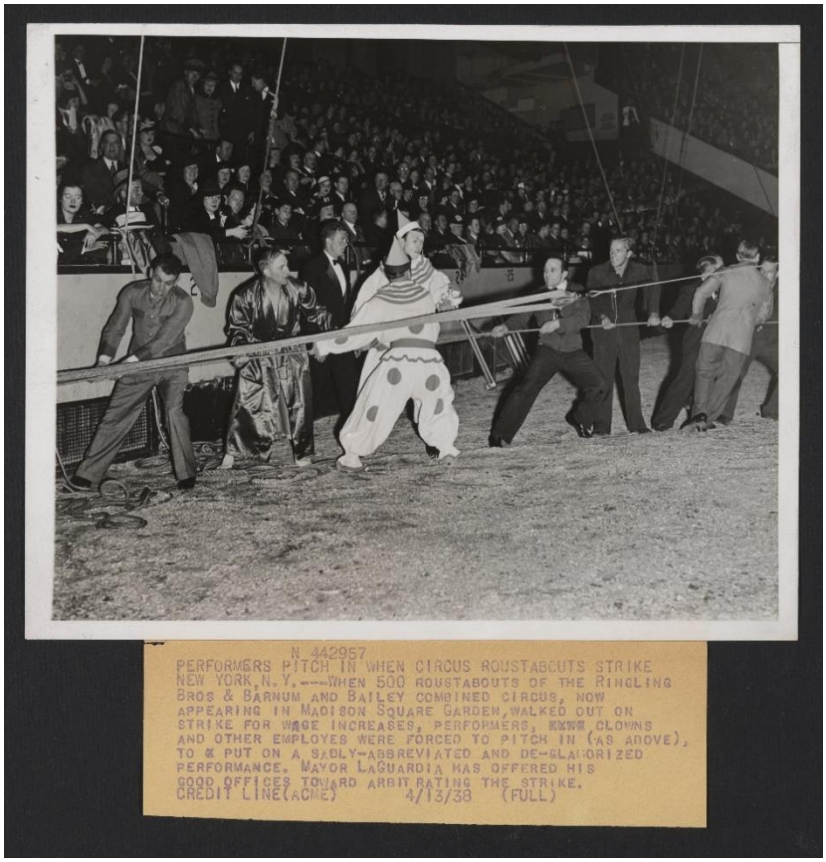
Circus men (and women) were far from alone in feeling ambivalent about joining and participating in a union. In *Union Renegades: Miners, Capitalism, and Organizing in the Gilded Age*, labor historian Dana M. Caldemeyer examines "laborers whose actions and affiliations changed according to what benefited them and their families in the moment." Caldemeyer, through an analysis of Midwestern workers in the coal industry, demonstrates that workers often exhibited a form of what Selig Perlman called "job consciousness."[42] Whereas Perlman was concerned with how workers behaved within unions, Caldemeyer convincingly determines that many workers felt they didn't need unions at all to effectively fight for better working conditions and wages, whereas others were supportive of unionization in principal but quit or refused to join specific unions which they felt did not adequately represent their interests. She argues that "worker rejection of unions or union leadership... was the result of workers looking after their own self-interest," and that this was a pervasive attitude among the Gilded Age working class.[43]

Caldemeyer's work, and Perlman's before her, helps us to explain why so few circus workers joined unions prior to 1937. The teamsters and the billposters did so because their well-established networks and the wide-ranging nature of their jobs made it beneficial for them to do so. But for roustabouts, who often did not stay on a job too long, there was a sort of catch-22 – because they did not want to organize, they were seen as unorganizable, and so they did not want to organize. And finally, like Caldemeyer's coal miners, Fraser and most of his fellow circus men finally unionized in 1937 because they felt it was the option that benefited them most,

[42] Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York: Macmillan, 1928).
[43] Dana M. Caldemeyer, *Union Renegades: Miners, Capitalism, and Organizing in the Gilded Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 3; 19.

especially because not joining meant they would lose their jobs. But most of these workers certainly felt no fondness toward the AFA or Ralph C. Whitehead.

Regardless of how anyone involved felt about it, this unionization resulted in drastic changes in the relationship between the employees and management. In 1938, JRN and his brother Henry Ringling North (HRN) bought the circus back from the holding company and fired its entire board of directors, including Sam Gumpertz. There is no direct evidence suggesting that the contract with the AFA was a reason for this, but there is little doubt that it was a contributing factor. JRN then appointed himself general manager, and further announced that he would not be abiding by the contract that had been signed between Gumpertz and the AFA. When the opening stand of the season began, JRN refused to pay the $60 wages promised due to the working men having fewer responsibilities as compared to when the show was traveling, and in response, Whitehead encouraged employees to strike, despite a no-strike clause in the contract. As many as 500 employees walked out, resulting in a severely crippled show that resulted in the Norths and many performers having to do the manual labor for themselves. JRN



MS Thr 675 (Box 12: 290); document box, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

was furious and vowed to make sure such a night would never happen again, despite the publicity it brought. But this was just the beginning of the fight between the Norths and the AFA.[44]

Amidst the conflict over pay for the workers, and the larger power struggle that it represented, RBBB management also exacerbated the conflict even more by adding celebrity animal trainer Frank "Bring 'Em Back Alive" Buck to the show, luring him with a very lucrative contract. Buck was an adventurer who in the 1920s became the world's premier supplier of wild exotic animals to zoos and circuses, and was well-known to the public as a best-selling author, movie star, and radio personality. It is likely that the Norths hoped adding him to the show would not only bring in more customers, but also help to overshadow the conflict with the conflict with union. As it turned out, his arrival only made problems worse.

Despite the closed shop agreement, Buck refused to join the AFA, arguing that he was "a scientist, not an actor." Union members threatened a strike if he did not join. Buck expressed some sympathy for the circus employees, saying "Don't get me wrong. I'm with the working man. I worked like a dog once myself. And my heart is with the fellow who works. But I don't want some [expletive] union delegate telling me when to get on and off an elephant." The journalist for the *New York Post* who obtained this quote was skeptical that Buck actually harbored any good feelings for the circus's working men. The reporter writes that Buck described many of these men as "sweepers, shovelers, and performers of other mundane functions for the comfort of the elephants," indicating that he saw their role as submissive to his own. At any rate, any potential crisis was averted when the AFA agreed to give Buck special

[44] Holdzkom, "More than 'Moon Gold and Marbles,'" 73–74.

permission to introduce a new star attraction, the (supposedly) dangerous and menacing Gargantua the Gorilla, without having to join the union.[45]

Although management had negotiated the successful addition of the adventurer Frank Buck and the scar-faced gorilla Gargantua to the center ring, business was slow that summer, in no small part due to the labor troubles. In response, JRN announced, without consulting the union, that there would be a 25% pay cut in mid-June. Sixty-seven teamsters walked out immediately, and JRN responded by simply selling off the baggage horses, divesting himself from the need for the employees and profiting from the sale of the animals. The pay cut went into effect on June 18, despite open refusal by employees to accept it, but more trouble did not begin until the show arrived in Scranton, Pennsylvania on June 22. Taking advantage of the fact that they were in a pro-union city with a pro-union mayor, and refusing to accept a pay cut to which they did not agree, the entire workforce of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth walked off the show for the first time in its history, in an unprecedented demonstration of solidarity. After decades of slow class composition, true class consciousness seemed to have been achieved under the big top.

However, although this collective action was a momentous occasion, the importance of which should not be overlooked, the solidarity it engendered was short-lived. Four days later, in part due to pressure from potential customers, performers petitioned to end the strike. The manual laborers, however, perhaps finally realizing the power that collective action gave them, and seeing themselves as a separate class from the performers, refused. The mayor of Scranton feared violence and demanded that the circus move on, one way or another. Finally, JRN caved,

[45] Frank Buck, *Bring Em Back Alive: The Best of Frank Buck*, ed. Steven Lehrer, 1st edition (Texas Tech University Press, 2006), xvii–xviii.

dissolving the circus's contract with the AFA and paying $12,000 for the costs of transporting the show and its employees back to the winter quarters campus in Sarasota, Florida in late June.[46]

Circus workers use an elephant to push a wagon out of a deep rut in this road. Anything animals were physically capable of doing, circuses put them to use doing. Circa 1920s, Breckenridge, TX. Image courtesy of the Basil Clemons Photograph Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries.

It was at this moment that John Ringling's seemingly disastrous purchase of the American Circus Corporation proved to be useful to his successor. Two of the shows that came with the ACC, the Al G. Barnes Wild Animal Circus and the Sells-Floto Circus, had been combined into one unit that was still operating and had not been unionized. Within a week of sending RBBB back to Sarasota, JRN organized a smaller show using only twenty railroad cars, which he called "Al G. Barnes–Sells-Floto Circus Presents Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Stupendous New Features." (The route book for this tour, interestingly, not only makes no mention of the strike or any issues with labor, but also does not mention this drastic change in the show's format.) In response, the AFA organized picket lines and followed the show for a few of its stands in the Midwest, but the picket lines were broken – sometimes figuratively, by press agents who countered their claims in local newspapers, and sometimes literally, in one case by

[46] Holdzkom, "More than 'Moon Gold and Marbles,'" 75–77.

parading elephants.[47] Although exploiting human labor was becoming increasingly more difficult, the exploitation of animals was still fair game. Not only that, but getting "finks" (strikebreakers) who were willing to travel with the circus may have proven difficult. So, instead of hiring human "finks," the Norths had instead made use of "elefinks."

Although the picketing efforts had been defeated, the AFA projected the results of its efforts as a major victory, and declared "jurisdiction over all circus employees," as was reported in a front-page article in *Billboard* on July 30, 1938. At this point, due to both a drastic rise in unionization generally and in entertainment specifically, circus employees had finally become visible to the world of organized labor, and different groups scrambled to organize them, in no small part to expand their own influence and power. While the AFA had been focusing mostly on the manual laborers of the circus, the Theatrical Managers, Agents, and Treasurers (TMAT) union was attempting to organize the white-collar employees of circuses. Whitehead claimed that William Green, the president of the AFL, had given the AFA complete jurisdiction over the circus industry, despite the fact that TMAT's charter specifically mentioned the circus. The bad blood between the two organizations was also exacerbated by the fact that TMAT preferred compromising to striking, hoping to keep the workers employed. Further complicating the matter was that both were forced to except musicians and billposters, who had already been unionized and had no desire to move to either the AFA or TMAT.[48] Regardless of what was actually intended, this political infighting was certainly to the detriment of the circus employees themselves, who were caught in the crossfire while simply trying to maintain their jobs, and a way a life that some had known for decades.

[47] Holdzkom, 77–79.
[48] "AFA Claims Jurisdiction Over All Circus Employees," *Billboard*, July 30, 1938, 1, 28.

The legal cases generated by these events were numerous and complex, and the primary archival collection that contains the records of these cases remains unprocessed. Depositions, memorandums of law, correspondence with attorneys, and other documents abound which detail the complexities of the lawsuits, made all the more complicated by the fact that RBBB and its subsidiary Al G. Barnes–Sells-Floto held offices and accounts in multiple states. Ultimately, the cases were handled primarily by the Southern District of New York, which the Norths used their advantage by demonstrating that the Barnes outfit was incorporated in Indiana, and did no business in the state of New York, not even touring there. Furthermore, the RBBB's lawyers even argued that they did not actually engage in interstate commerce, for shows were given within the domain of cities and states. Therefore, the federal government did not have jurisdiction over them at all. Finally, they used the workers' strike against them, because the original contract between Gumpertz and Whitehead included a no-strike clause. By allowing the workers to strike before the pay cuts had actually gone into effect, the AFA had been the first to break the contract.[49]

Setting the legalese aside, there are at least two important takeaways to be found in these documents. The first is that in addition to strikes, sabotage was undertaken by someone involved in at least one instance. In August 1938, an unknown party or parties sabotaged the circus train by cutting open some rubber hose couplings. The Norths corresponded with the FBI to investigate, but the results of those investigations, which ran at least into October, are unknown.[50] This is ironic, given that the Norths had denied they were involved in interstate commerce, which means that the FBI should not have had jurisdiction over the case! The second

[49] "In Re American Federation of Actors vs. Ringling Bros.-Barnum& Bailey Combined Shows, Inc.," Memorandum of Law, 1938, CWM MSS 36, Union Strikes series, unprocessed.
[50] CWM MSS 36, Union Strikes series, unprocessed, 1938 strike correspondence folder.

takeaway is that, because of lawsuits initiated by Whitehead and the AFA, the RBBB and the Norths were forced to defend themselves in front of the National Labor Relations Board, which made them furious, although the case ultimately was settled with a withdrawal of charges and a discontinuance. In a November 1938 letter to one of his attorneys, HRN requested that the lawyer write a statement to the US Department of Labor for him. "I am forced to have you make my comment in such a way that what I really wish to say will not land me in jail, for libel, obscene matters in the mail, etc." North also believed the very idea that the government would spend its time investigating the circus and compiling a list of charges against it was wasteful. "To think that this is what happens to the tax payers' money – spending it to compile the most useless –," he writes, cutting himself off before he goes too far.[51]

Throughout this series of events, the relationship between the employees of RBBB and the AFA remained complicated. William Fraser tells us that although some liked the idea of a union, and most liked the double pay raise that they were promised, many did not like having to pay $12 dues each year in advance. In general, collecting dues proved quite difficult, at least for Fraser, which became the basis of some of the legal issues between the union and RBBB. He described how the system of elected department "stewards" was meant to help resolve small differences and to make the union run more smoothly, but the problem was that the stewards had no power or standing within the union itself. Fraser said he could not even obtain a copy of the AFA's bylaws to read. It was the members who came from the nightclubs and theaters who had the true power, as it was they who were allowed to elect councilmembers. He makes clear to the interviewer that he felt that the working men of the circus had no real representation and no

[51] Letter from Henry Ringling North to Mr. J. F. Reddy, November 8, 1938, CWM MSS 36, Union Strikes series, unprocessed.

power to actually make changes in their own interest.[52] The circus workers had been organized, and on paper had been unionized, but in reality, their ability to participate in the union was severely hamstrung.

Despite their continued claims of victory, by the summer of 1939, the AFA was beset by enemies on all sides. The Norths despised the union, although their legal cases with Whitehead and the NLRB had been settled. The public just wanted to see the circus, and the show's press agents had done a good job of turning it against the strikers. The employees did not feel they were being adequately represented, and the AFL was not happy with the organization's management. As it turns out, the roustabouts and other laborers were right to feel the way they did, for the AFL never intended for anyone but performers to be included in the AFA. The inclusion of non-performers was done without the knowledge of AFL leadership, and president William Green believed that circus workers were not in fact within the AFA's jurisdiction, despite its bold claims.[53] Whether or not Green believed that the laborers were organizable at all is unclear, but regardless, he took issue with the fact that Ralph Whitehead had organized them without moving through the proper channels and procedure. Things took another turn for the worse when, in June, the Four A's accused Whitehead "of illegally using funds collected at benefit performances for administrative purposes." Sophie Tucker, for her part, felt "wounded" and defended herself and the AFA vigorously against the accusations, although things soon got bad enough that her friend Eddie Cantor suggested she resign. But Tucker refused to back down, because "under her leadership, the AFA became the fastest growing of all the entertainers'

[52] "Statement by William Fraser," 5–12.
[53] Holdzkom, "More than 'Moon Gold and Marbles,'" 79.

unions and had obtained numerous benefits for workers. She believed that the charges against the union stemmed from these successes."[54]

Unfortunately, her efforts were for naught, and by September, the AFA and Whitehead had been found guilty of misuse of funds. The AFA's charter was revoked, the union disbanded, and a new organization, the American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA), was chartered to replace it. Although Tucker was never directly a subject of the legal proceedings, she was suspended from every entertainers' organization of which she was a member for her role in this series of events. "She can always join the American Guild of Variety Artists," one commenter wryly remarked.[55] Tucker remained a beloved entertainer in the public eye, however, continuing to perform up until her death in 1966. As for Ralph C. Whitehead, his fate is unclear, although he continued to be embroiled in legal troubles for at least another year.[56]

Although this was essentially the end of the AFA, there was a brief coda which extended its existence in the final months of 1939. Following its financial fiascos, Tucker attempted to save the AFA by taking sides in a different political battle, the ongoing fight between the Screen Actors' Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE). In the 1930s, the IATSE was essentially taken over by the Chicago Outfit organized crime syndicate, and its leaders worked to extend their influence over the entertainment industry more broadly, especially through extortion of film executives.[57] The president of the IATSE, George Brown, attempted two hostile takeovers of all actors' unions in the United States, the second of which began in 1939 by

[54] Antler, *The Journey Home*, 143–44.
[55] Wolcott Gibbs, "The Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, August 19, 1939, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1939/08/19/comment-2153.
[56] CWM MSS 36, Union Strikes series, unprocessed.
[57] Michael Woodiwiss, *Organized Crime and American Power: A History* (University of Toronto Press, 2001), 156–59.

granting a charter to the AFA immediately following the revocation of their Four A's charter. Tucker supported the move, hoping it would save the AFA from ruin. But the takeover was thwarted by SAG-AFTRA when IATSE became embroiled in a federal investigation over racketeering.[58] As a result, the IATSE bosses refocused their efforts, and although the AFA attempted to wage public campaigns against the AGVA as a last-ditch effort to find and keep members, the union ceased to exist by the summer of 1940.[59]

Despite this ignominious end, the AFA left a lasting legacy. It was succeeded by the AGVA, which took up the mantle of unionizing circus employees. In early 1940, JRN signed a contract with the AGVA, which continued to represent circus workers in significant numbers at least until the 1980s and still exists today, far outliving any of its predecessors. (There is of course also the case of the Showmen's League, but it is a mutual aid society, not a union proper.) Despite the contract, the Norths attempted to hire non-union members for the 1940 season, and were forced to back down when another strike was threatened. The genie could not be put back into the bottle.

The fact that over 1,500 circus employees had joined the AFA, even when considering that it was under a closed-shop agreement, demonstrates a sort of culmination of the processes of class composition that had been occurring in the circus over the previous several decades. And, for what it is worth, Ralph C. Whitehead was not quite as bad as Fraser made him seem. Although he mismanaged union funds and mishandled political and legal battles, he did seem to genuinely believe in protecting workers – especially migratory workers – through the power of organized labor. Not only did he include everyone in the AFA, instead of just performers, but he

[58] Antler, *The Journey Home*, 145.
[59] "1930s | SAG-AFTRA," https://www.sagaftra.org/about/our-history/1930s. Documents related to AFA vs AGVA in early 1940 found in CWM MSS 36, Union Strikes series, unprocessed.

continued to fight for Ringling workers through to the 1940 season, encouraging them to continue engaging in collective action.[60] Beyond this, Whitehead had a longer history of fighting for the rights of entertainment employees of all kinds. In 1935, he had successfully argued before the US House of Representatives that migratory workers in the entertainment industry would not be sufficiently covered under the language of the Economic Security Act (which would later come to be known as Social Security), and that they had also been disenfranchised of voting in many instances, in both cases due to residency requirements that they could not meet.[61]

For better or for worse, Whitehead and the AFA changed the course of circus history. On the one hand, they helped to turn decades of slowly building class composition in the circus into realized class consciousness, uneasy though it may have been. Although unions were still wary of organizing circus workers, at least they were now visible and active, although this sometimes proved to be as harmful as it was helpful. On the other hand, the organization of and collective action by workers on this previously unheard-of scale brought one of the world's most significant entertainment enterprises to its knees.

[60] Events described in this paragraph all to be found in the unprocessed Union Strikes series of CWM MSS 36.
[61] United States Congress House Committee on Ways and Means, *Economic Security Act: Hearings Before the Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives, Seventy-Fourth Congress, First Session, on H.R. 4120, a Bill to Alleviate the Hazards of Old Age, Unemployment, Illness, and Dependency, to Establish a Social Insurance Board in the Department of Labor, to Raise Revenue, and for Other Purposes* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1935), 825-832.

EPILOGUE

The circus industry would never be the same after the 1938 RBBB strike. Its very existence had depended on the exploitation of manual laborers who had few options or means of resistance, and on keeping intact a hierarchy of workers that would inhibit the development of class composition. With a single union uniting most circus workers in all levels of that hierarchy, who now had legal and social recourse for mistreatment, the circus would have to change drastically in order to keep the show on the road. Union troubles mostly died down in the 1940s, mostly due to the fact that so many men who would normally have worked on the circus had been shipped overseas to fight in the war. In fact, the previously massive RBBB show was briefly reduced to a small, female-oriented show called "Spangles," although it soon returned to a more standard format. The war years remained largely uneventful until the summer of 1944, when the circus was struck by perhaps the worst disaster in its history. On July 6, 1944, an accidental fire set the big top ablaze in Hartford, Connecticut. The fire spread rapidly due to the fact that the tent had been waterproofed with a solution of paraffin wax dissolved in gasoline, and despite employees' best efforts, the canvas was consumed in flames a hundred feet high. The disaster resulted in the deaths of nearly 170 people, with hundreds more injured.[1] Those who survived were forever scarred, in some cases literally, and the circus's reputation took a major hit. Among the survivors was future actor and director Charles Nelson Reilly, who later dramatized his memories as a performer, and often spoke of that horrific day in interviews.[2]

In the 1950s, the circus was seemingly recovering, and indeed some scholars and circus fans extend its "golden age" up into this period. In 1952, Paramount Pictures released Cecil B.

[1] "The Hartford Circus Fire," *Connecticut History | a CTHumanities Project* (blog), July 6, 2019, https://connecticuthistory.org/the-hartford-circus-fire/.
[2] *The Life of Reilly | 13 Hartford Circus Fire*, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZ-a4eCFMFc.

DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth*, a motion picture epic that featured the actual troupe, sets, animals, and employees of RBBB. The film would go on to be nominated for five Academy Awards, and to win both Best Picture and Best Story. In addition to renewed cultural relevance for RBBB, it also seemed that labor troubles might finally have been overcome. An unidentified newspaper clipping in the Circus World collection relating to circus unions and labor notes that "during the war years, there was little circus activity, but a new contract was negotiated in 1950 which lasted through 1954."[3]

Unfortunately, there was a failure to renegotiate that contract in 1954, which led to strikes by the AGVA and the Teamsters under the leadership of Jimmy Hoffa, with support from SAG-AFTRA. The combined union forces even managed to put together their own show to compete with RBBB at their stand in Boston. This heavy pressure on the show was eventually too much to bear, and on July 17, 1956, the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus held its final show under canvas in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. John Ringling North announced that day, in a surprise decision, that "the tented circus as it now exists is, in my opinion, a thing of the past. We are considering plans for the future which may involve an almost completely mechanically controlled exhibition," meaning permanent indoor venues. Most commenters lamented the end of an era and felt sadness over the loss of a cultural symbol, but few had any concern over what would happen to those who had made the circus their home. As a result of the show's sudden but temporary closure, over eight hundred employees were suddenly left without jobs, and were given only a week's pay and transportation back to the show's winter quarters in Sarasota.[4] RBBB was not alone in this decision, either. Earlier in the year, two smaller shows, Clyde Beatty

[3] CWM Mss 36, Union Strikes series, unprocessed, second folder of 1956 materials
[4] "Eyewitness 1956: Ringling Brothers Folds Its Circus Tent for the Last Time in Allegheny County," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, https://www.post-gazette.com/local/pittsburgh-history/2014/07/06/Eyewitness-1956-Ringling-Brothers-folds-its-circus-tent-for-the-last-time-in-Allegheny-County/stories/201407060003.

(a famous wild animal tamer) and King Brothers, had both folded up their canvases permanently as well.[5] Clyde Beatty had also been defeated by a strike by members of the AGVA, which had been the result of not paying salaries to some performers.[6] Interestingly, not all canvas shows were suffering, however. While others were closing shop, the Garden Bros. circus announced plans to begin operating a second unit under canvas.[7] Although in decline, arguably for many years by this point, the circus as an industry was far from dead.

In 1967, circus promoters Irvin and Israel Feld (with additional financial backing from Judge Roy Hofheinz of Houston, Texas) purchased RBBB from the Norths, holding a ceremony at the Colosseum in Rome – symbolically, the place where the circus began. The relative success of the revitalized show was good for Feld Entertainment, and the company grew such that it now operates a half-dozen other traveling productions, including Disney on Ice, Sesame Street Live, and the monster truck rally known as Monster Jam. RBBB continued to perform in arenas until the show's final performance on May 21, 2017 in Uniondale, New York. Decades of pressure from animal rights activists, in particular bitter conflicts with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, had caused Feld to retire its performing elephants in 2016.[8] This, combined with increasing operating costs and declining ticket sales – which were caused in part by the retirement of the elephants – led to the closure of the show 146 years after Barnum & Bailey had been founded.[9] Well over four hundred employees were laid off, leaving them "scrambling for new jobs," as a *Vice* blog post on the subject was titled. But, as the article explains, Feld did not

[5] "Circus Shows Took Place under Canvas Finale: The Last Time the Big Top Was Raised in Baltimore Was May 22, 1956, in Herring Run Park.," *Baltimore Sun*, https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1998-03-22-1998081217-story.html.
[6] "AGVA Strike Folds Beatty; Show Train Goes to Quarters," *Billboard*, May 19, 1956, 54.
[7] "Garden Bros. Reveal Plans For Under-Canvas 2d Unit," *Billboard*, May 19, 1956, 38.
[8] John Rogers, "Hundreds to Lose Jobs after Ringling Bros Circus Shuts Down," *WFLA*, January 16, 2017, https://www.wfla.com/news/hundreds-to-lose-jobs-after-ringling-bros-circus-shuts-down/.
[9] Steph Solis, "Ringling Bros. Circus Closing after 146 Years," *USA TODAY*, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2017/01/14/ringling-bros-circus-close-after-146-years/96606820/.

leave their people completely out in the cold. It attempted to find workers new homes and jobs, and offered "severance packages" to some. Still, just as with the surprise announcement of the end of tented shows in 1956, this decision blindsided the workers, many of whom had been with the show for decades.[10] Because they were interviewed, we know that some performers, animal trainers, and other star attractions were able to find employment within weeks or months with other circuses, zoos, theme parks, etc.[11] But what happened to the roustabouts, the razorbacks, the laborers who had made the show run? Just as was the case in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, no one seems to have bothered to find out, and the private nature of former showfolks makes it difficult for an outsider to inquire about such things.

The circus is resilient, however, and it continues to exist in one form or another, in spite of any difficulties. The circus and the United States grew up together, and it is a part of the nation's DNA. A handful of smaller shows continue to tour throughout North America as of 2022, both with and without animal acts. Many are tented shows, the canvas replaced with vinyl. They are essentially a modern continuation of the "mud show," especially in terms of the division of labor – the author has visited many and seen performers and roustabouts selling concessions and souvenirs before the show began, performers who also offered face painting to children, and other personnel with multiple roles. Furthermore, RBBB is not permanently disbanded. In October 2021, it was announced that the show will return in 2023, playing in arenas but without animals.[12] This raises many questions about the future of circus workers. Will

[10] Mitchell Sunderland, "As Ringling Bros. Closes, Circus Workers Are Left Scrambling for New Jobs," *Vice* (blog), January 24, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en/article/j5e87g/as-ringling-bros-closes-circus-workers-are-left-scrambling-for-new-jobs.
[11] Teri Silver, "Life After Ringling: What Happens When the Circus Closes Down," HobbyLark, https://hobbylark.com/performing-arts/Life-After-Ringling-When-the-Circus-Closes-Down.
[12] Jay Handelman, "Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Could Be Making Comeback – but without the Animals," USA TODAY, https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2021/10/26/ringling-brothers-circus-comeback-without-animals/8551976002/.

former employees be allowed to return? Will they want to? How intact has the circus "family" remained, and can it be reconstructed when they climb back into their train cabins? Without the draw of animals, how will the show deal with competitors, such as Cirque du Soleil, to which they now bear much more similarity? How will such competition affect the jobs of performers and laborers? What, if anything, will have changed about working for RBBB when it is resurrected? There has been public outcry over the exploitation of animals, but the exploitation of humans has gone on largely without comment. Perhaps, with the elephants retired, efforts can be made to shift attention to the roustabouts. Whether or not they want that attention, whether or not they want to be organized or see themselves as a class, remains a central problem in the story of class composition in the American circus industry.

Exotic animal trainers were once some of the world's biggest celebrities. As public opinions regarding performing animals have shifted, competition in the dwindling job market has become much more fierce. What does the future hold for showfolks like these? Image courtesy of the Basil Clemons Photograph Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries

Of course, whether or not showfolks see themselves as a class may not be the best framework in which to understand their story. Perhaps more than anything, these events are evidence of the idea put forth by New Left historian E.P Thompson that

> far too much theoretical attention been paid to "class", and far too little to "class-struggle". To put it bluntly: classes do not exist as separate entities, look around, find an enemy class, and then start to struggle. On the contrary, people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways, they experience exploitation, they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness. Class and class-consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage in the real historical process.[13]

The historical evidence clearly demonstrates that circus workers have experienced class consciousness in fits and starts over the past one hundred and fifty years. But they have more consistently than this engaged in class struggle, as Thompson defines it. From the first teamsters and billposters to join their respective unions, to the mutual aid provided by the Benevolent Protective Order of Tigers, to the brief but significant organization under the AFA, the people of the circus have known class struggle since its earliest days as an industry. Whether or not a sense of class is achieved, class struggle must be understood on its own terms, and circus labor provides an excellent example to see this historical process in action.

Let us return one last time to "Big Jake" Posey, for of all of the characters we have encountered, he best exemplifies this phenomenon. Posey refused to be treated poorly by circus bosses, and if he was not satisfied with his position, he moved on. When he found camaraderie and commonality with his fellow showfolks, he organized them to their benefit. But he also served as a sort of boss himself, and did not always side with others in his class. He refused to take employees to Europe that he did not believe were good enough workers, for example. Posey was a man who engaged in class struggle throughout his entire career, and sometimes, but not

[13] Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society," 149.

always, saw himself as a member of a class. Examples like that of Posey demonstrate that circus labor is a story of people for whom class consciousness and organization were achieved as a secondary effect of class struggle.

Circus workers wanted, like all laborers, to strike a balance between being able to provide for themselves while resisting exploitation through practical means that would not cost them their livelihoods. When management countered resistance with methods like red-lighting, laborers tended to tread lightly or to move on. Conversely, when management insisted they unionize or lose their jobs, they did so, because it was the most practical decision. Whether or not circus workers are able to achieve or maintain class consciousness remains a difficult question to answer, but there can be no question that class struggle has been an essential part of the circus experience.

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