

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

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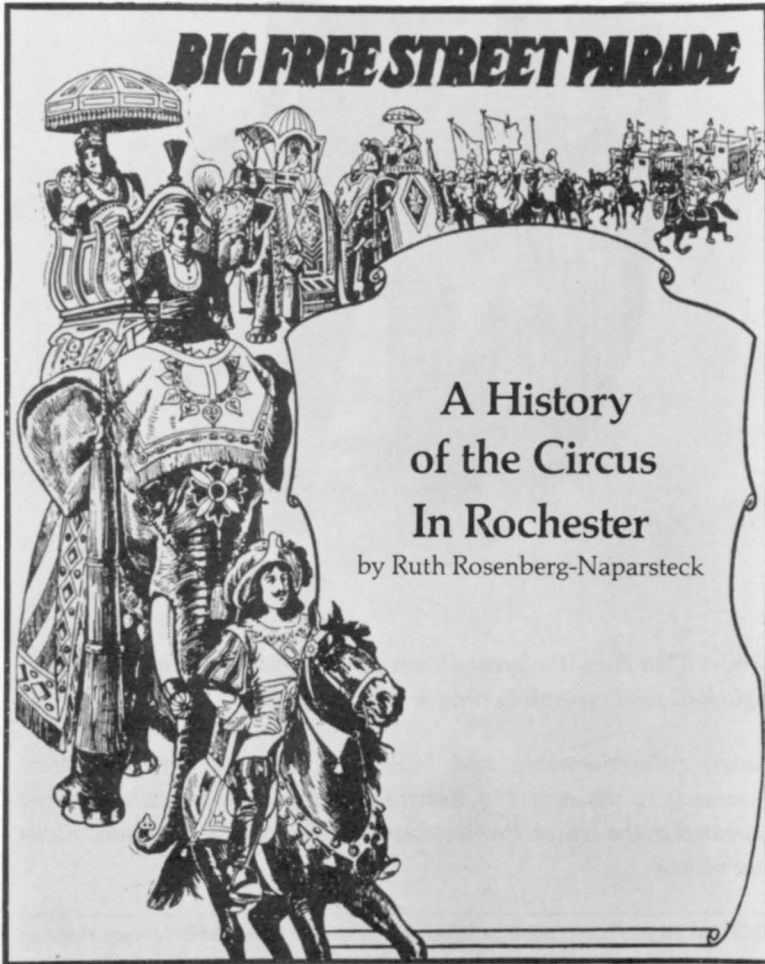
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*Above: Dan Rice, the great clown comic wrote the song "The Blue Eagle Jail" while spending time in Rochester's jail.*

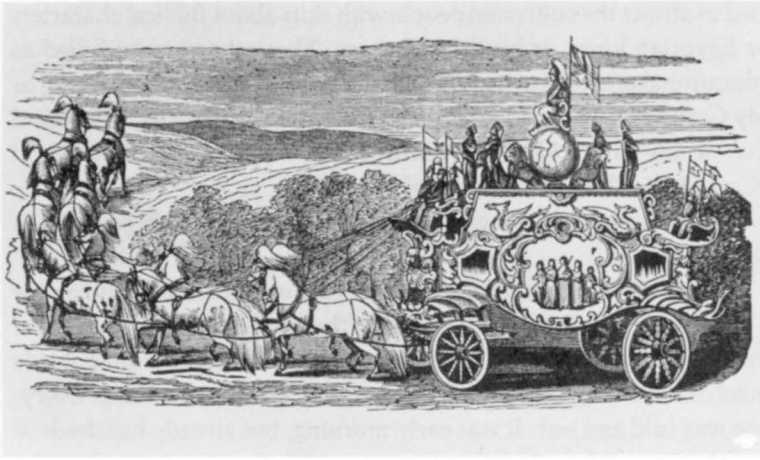
*Cover: Advertisements and billboards such as this one drew thousands to the streets to watch the circus company whose name appeared in the center. Printers kept standing graphics for any circus that visited.*

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*The early circuses traveled over deeply rutted, muddy roads to perform in towns like Rochester where not everyone made them welcome.*

## Growing to Love the Circus

For more than a decade after Sam Patch was killed before thousands of spectators when he jumped 125 feet into the Genesee River from the Upper Falls, circuses were said to have passed by Rochester because Rochester was not an amusement town and it would not bring in enough receipts to pay the expenses. The thousands who witnessed the jump of Sam Patch were scolded by the clergy for urging his suicide. His death sent such a shudder through the population that his jump has never been forgotten though it took place in 1829; so great was the guilt borne by the people. Witnesses and children who recalled being taken to the Falls by their parents mentioned that they never forgot the incident. And this was the major complaint against circuses; that audiences encouraged performers to risk life and limb in daredevil feats. Early in the development of circuses equestrian acts predominated, reflecting the agrarian audience's interest in trick horses and mules. Later the addition of tumbling and gymnastics reflected the growing interest of the audience in physical health.<sup>1</sup> These equestrian acts and tumbling were acceptable because they did not risk life and limb.

Until the Erie Canal brought thousands of working class people who appreciated the circus, the exhibitions were not heavily patronized. But the newcomers changed that. They loved the animal acts and the freak shows. They loved the acts of daring from the trapeze and the demonstrations of domination over fierce wild animals. Still the circus strug-

gled to attract the cultivated people with skits about Biblical characters or Egyptian kings or historical figures. These shows were billed as educational and instructive. Popular skits were "The Miller's Frolic or My Grandmother and Grandfather's Return from the Mill;" "Adam and Eve or the Fratricide;" "St. George and the Dragon Slayer" and "Crusaders' Glory or Warriors of the Cross."

But attitudes did change and more circuses began to perform in Rochester.

In June of 1847, Spaulding's Monster Circus rolled into Rochester for a performance at Falls Field. All night the circus troupe traveled over the dark, muddy roads, the drivers and performers huddling inside their coats to keep out the cold. A rain storm was just ending. Everyone was cold and wet. It was early morning, but already hundreds of people were gathered on the streets to watch the circus parade on its way to Falls Field. Others, who heard the band, put their heads out of their windows and watched as the circus passed by. The *Rochester Republican* reported that "the unparalleled celebrity of the company and the magnificent spectacle presented by their triumphal procession in the morning drew together a (huge) crowd. . . never before witnessed at one time under one pavillion-not less than four thousand persons, many of them consisting of groups of ladies and gentlemen who for the first time now attended a circus."<sup>2</sup>

Edward Kendall, known as the Lion Bugler, excited spectators with the performance of his brass band. John Smith, known as the "master Ethiopian Deliniator," J. McFarlane, the acrobat and C. J. Rogers, the dramatic equestrian enthralled the audiences with their evening performances. The *Rochester Republican* declared, "The great number of the elite assembled to participate in these amusements, marks a new era in our city."<sup>3</sup> The paper credited Kendall's Brass Band with much of the change in attitude of the people toward the circus. "Every portion of the country has been put under contribution to raise Kendall's Brass Band to its present approximation of perfection, and to every one," it said, "whose scruples against the circus. . . (do) not savor of bigotry, their brilliant execution of the most difficult musical compositions, much remove the barriers. . . heretofore imposed against the witnessing of an equestrian performance."<sup>4</sup>

Although a growing number of people attended the circus, the public's attitude against the circus was more involved than the apprehension over the injury of a performer. Circuses were not only an attraction to spectators, but to pickpockets, prostitutes, ruffians and small side-show men who cluttered the main attraction and gave it an un-

seemly appearance. When a fight broke out at the Howe & Co. circus in June 1849, the editor of the *Rochester Daily Advertiser* complained, "Riots and circus exhibitions, have of late become synonymous terms. The time was once that equestrian performances were conducted with a degree of order and respectability that would warrant peaceable citizens in visiting them, we are now ready to assert that that time has now gone by. . . . They performed in a mudhole below the haymarket, and around and within their canvas was congregated altogether too large a representation of the disorderly of this city. . . . The company left the city this morning, we trust never to visit again."<sup>5</sup> Little attention was given in the article to the little girl who was run over by one of the chariot horses. It seemed of more importance that the circus attracted the disorderly.

The article brought the response of a reader who argued that "our own citizens are the instigators of rows, it seems to me that a public paper is not only unjustified in attacking the company [circus] for it, but is ungenerous and unfair in the extreme to do so."

But the paper did not accept responsibility for unfairly judging the circus. Instead it prefaced the published letter to the editor: "It is too true that the press have stood ready to puff indiscriminately, all exhibitions that present a flaming bill of 'attractions,' without any regard to their merits. However much we may have been to blame in this matter in the past, we purpose in future to pay a little attention to the character of public exhibitions that force themselves upon our attention."<sup>6</sup>

Rochester's sensitivities were not to be ignored and circuses knew this. When Spalding's North American Circus performed in Rochester in 1844 it was critically reviewed. The *Rochester Daily Advertiser* reported that Spalding "has not disregarded the taste of the public which imperiously demands the exclusion of everything immoral and objectionable; and with an eye to the rock on which so many have split, has used the most effective means to prevent anything that can be construed into indelicacy by the most purient imagination, or that might tinge the most modest cheek, or that could be obnoxious to the most heterogeneous crowd."<sup>7</sup> The Barnard & Page Circus that performed in Rochester in 1829 tried to protect the sensitivities of women by forbidding them entrance without a male escort. Many circuses began to perform in the mornings to allow the ladies and children to attend without the evening crowd that tended to be rowdier.

L.B. Lent's Great New York Circus was noticeably 'reformed' when it arrived in Rochester for a performance in August of 1866. The *Union*



*Extraordinary hair growth was more than just a bearded lady. One woman exhibited in Rochester was billed as "The Bear Woman."*

*& Advertiser* pointed out that everything was in good order—there were no side-shows, no offensive wild animal exhibits, no noisy peddlers or silver plate speculators." There was an absence "of all coarseness and vulgarity usually indulged in by 'clowns of low degree,' and nothing is ever permitted to be spoken or exhibited in the New York Circus that is in the most remote degree censurable."<sup>8</sup>

When the circus came to town, strangers came in large numbers to see the street parade and to run their little side shows. P.T. Barnum's circus attracted thousands to Rochester when it arrived in the early morning of June 1873. The *Union & Advertiser* reported,

"Groups of strangers were seen before seven o'clock, standing upon the corners, and couples from the country, hand in hand, were sauntering about the streets apparently eager for the show to open. Last night the trains brought in many strangers who were in some manner interested in or connected with the show. There were one-legged and one-armed men wearing soldier's uniforms, who seemed to be the possessors of sundry barrel organs, which were mounted on wheels as if ready to be transported to the show field. And there were also men with various kinds of machines for running side shows, with which to draw the dimes of those who have them to spare. It was reported that some strangers who had no baggage or other encumbrances were rogues who live upon their dexterity in plundering unwary persons who fall in their way."<sup>9</sup>

The public demanded civil and moral amusement and over the years, the circus met the demand. By mid-century the *Rochester Daily Democrat* could declare that the demanding, conservative city of Rochester had gone "circus mad."<sup>10</sup>

**W. C. COUP** MANAGER of

PROF. WORTH'S MUSEUM OF A MILLION FEATURES,

AND

**LEVANTINE'S AGGREGATION OF NOVELTIES!**

INTRODUCING A SELECTION OF

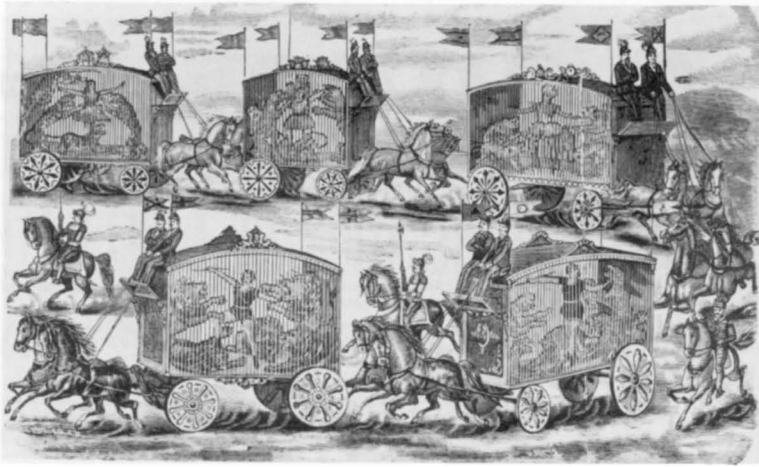
**OPERATIC and SPECIALTY STARS**

IN GRAND STAGE PERFORMANCES.



AN ASTOUNDING CONJUNCTION OF STARTLING SENSATIONS AND CLASSICALLY-BEAUTIFUL PERFORMANCES.

*Courtesy of Monroe County Historian.*



*"The pageant seemed like a realization of the wonderful stories of Eastern Magnificence, which every schoolboy encounters in 'Arabian Nights.'"*

## The Street Parade

"There is nothing like a circus to draw a crowd in Rochester," the *Union & Advertiser* declared. It was 1878 and the Great London Show was arriving. Long before the street parade was expected to begin, thousands of people already lined the sidewalks of center city. When the scheduled route was altered "there was an immediate stampede for the corner where the throng of human beings and vehicles of every description rendered the streets almost impassable."<sup>11</sup> The *Union & Advertiser* noted that "The street pageant attracted more attention than anything in Rochester had in several years."<sup>12</sup>

Two years later, the paper reported that "A glance up the street during the progress (of the street parade) showed it to be literally one dense mass of people. The street cars were blocked and stood in a solid line, remaining until the show was over. There is no doubt but that the procession was an immense advertisement for the performance . . ."<sup>13</sup>



And it is no wonder the parades were so popular. As the *Union & Advertiser* pointed out, "To the thousands of poor people who (could not) afford to go to the circus, this gave them a free show that they could witness with delight . . . The other thousands who [were] fortunate enough to attend the performance, and see the great menagerie of wild animals (would) receive impressions that (could) never be effaced from their recollections."<sup>14</sup>

Jugglers juggled. Men balanced on a rolling ball and sat on top of wagons with uncaged, unchained lions and the crowds loved it. In 1878, the paper reported that the chariots of the Great London Circus were "numerous and elegant, two of them being massive proportions, and gilded from top to bottom. The ladies who ride upon the summits of each are elevated nearly to a level with the third story of ordinary buildings."<sup>15</sup> There were two bands, five elephants, several animal cages and grotesque masks on the decks of each wagon.

Sometimes to give readers a preview of the parade, the newspapers described the street parade that took place in the city the circus last visited. In 1868, the Great European Circus left Buffalo for Rochester. It was scheduled to parade from St. Paul Street to Hand to Clinton to Franklin to Main to Scio to East to Main to State to Platt through Mill to Mumford Street then to Falls Field at the Upper Falls. The *Buffalo Courier's* description of their parade was reprinted in the *Union & Advertiser*:

*"The pageant proved magnificent beyond anything of the kind ever witnessed in the city (Buffalo), and young and old felt as if it was a thing to be remembered vividly, in all the years that are to come. . . (they) experienced a glow of exhilarating satisfaction as they saw the brilliant cortege pass, and the youth of many a grey-beard was, for the time, renewed in the awakening of sentiments of admiration of which they had long since deemed themselves incapable.*

*"The satisfaction seemed universal, and indeed it could not be otherwise. First came the immense band chariot. . . suggestive of wealth and splendor, bearing the golden statue of Alexander's famous horse Bucephalus, containing the silver cornet band, and drawn by a team of gaily-decked dromedaries from the desert of Saharah. Next followed the beautiful pictorial wagon containing the baggage of the principal performers; next, still another pictorial traveling wagon, and then came the costume and property wagons and then the fairy chariot. . . drawn by twelve shetland ponies, and which is generally occupied by the star of the arena. . . . The ticket*

wagon-a well-arranged office followed. Gaily dressed knights and fair ladies on beautifully caparisoned horses came after and a band intervening; next moved ten mounted ladies in Spanish costumes. Other knights and their ladies came into view in rapid succession, but the grand feature of the glittering pageant was the colossal leonine car, bearing beautiful women, in the centre of which a large living lion, uncaged and unchained reposed in all his native majesty near his keeper. . . . The globe car was also a splendid feature, and taken altogether, we repeat, the pagant was the most magnificent of the kind ever witnessed in this city (Buffalo)."<sup>16</sup>

The gathering crowds, the noise from the elephants trumpeting, the screaming steam calliope all helped to advertise the arrival of the circus and created such an uproar that men and women flocked to see it. When Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth entered Rochester promptly at 10 a.m. one day in June 1875, it surprised many people who did not expect it so early. The *Union & Advertiser* reported, "As it was, the streets and houses along the route of the parade were lined with eager, anxious men, women and children while every available window and doorstep along the line was filled with humanity anxious to see the grand pagant."<sup>17</sup>

Americans loved the circus because it gave substance to their fantasies. As the *Albany Argus* said of one of their circus parades, "with the sun shining brightly upon the gilt tinsel and gorgeous trappings of chariots, men and horses, the pageant seemed like a realization of the wonderful stories of Eastern magnificence, which every schoolboy encounters in 'Arabian Nights.'"<sup>18</sup>





*W.C. Coup and other showmen entertained audiences with the dog execution act, a complicated act that fascinated audiences.*

## Competition to Become the Greatest Show on Earth

Circuses were quite popular by July of 1857 so it was unusual when an unnamed circus rolled into Rochester to perform before a *small* audience at Falls Field. The *Union and Advertiser* told circus critics not to be hopeful that attendance was on the decline. The low attendance was due to little advertizing. The paper said, "When the troupe appeared in our streets yesterday morning many who could have contrived some way to lay by a quarter during the month past were taken by surprise and had not the price of a ticket."<sup>19</sup>

Advertising was critical to the success of a traveling show. The *Union and Advertiser* pointed out, "If there is any one kind of amusement more than another which depends upon advertising it is the circus. The large bills posted on the fences and about the taverns are what do the business."<sup>20</sup>

Often circuses sent advance men who drove to the next city in wagons that were gilded and brightly painted with animals and performers and the name of the circus in letters large enough to be read blocks away. The advance man or agent placed announcements of the coming circus in the local newspapers and posted broadsides in every tavern and hotel and on fences and vacant houses. The circus was the earliest of advertisers to place large illustrated advertisements in the



*The scream of the calliope could be heard for twelve miles. Many startled horses bolted, one Rochester man was killed when his horse turned over his carriage when he heard the steam calliope.*

newspapers. Newspaper editors were supposed to select cuts that depicted the performances and attractions of the advertising circus, but often the circus did not give the public what it advertised.

Advertising was even more important because competition was keen among traveling shows. Several circuses a year might visit and being the first meant getting an audience among those who could afford one outing a season. Sometimes one circus immediately followed another reducing the audience of the second circus unless it could entice the audience to wait, as Barnum did. In 1879 while another circus was performing in Rochester, Barnum placed a large illustrated newspaper advertisement calling, "I am coming! Look for it! Wait for it!"<sup>21</sup>

Sabotage was another way of drawing an audience away from a competing circus. Some unscrupulous showmen rumored that Barnum was dividing his show. Barnum responded in the *Union & Advertiser* on June 23, 1873 that it was not true. Much of Barnum's attraction was in the enormity of his circus. Like other circus managers, he consolidated with, bought out and swallowed up his competition and eventually became a circus, menagerie, museum and world's fair.

He tried to buy the main attraction of his biggest competitor. The Great London Circus owned a mother and baby elephant in 1880 and Barnum wanted the baby very much because "the women flocked to see that baby elephant."<sup>22</sup> He said, "I offered the London Company Circus \$100,000 for the mother elephant and baby (the mother is worth

\$6,000) and it would have been worth twice that to me . . . (That circus) pushed me harder last spring than any other show I ever encountered. It went right along behind us, giving us the cream of the business all through New England, and I'll be blest if it didn't take as much money as we did, and right here in Bridgeport, (Connecticut, Barnum's home town) it took a few dollars more."<sup>23</sup>

Barnum later angered Great Britain when he bought Jumbo, the huge elephant, from the Royal London Zoological Gardens in 1882. Jumbo was reportedly twelve feet tall and beloved by the people of England. Political cartoons appeared in the papers pitting the Royalty of England against Uncle Sam. When Jumbo laid down on the street and refused to be transported to the United States, Barnum delighted in the news coverage. Barnum brought Jumbo to Rochester in 1882. Walking at the head of a herd of elephants, he made a grand entry at the performance on the grounds at Scio and Main Streets. Rochester was fortunate to have seen Jumbo soon after his arrival in the United States, for he traveled only three years with Barnum before he was struck by a freight train in St. Thomas, Ontario in 1885. Professor Henry A. Ward, who owned Ward's Natural Science Establishment in Rochester, stuffed Jumbo and the huge elephant continued to tour until 1890 when the skeleton was given to the Museum of Natural History in New York City.

Staying ahead of the competition was physically grueling. When the Sloat & Sheppard Circus rolled into town in July 1858 after traveling all morning, the *Union & Advertiser* remarked, "There was a large number of wagons, but the horses which drew them were poor-indicating that feed is high and the circus business rather dull this season. We hear from those who are supposed to know, that this circus is a singed cat- better than it looks."<sup>24</sup>

By the 1850's some circuses were modernizing by traveling by railroad to avoid the singed-cat look. Spalding and Rogers Circus advertised in August 1856 that they were the new railroad circus. They traveled in their own cars, conveying their own people, horses and property. "From the track to the tent!" the advertisement read. "No more skeleton team horses! Rickety wagons! Tarnished trappings! Worn out ring horses! Tired performers! As with the old foggy wagon shows, traveling all night over rough roads, but fast men! Fast women! Fast children! and Fast horses! To keep up with the times! Ring horses of spirit! And trappings lustrous!"<sup>25</sup>

Though some of the circuses traveled by railroad for decades before Barnum put his show on the tracks in 1872, Barnum was more success-

ful because the guages of the railroad tracks were now universal enough to allow him to travel greater areas and he arranged early in the year to transport his own cars for the entire season. Railroads allowed circuses to perform in a town for as little as one day. Barnum's superior organizational skills kept him in the lead.

Getting to the next town ahead of the competition was important in drawing the crowds, but there were hazards for those that set out too early.

America's Racing Association and Hippodrome set out on the traveling circuit in early May 1875 to beat the other shows on the northern route, but it was the rainy season and people would not come out. Even with waterproof tents, the people could not be attracted to the "mud-holes" where the tents were set up. Traveling and feeding the animals was expensive, too expensive for a circus to carry itself without a good return. Debts were unpaid; Creditors took legal action to attach property. The *Union & Advertiser* reported, "It got out of town but only by leaving behind a portion of the menagerie as security for obligations incurred. The *Express* which had been doing some advertising for the concern, has to take its pay in animals, to wit: one elephant, three lions, one yak, a cage of leopards, and several monkeys. The collection is at the Front Street Market tended by Sheriff Campbell. About the only income to be derived from the whole thing at present is goat's milk. The *Union* did not advertise the show, and consequently, we have no elephant on our hands."<sup>26</sup>

The paper projected that the circus could do well with the collection it had left if people continued to sympathize with it because it was under attack by Barnum. "Possibly," the paper wrote, "with good weather, it may be able yet to do a thriving business." But it wasn't all that optimistic. There were at least five circuses traveling through New England. With the good weather they all had done well, especially Barnum's. Perhaps the audience was saturated with the circus. The paper added, "America's Racing Association sought to be the first over the northern route and 'scoop' everything else; but it was only 'worsted'."<sup>27</sup>

Ten days later, the circus was stopped passing through Rochester with three elephants that it was trying to "spirit away" to its circus headquarters in Cincinnati, Ohio. The sheriff seized the elephants in East Rochester and held them to satisfy the creditors. One of the elephants was quite temperamental and the paper remarked that if it escaped there would be quite a menagerie in the streets.<sup>28</sup> With towns unwilling to extend credit, the circus became tied up in judgements and auctions to settle debts.

## The Greatest Showman on Earth

P.T. Barnum often spoke from the ring of his circus and when he did his manager said the ticket sales jumped \$500 to \$1000. When he appeared in September of 1871 in Rochester the newspaper said he "is as much of a lion as the best royal Abyssinian specimen to be found in the Department of Natural History."<sup>29</sup> The paper added "Barnum is immensely popular, and knows how, better than any man living, to cater to the eager million. The success which has attended the show for the past season is unprecedented in the annals of the profession, and is a flattering tribute to the energies of the management in organizing and equipping the largest combination of exhibitions the world has ever known."<sup>30</sup>

Barnum's ambition to put together the greatest show on earth was thought to be overambitious . . . undoable . . . lunacy. The *Union & Advertiser* remarked, "A few years ago, had anyone talked of exhibiting around the country, some of the wonders contained in it, he would have been looked upon as a lunatic. In fact P.T. Barnum has been talked of as such repeatedly, but the old adage, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating,' applies fittingly to his case. The proof of this pudding is in the wonderful success of Barnum's gigantic enterprises, such as none but himself have the courage and capacity to carry through successfully."<sup>31</sup>

People marveled at the success of a combination circus, menagerie, museum and world's fair that was so large that when it paraded through the streets of Rochester it was one mile long. An enormous number of people crowded the streets to preview the performances. But Barnum himself rivaled his own show for admiration. Mark Twain reflected the attitudes of the people of Rochester when he wrote to a friend, "Of all the amazing shows that ever were conceived of, I think this of Barnum's must surely take the lead! I hardly know which to wonder at most, its stupendousness or the pluck of the man who has dared to venture upon so vast an enterprise. I mean to go to see the show, but to me Mr. Barnum is the biggest marvel connected with it after all."<sup>32</sup>

Barnum became a household word. People loved him not only because he brought the largest show in the world to them, but because they marveled at his efficiency, morality and organization. He made every worker in his circus a specialist. The circus was well organized. The trains were scheduled at the beginning of the season and he constantly innovated the traveling circus. For instance, he added sleeping cars to his train. He allowed no liquor to be sold on or near his show.

Only a few selected side shows were permitted to take advantage of the attendance at his circus. One, for example, was a refreshment stand run by the women of the Rochester Orphan Asylum.

The people appreciated his devotion, his dedication to "elevating and refining this class of popular amusement."<sup>33</sup> He was a model gentleman that parents could hold up to their children as an example. The *Union & Advertiser* said of his autobiography: "It places before the youth of the country a complete history of the manner in which a moderate amount of genius combined with lofty ambition and indefatigable energy can surmount the most stubborn obstacles, override the most terrible disasters and achieve the grandest success."<sup>34</sup>



*Barnum's circus was so large he could not exhibit at Falls Field. His three ring circus was the 'greatest show on earth'.*

## Under The Big Top

In 1873 Barnum's circus was so large, only the lot on Hunter Street near St. Mary's Hospital could contain it. The traditional circus grounds at Falls Field was not large enough for the "Greatest Show On Earth," that the *Syracuse Courier* said gave "the appearance of an oriental city" with all the tents. Many people crowded the streets walking to the grounds, others pushed onto the already crowded West Avenue street cars. The scene in Rochester was much like that described in Syracuse where

*"The sidewalks were literally crowded by citizens of every class-the merchant with his children, the mechanic with his wife and babies,*



*the minister with his family, the man from the country with the ever present whip, the country bumpkin with his sweetheart and peanuts, the gambler, the pickpocket, the harlot, the bootblack and all. Vehicles of every description thronged the street from the coach of the wealthy citizen, driven by a liveried coachman, to the rickety one-horse shay. This nondescript mass swelled and surged from all directions to the grounds where the tents were pitched. Scattered along the street were stands where the unsophisticated could buy colored water for lemonade, peanuts, ginger cake, lager and other refreshments. Here was a chance for the marksman to try his skill by shooting at a target; there was a chance for the man of muscle to test his strength with a lifting machine; and over yonder the strength of the lungs was tested by blowing up something. Every scheme imaginable for making money was to be found, from the miniature lemonade stand of some juvenile, to the side show where could be seen the fat man and fat woman, the bearded woman and all the other living curiosities.”<sup>35</sup>*

Before 1825, circuses exhibited only in cities large enough to have a permanent building for them. After 1824, Rochester sheltered circuses on the east side of Exchange Street. But after 1825, portable canvas tents freed the circus to travel to many towns with only an empty lot to attract it.

Rochester’s circuses were set up at Merchants’ Exchange, Louis’ Tavern (location unknown), empty lots at Bay Street, Driving Park Avenue west of Dewey, East Main Street and North Union, Andrews and Front, Emerson and Norman, Scio between the NYCRR tracks and Wells Street (sometimes called the ball field), Exchange Street south of Court at the Canal (where a circus once wintered), the hay market on the west side of the river, State Street, Christopher’s Mansion House, the corner of Frances and Strong Streets, the foot of Mumford Street on the river flats, and the popular Falls Field at the Upper Falls.

Falls Field was popular but the high winds forced many circuses to fold up their tents early and a few times tents were blown down. In September 1854, Dan Rice’s tents were blown down several times on separate occasions and a few people were injured. The *Rochester Daily Union* reported in 1854:

*“his canvas was prostrated twice by the gale, and once the performance was prevented altogether. Yesterday afternoon, just as the audience had begun to assemble, a great wind struck the canvas-breaking the centre pole, and throwing the whole concern to the ground. No one was injured; but the damage could not be*

repaired in time for an afternoon performance.

*"At the evening hour for opening, the canvas was again in order, and an immense multitude of people-men, women and children-flocked to the exhibition. The tent was filled to overflowing at an early hour, and hundreds went away unable to gain admittance. The performance went on well as it could be conducted with such a crowd, until near 10 o'clock, when a violent storm of wind and rain commenced. The canvas was lifted up from the earth, and thrown down upon the multitude. The wildest excitement followed. Women and children shrieked as if in agony of despair, and three or four thousand persons were struggling in total darkness, amidst a heavy shower, to extricate themselves from the position in which they were placed. The canvas was cut in hundreds of places, and the people crawled through the rents, and on the cloth over the multitude to a place of safety outside. That some lives were not lost, is indeed a miracle. A good many were slightly injured; but none seriously. . . . The people quickly dispersed after the accident to escape from the drenching rain."* The circus packed up and left.<sup>36</sup>

Dan Rice's audience miraculously escaped death when his tent collapsed, but a few years before a man was killed when the Welch, Delevan & Co. Circus tent collapsed during a performance at Falls Field. The company donated the entire proceeds of the performance including the salaries to the widow. In return, the city refunded the fifty dollar license fee to the circus.<sup>37</sup>

The early shows to visit Rochester were not much more than menageries. They exhibited lions and other curiosities. One menagerie visited Rochester at the C.G. Christopher Mansion House in 1823. It displayed a lion and a wide variety of wild animals. In 1835 a trained flea circus performed there. Columbus, the famous elephant appeared at Merchants' Exchange in 1839 at the age of 25. His 8120 pounds were documented by the display of a weigh master's certificate. Other circuses came to Rochester to exhibit a zebra, an emu, a camel and a giraffe or camel leopard. One giraffe died in transport and was stuffed for exhibition.

In 1829, the Bernard & Page Circus entertained in Rochester demonstrating several different ways to mount a horse; and a pony retrieved a whip, a hat, and a handkerchief, then jumped over a bar and up on a table where he unsaddled himself and gave the saddle to his master. A clown performed on a tightrope and balanced on a chair and did a backwards somersault while shoot-

ing a pistol. Often there were short skits performed like "The Miller's Frolic or My Grandmother and Grandfather's Return From the Mill."

The Eagle Circus exhibited two acrobats on two horses side by side in 1836. They proudly advertised their traveling arena in the *Rochester Republican*. Acrobatics and gymnastics became a large part of the circus performance, reflecting the growing interest in them particularly after the Civil War.<sup>38</sup> Circuses like the Bowery Amphitheatre which exhibited near the American Hotel in 1842 were typical of circuses of the period. In one act an India rubber man took every limb out of joint. The *Rochester Daily Democrat* said in 1842 that unless the man was formed without bones, he could not accomplish the contortions that he did. The entire troupe vaulted as a finale.

Feats of strength were popular. One performer with Spalding Circus in 1845 fired a 1000 pound cannon at rest on his chest. Another performer from the Bowery Amphitheatre caught a cannonball on the back of his neck while riding horseback.

The great interest in slavery was also reflected in the performances of men like John Smith who sang slave songs and danced and played a banjo for Spalding's North American Circus that visited Rochester on numerous occasions. John Conny and "Piccaninny Coleman" performed with him on State Street near the railroad in May of 1845. George Sweet performed for the Bowery Amphitheatre singing Ethiopian songs and S. W. Seely and John Diamond also performed.

The crowds also loved the daring and danger of the circus. Some were attracted to the trapeze act. The *Union and Advertiser* reported, "The trapeze act . . . creates a porcupine feeling as to the cranium, and if one's hair doesn't stand on end during the aerial flight of (the performer), it may be owing to entire baldness of the spectator. It is not likely to be from any other reason."<sup>39</sup>

Many of the dangerous acts were routine because they were seen in every performance. It was accidents that seldom happened that caused "one's hair to stand on end" during a dangerous performance. In July of 1857, Thayer & Noyes' lion tamer was attacked and injured by the lion when he entered the cage during a Rochester performance. It was a common act that probably brought many yawns until this reminder of the danger revived the spectators' interest.

Barnum's tents were filled with daring performances, live

animals and mechanical amusements. He exhibited a calliope, an "automaton trumpeter, organ grinder, and bell ringer", a mechanical Napoleon, sleeping beauty, and glass blowers. He exhibited monkeys in a two-story cage. There were special attractions like "Zip" the man-monkey and Admiral Dot, a dwarf. Thousands of people passed through the tents looking in awe at the collections, waiting anxiously for the beginning of the performance. Fourteen thousand people could be seated inside Barnum's massive tents and people were turned away by the hundreds because of a full house.

The performances took place in two rings simultaneously. There were tumblers, contortionists, acrobats, gymnasts, riders and jugglers. The *Union & Advertiser* said it was the largest menagerie and circus that ever visited Rochester. What caught much of the attention was a new invention called a talking machine.

One of the most impressive Barnum displays was the "Congress of Nations." There were as many as thirteen countries represented by a costumed character each riding in a carriage of state. The countries and city-states included were Great Britain, France, Rome, Germany, Turkey, Italy, Egypt, Russia, Ireland, Spain, China, India and America. The *Union & Advertiser* wrote that the "congress" was indeed a "great spectacular display, a panorama of brilliancy and beauty, in which the idea of variety in national traits and characteristic manners was aptly conveyed by all which could engage the attention or make the illusion of being in royal presence seem real." The grand pageant closed with the appearance of the car representing our own republic, Columbia's form at the summit and around her grouped the Fathers of the Republic, with the "Old Continentals" marching as escort.<sup>40</sup>

There were horse races and chariot races, a race among three Romans who each straddled upon the backs of two horses. The chariots raced with horses two and four abreast. There were elephant races, pony races with monkey jockeys and goats that rode horses. There were sack races, ostrich races, snow shoe races and Indian chief races.

In the 1870's, curiosity about Indians in the West was great and Barnum was quick to add the attractions of the wild West show to his own performances. In one of the Indian scenes, a band of Indians set up camp and chased a buffalo around the track. In another scene a white prisoner was led around the track. He was "considerably maltreated" and bound to the back of a horse and sent running around the track. There was a race among young braves

riding ponies and in one race a young Indian raced against a horse. The scene that was most exciting to a Rochester reporter was the Indian chase for a wife. Several worthy Indian braves gave chase to the daughter of the Chief who had been placed on the back of a swift horse. She was married to the swiftest brave.<sup>41</sup> Rochester was visited by P.T. Barnum, Dan Rice, W. C. Coup, June, Angevine & Titus, James Welch, Levi North, Rowe & Co., Rockwell & Stone, Sloat & Shepard's Great Northern Circus, Rivers & Derious, Jim Meyers, John Robinson and many more.

Dan Rice was a popular clown who kept the crowd in tears of laughter as he took stabs at political leaders. He was a clown in the ring of his own circus too, and his presence like that of Barnum's increased the sale of tickets.

In 1850 Dan Rice was arrested by the Monroe County sheriff and kept in the jail near the river and old Erie train shed. Rice was arrested for slandering a man named Van Orden whom he claimed stole his farm, his show and his money. The Pittsford man filed a slander complaint and Dan Rice found it difficult to get bail. When bail was raised, the sheriff would not accept it for some reason and an angry Dan Rice claimed the sheriff and Van Orden were in cahoots against him. He scrawled the words to a song on the wall of the jail in which for the first time the jail was referred to as the Blue Eagle jail, named for the Eagle Hotel at the Four Corners where Rice usually stayed. He named the sheriff and Mr. Van Orden and the injustices they committed against him and he sang the song frequently in his performances.

W. C. Coup was Barnum's manager for years. He claimed that in 1870 he organized the show to be so large that he needed 350 horses to move it around the country. Two years later he doubled its size and engaged 60 railroad cars to transport it on time. He started the Hippodrome in New York City. He said, "The old fossilized croakers said it would break us," but it didn't.

In his own show, W. C. Coup included a hanging dog act that was sometimes performed in other circuses with a dog or a horse. In the act there was a theft committed by a dog. One thieving dog removed a collar from another dog and ran off with it. A third dog chased it, took the collar and returned it. The trainer placed a noose around the neck of the criminal and another dog took the noose in his mouth, jumped a cross bar and pulled on the rope, raising the dog off his feet. He was suspended for a few moments and let to fall, apparently dead. He was placed on a wagon and a

large dog pulled the wagon out of the ring with two smaller dogs seated on the wagon with the executed dog.<sup>42</sup> This was a popular act, in part, because it was complicated.

Another popular performance was the bullfight with a horse disguised as a bull. In another, St. George slew the dragon. In others, horses raced, danced around the ring and kept perfect time for somersaulting riders who intended to meet them from the air.

There were Bedouins, wild Fiji cannibals, Indians, rare animals like the orangutang, the giraffe, sea lions and oddities such as bear woman, a woman described as human, but with double gums and teeth, hair over her entire body and the ability to speak in several languages. There were clowns and "Negro impersonators" who sang slave songs and spirituals. Aerial acts and trapeze acts were especially popular. One man in the Jim Meyers' Great Show walked upside down on a ceiling with only a pair of smooth sandals and no apparatus or tricks (So they advertised!)

Barnum was by far the most extravagant in the costuming and trappings of his show. Some of his chariots were three stories high—so high that one traveling through the streets of Rochester once broke a telephone line.

The circuses were enormously popular in Rochester and those that attended them remembered them, but Barnum's show was a lifetime experience. The *Union & Advertiser* reported, "The advent of Barnum's show is not like an ordinary entertainment, a mere visit which passes by and is dropped from memory until the next time it happens to come around; but is an event which occupies a permanent date in the calendar of many people's lives."<sup>43</sup>

#### Footnotes

1. Flint, Richard W. "The Circus in America," *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, summer 1983.
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3. *IBID.*
4. *IBID.*
5. *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, June 12, 1849.
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7. *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, May 11, 1844.
8. *Union & Advertiser*, August 15, 1866.
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11. *Union & Advertiser*, June 3, 1878.

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13. *Union & Advertiser*, August 18, 1880.
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16. *Union & Advertiser*, August 24, 1868.
17. *Union & Advertiser*, June 14, 1875.
18. *Union & Advertiser*, July 1, 1871.
19. *Union & Advertiser*, July 14, 1857.
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21. *Union & Advertiser*, July 9, 1879.
22. *Union & Advertiser*, August 17, 1880.
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24. *Union & Advertiser*, July 13, 1857.
25. *Rochester Daily Union*, August 6, 1856.
26. *Union & Advertiser*, May 17, 1875.
27. *IBID.*
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29. *Union & Advertiser*, September 16, 1871.
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31. *Union & Advertiser*, August 27, 1874.
32. *Union & Advertiser*, July 14, 1875.
33. *Union & Advertiser*, July 9, 1879.
34. *Union & Advertiser*, August 27, 1874.
35. *Union & Advertiser*, June 26, 1873.
36. *Rochester Daily Union*, September 20, 1854.
37. *Common Council Proceedings*, April 24, 1849; ready reference file, Rochester Public Library, Local History Division.
38. *op cit.*, Flint, Richard
39. *Union & Advertiser*, July 8, 1871.
40. *Union & Advertiser*, June 15, 1875.
41. *IBID.*
42. *Union & Advertiser*, June 18, 1879.
43. *Union & Advertiser*, August 27, 1874.

*Back page: Jumbo created an international sensation when Barnum bought him in 1882. He came to Rochester that year and when he was killed in 1885, he was stuffed by Henry Ward of Rochester.*

*Copy edited by Hans Munsch*

