Chapter VIII
Animals and Trainers

"Bulls and..."

We begin this chapter with the number-one-most popular attraction in the circus. P.T. Barnum said over a hundred years ago that elephants and clowns were the two pegs on which to hang a circus. A survey of some 1,500 members of the Circus Fans of America completed in 1985, by Pemar Services, suggested that the elephants have not slipped in popularity. What is still the main reason most people go to the circus, the only performing act without a single negative vote in the survey? The elephants! Part of the reason is the apparent contradiction between their enormous size and their paradoxically sensitive looks and disposition. They can crush a lion with a single kick or slap with their trunk, and yet we popularly think of them as being afraid of mice—a most decidedly untrue rumor.

What magnificent creatures they are: powerful, and according to many trainers unpredictably dangerous. Both male and female elephants are called bulls, and they are both loved and quietly feared by the men who work most closely with them. They are capable of extraordinary loyalty and genuine affection, both for each other and for their trainers, and their long eyelashes and mournful expressions give them an air of possessing uncannily human emotions and intelligence. Gunther Gebel-Williams, who has worked with elephants, horses, dogs, and a great variety of cats, credits elephants with being by far the most intelligent of circus creatures. At the same time, bull men have learned by experience that it is not smart to completely trust so large, so powerful, and so distinctly not-human a creature. Males are more unpredictable and dangerous than females. Africans are traditionally harder to train, also more unpredictable and dangerous than Asians, who have a longer history of cooperation with man. But that may all be about to change.

Recently, it has been orphaned Africans, whose mothers have been murdered by ivory poachers, who are making ever more frequent appearances in American circuses. It has not been possible to import Asians to the United States for display by zoos or circuses since the mid-70s. Future Asians seen in this country will have to be bred in this country, a process which has heretofore been difficult at best. Now, with increasingly tightening restrictions on elephant exporting in the Asian countries, at the same time that domesticated elephants are being superseded by tractor power, the long history of the Asian elephant in association with man is in imminent danger of collapse. Under the pressure of population and agriculture, the very survival of the Asian elephant is as much at risk as that of the African.

There is no question that the African elephant is in immediate danger of extinction. Over half of the entire population of African elephants has been killed in the last eight years. It is estimated as of this writing that there are a mere 600,000 animals left on the entire continent, and they are being killed at the rate of 80,000 a year. African elephants are the victims of a continuing war of words, in which no one can even agree whether a worldwide ban on trade in ivory would be a help or a hindrance. And they are the victims of the ever-expanding needs of human populations to grow food. Despite all the fervent and genuine wishes of naturalists and animal-rights lovers, this earth can never again sustain the great elephant herds of the past, unless by war, plague, or mismanagement we are successful in killing off substantial percentages of its human population. So while we humans argue about how to protect elephants, and what to do with them once we have them protected, the elephants continue to be slaughtered by the thousands, illegally by poachers for their ivory, legally by "legitimate" ivory traders, and legally by game wardens and farmers protecting their agricultural food supply. In a bitter ironic twist, 1989 may have marked the last year in which baby African elephants can be imported by American circuses and zoos for display purposes. Without a market, many of the orphans will in the future undoubtedly be
destroyed along with their mothers. Unless new knowledge and innovative domestic breeding programs are successful in compensating for import restrictions and the lack of respect for animals in their natural state, it is distinctly possible that future generations will not be able to experience what earth's largest living land mammal, either African or Asian, looked like, or how it behaved.

**Characteristics**

The largest Africans tend to be somewhat taller and leaner than their heavier cousins, the Asians. That distinction doesn't do much good in identifying domesticated animals, which may be younger and smaller than their potential maximum growth in the wild. Still, it's easy to tell the difference between an Asian and an African elephant: The African has huge floppy ears and a domed head, while the Asian has little ears and two bumps on top of its head. Africans can sport the longer tusks, over twelve feet if they are not broken off in battle or hacked off by poachers.

Among the elephants’ more impressive characteristics are their tusks, the middle incisor teeth of the upper jaw; only some Asian females have no tusks. They will grow around two inches a year throughout the elephant's life, new ones replacing broken-off ones. Domestic elephants frequently have theirs trimmed or removed for safety purposes. Elephants are extremely light-footed and able to move in total silence, because they are basically walking on tip-toe, supported by a large pad under the heel that cushions the foot like a running shoe. There are two temporal glands on the elephant's head, from which a gummy substance may ooze when he or she is in an excited state. During “musth,” which occurs only in mature males, the substance is thick and foulsmelling. It is apparently associated with sexual dominance during periods of competition for mating. Trainers agree that elephants can be unpredictably temperamental and dangerously violent during musth.

Elephants are covered with a stiff bristly hair, too tough for razors. Circus elephants are given haircuts ever so delicately, with a blowtorch, and they seem to love it. Their hide is tough and thick, varying from three-quarters of an inch to three inches, but it is extremely sensitive. They can feel mosquitoes landing on them, and a hard slap or blow from the handle of an elephant hook by a trainer is most certainly painful. Most sensitive is the end of his nose, or trunk. The end of an Asian's trunk has a finger for grabbing objects; an African's trunk has two fingers. There is a large hole in the center of an elephant's skull at the base of its trunk, and many people think that the found skulls gave rise to the legend of the Cyclops, Homer's one-eyed giants. The trunk is a multi-purpose instrument for smelling, grabbing, and making a great variety of noises for communication. With it, an elephant can whistle, chirp, squeal, thump on the ground, trumpet, and rumble. Much of the rumbling is at a pitch too low to be heard by human ears, and carries mating calls over great distances to other elephants. The trunk may also be used for holding, blowing, or lifting water to the mouth. It can not be used like a drinking straw, however, since after all, it is primarily a nose.

A circus elephant will drink from 50 to 100 gallons of water a day, much more than little boys who dreamt of running away to the circus to water elephants could ever have managed. A circus elephant will also eat up to 100 pounds of hay and sweet feed every day. Its inefficient digestive system allows it to eat almost anything, half of which is wasted. Fresh grasses are a favorite, but peanuts, tobacco, stale donuts, and paper will do in a pinch. Elephants are sexually mature at around fifteen to twenty years; they can live up to seventy years. Pregnancy lasts about 23 months, and the average female may produce around four 200 pound newborns during her lifetime.
Great Circus Elephants

Elephants have been involved with parades and circus-like activities for over four thousand years, and they have been a part of the American circus since 1832. Their long tradition of domesticated cooperation with man rivals that of the horse. Their extreme sociability and apparent friendliness, patience, and tolerance, and their great strength and size make them ideal for use in the circus. According to a 1985 census, there were well over 250 elephants in American circuses, and baby Africans are still coming into the country rapidly.

Circus back yards are full of tales of elephant lore. We saw in Chapter 3 how Old Bet and Romeo came to be immortalized on the town squares of Somers and Delavan. According to the Cincinnati Enquirer in 1880, another Romeo used to travel with the Uncle John Robinson Circus on the deck of a riverboat. He earned a mischievous but lovable reputation by regularly hauling in the hawser rope, and once almost sinking the ship by banging around a few loose logs. Moved inside for safety, he grew intrigued with the bell wires running from the pilot house to the engine room, and began to ring the bells himself, signalling "all engines stop!" The pilot and engineer had to arrange alternate communications for the rest of the trip. Then there's the one about the elephant who snatched and ate a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and an envelope containing $1,000 in cash from the shirt of an Oklahoma man. The cigarettes and lighter were done for, but a lot of administered mineral oil produced enough bits and pieces of the bills for the Federal Reserve to replace the cash... Or the one about Tommy Hanneford's elephant, hired by a sleep shop owner for a publicity stunt to test out water beds. She was so distraught when she couldn't get herself up from the bed that she would have caused an elephant stampede in the basement of the Lansing Civic Center had not Tommy punctured the mattress with his knife.

Not all elephant stories are so lighthearted and benign, however. Most trainers think of their bulls as highly intelligent animals with whom they have formed a partnership, and there is genuine affection between them. But there are also those less responsible would-be trainers who perhaps see themselves as the losers in life's power struggles, victims who set out to avenge themselves by cruel subjugation of these huge beasts. There are plenty of horror stories about elephants who suddenly turned on their trainers, or bystanders, or anyone else whom the elephant deemed its enemy. Not all rampages can be attributed to bad treatment, though, because elephants, like people, are unpredictable individuals, with quirky and little understood personalities of their own. Many of the stories suggest that the old axiom, "An elephant never forgets," is rooted in fact. Elephants do forget faces, jobs, and tricks, and they can get as frightened and confused as the rest of us. But like the rest of us, they rarely forget strong reactions to punishment and reward, and often they can apparently develop a pathological affection for and loyalty to one man alone. Tichi, one of the Ringling Red Unit's bulls, is fiercely jealous of her trainer, Gunther Gebel-Williams, and won't tolerate the presence of his wife Sigrid. But Black Diamond's jealousy and memory are still talked about by many circus folks. This huge male Asian elephant was brought onto the Al G. Barnes Circus as an occasional stand-in for the notorious Tusko. Black Diamond evidently harbored resentments for some time when he saw his trusted first trainer walk out on him for a woman. Three years later, in 1928, when the trainer and his wife came to visit the circus, he attacked and killed the woman, and threw the trainer across several cars. The old bull was led off to a firing squad for his misguided obsession, and it took 170 bullets to kill him. At the time there were two other elephants of note on the Barnes show that add to our belief in elephantine memory: one-eyed Pearl and Tusko. Sidney Rink, who had been a superintendent of elephants with Al G. Barnes, once accidentally knocked out Pearl's eye, and she never forgot who had maimed her. According to Slim Lewis, she drove Rink off the show and for the rest of her life sought revenge on all black people.
Along with Henry Clay and Eph Thompson, an independent elephant showman from Europe who later worked with Forepaugh, Sidney Rink was one of the few well-known black elephant trainers in the country. He was one of a family of twenty-nine children, who started as a pony boy with the John Robinson show and became a headliner in charge of three herds of elephants. One day in 1930, the year the Miller 101 Ranch show folded, Rink found himself working for Miller management. His job was to load the elephants for delivery to the receiver in bankruptcy, crossing a picket line of angry unpaid performers and workers. Already seventy-four years old by then, but completely undaunted, he tailed up his elephants, mounted the lead, and had her pick up a logging chain. The line charged for the railroad cars, wildly swinging the chain from left to right, and flew through the picket line. Rink died at eighty-five, on March 14, 1941.

The Mighty Tusko, formerly "Ned," was the biggest elephant on the North American continent since the days of Jumbo. The tusks which earned him his name were about seven feet long. A temperamental Asian male, he was ten feet, two inches tall, and weighed over seven tons. He didn't work or perform on the Al G. Barnes show, but he was a major drawing card all the same, merely from his outlaw reputation. Before Al G. Barnes sold out to the American Circus Corporation, he and Tusko had a very strong mutual affection, and when Barnes left, the elephant became completely unmanageable. No other circus would touch him, and he spent some time as an exhibition road show, accompanied by his keeper and lifelong devotee, young George "Slim" Lewis. Tusko was to finish out his days in the Seattle Zoo, dying of a blood clot on June 10, 1932.

Al G. Barnes, born in 1862 as Alpheus George Barnes Stonehouse, was the gentle owner of one of America's most popular circuses, and widely known for his affinity with animals. It was said that he alone could talk Tusko out of one of his murderous rampages, merely with the sound of his voice. Like Wayne Franzen, that other "Doctor Doolittle" in the modern circus, Barnes grew up on the family farm, where early in his life he acquired his great love for animals and a complete intolerance for cruelty to animals. As a boy he was opposed to joining his father and brother on hunting trips. Once he found an orphaned black bear cub and took it home; within days his dogs and he and the bear were all playfully wrestling together. By the time Al was fourteen, he was breaking horses for his father's stock business, a feat he evidently accomplished mostly by "talking" to them. His father liked to buy cheaper hard-to-manage horses knowing that Al could calm them down. He had a standing $100 bet that Al could break any horse brought to him, and he never lost his bet. During his long life, Al's uncanny ability to talk to wild animals and seemingly be completely understood by them, made him a much-loved legend. Near the end of his life, he could still carry on a friendly howling conversation in the desert with a skittish coyote. It is little wonder that Tusko saw in him a friend.

Elephants have often been at the center of a circus' life. When "Columbia" was born on the Cooper-Bailey show in 1880, the first elephant to be born in the New World, P.T. Barnum was so impressed he offered to buy the calf for $100,000. Bailey not only refused to sell, but publicized the offer and attracted more customers of his own to see the baby elephant that Barnum would pay so much to have. Finally, Barnum was so impressed with his rival's ballyhooing that he offered to join forces with Bailey and form the Barnum & London Circus. Then there was Toung Taloung, the highly touted Burmese "Sacred White" elephant acquired by Barnum in 1884, which actually turned out to be a rather boring mottled gray albino. Not to be outdone, Adam Forepaugh scraped down and whitewashed one of his elephants, and launched the famous "White Elephant Wars." He nervily claimed that his "Light of Asia" was the only genuine white elephant, and that Barnum's was a complete fraud.

The most highly publicized elephant in the history was undoubtedly Jumbo, whose name, shortened
from Mumbo-Jumbo, has been added to our permanent vocabulary for denoting enormity. Barnum secretly bought Jumbo from the London Zoological Gardens for the paltry sum of $10,000. The bull had been a resident of Paris and London zoos since he was captured as a baby, and coming into a musth, which was little understood at the time, he was reputed to be growing difficult to manage. He was by then over eleven feet high, a foot taller than the later Tusko, and he weighed about one ton less—6½ tons. So far as anyone knows, Jumbo was the largest elephant ever measured in captivity, although there have been larger Africans in the wild. The example in the rotunda of the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History is more than a foot taller and probably about a ton heavier. As soon as the sale was made public, the English created a marketing bonanza for Barnum and Bailey by demanding that it be cancelled. Thousands of school children and even Queen Victoria herself urged that the suddenly beloved Jumbo be kept on British soil. But their pleas fell on deaf ears; for by now, Barnum knew what a plum he had gotten, and he boasted that he would even turn down an offer of 100,000 pounds to void the sale.

By the time he arrived in New York, Jumbo had generated such a sentimental hullabaloo on both sides of the Atlantic that he became the single biggest draw in Barnum's career. The world went "Jumbo-crazy," and for his part, the now gentle Jumbo seemed to love all the attention. For three and a half years, he was the much-loved feature attraction on the circus. In his career, he sold millions of souvenirs and photos on which he was portrayed, and gave "at least a million children" rides on his back, as well as Queen Victoria, Winston Churchill, and Teddy Roosevelt. When he was killed by a passing freight train on September 15, 1885, in St. Thomas, Ontario, he was mourned by millions all over the world. Jumbo's stuffed hide eventually went on display at Tufts University, where Barnum was a trustee, and it remained there until it was destroyed by fire in 1975. Jumbo is still featured on the school's official logo.

In recent years, only one elephant has been given anything like the star status that was accorded to Jumbo and his early followers. Big Tommy was born in Thailand, and picked up just after his fortieth birthday by the Ringling organization from Tony Diano in 1986. He was renamed "King Tusk," the "Largest Mammal Travelling the Earth Today!" The forty-five-year-old bull stands ten feet high at the shoulder, and weighs about seven tons, shorter but heavier than Jumbo. Lee Keener, who has been his friend and trainer for over twenty years, says that King Tusk is pretty docile and well-behaved, and always does what he's supposed to do. Featured on the Red Unit of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1987 and 1988, he was then shipped to Japan to headline the Gold Unit tour. However, if size is what all the fuss is about, Colonel Joe, a castrated male bull now with the Circus Vargas, may soon become the largest mammal traveling with an American Circus. Only fifteen years old, he already weighs an estimated five tons.

**Bull Tricks**

Performing elephants are taught a number of standard tricks, although every elephant is different, and not all can do every trick. Nevertheless, all individual routines are variations on and combinations of these basic tricks. Hugo Schmidt was one of the best-known boss bull men in the country when he came to the Ringling show from Germany after the war. His son Roman Schmidt has recently enjoyed success in breeding Asian elephants in this country. Hugo told Bill Ballantine that the first hurdle in training is getting past an elephant's kick to get a chain on its leg. Training then starts with keeping the trunk preoccupied with a stick or "tail-up" trunk-to-tail with another elephant, just to keep it from getting into mischief. Lying down, sitting down, standing on the front or back legs, mounting the pedestal, called a "bull tub," and spinning around are the next lessons. A dangerous trick taught the more trusted bulls is to
hold a human being in their mouths while they spin. Their grip must be gentle enough to avoid crushing skulls or leg bones, but firm enough to keep the chorus girls or trainers spinning on a horizontal axis without flying out of the ring. Other difficult variations, like standing on one front foot, or lightly stepping on or half-lying over the body of the trainer, may be taught if the elephant can handle them.

Ben Williams likes to work that trick with Anna May in their fast-paced solo act on the Big Apple Circus, using it to suggest a fearless trust and rapport between man and beast. Ben also puts himself through horizontal spins with his leg in Anna May's mouth. In the 1989 show, Anna May and Ben introduced the newest member of the Big Apple elephant family, an African punk named Ned, perhaps after Tusko's original name. "Punk," a word often used to describe a circus youngster of the human variety as well, is the circus word for a baby elephant. Ned arrived in an oversized baby carriage, pushed around the ring by Anna May in her Sunday best, continuing a long tradition of elephant baby carriages in the circus. Ben Williams is the step-son of William "Buckles" Woodcock, one of the country's foremost bull men, to whom Anna May and Ned belong. Buckles is himself the son of prominent elephant trainers Babe and Bill Woodcock, Sr., who had the center ring bull act with Sells-Floto in 1931. Buckles likes to say that his family was in the circus when the Ringling boys were still wearing their wooden shoes. He acquired his nickname as a tot, when he wanted nothing more than to run away from - not to-the circus, and was buckled into a harness to keep him in sight of his mother. He is most grateful that the harness wasn't fitted with zippers: "Zippers Woodcock wouldn't have the same ring," he says. Ignoring his father's advice to get into the money end of circus, because "an elephant trainer should have a strong back, a weak mind, and a savage disposition, and you don't qualify on any of those accounts," Buckles followed his parents into the business. In 1959 he married Ben's mother, Barbara Williams, the fourth generation of another family of circus animal experts. He is now widely recognized as the reigning authority on elephants in America, and keeps detailed, accurate records on almost every bull that sets foot in the country. Among the other major contemporary bull men are Rex Williams, Barbara's first husband and Ben's father, with the Circus Vargas; and Donnie Carr, who manages one of the largest single herds traveling in the circus with Carson & Barnes.

One climactic trick, which traditionally comes at the end of most multiple elephant acts in the circus, is the long-mount. Fred Logan, the boss bull man for the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus, is one of the few who show a walking longmount: All ten of his bulls walk forward in a straight line on their hind legs, with their front legs braced on the back of the elephant in front. It's an impressive sight. Most other shows use a stationary long-mount, some trainers claiming that it's too hard on the elephants to have them walk during the long-mount. Fred is from Saskatchewan, and came to the United States to work for Terrell Jacobs. He became an assistant to Hugo Schmidt on the Ringling show before he moved off to be Bill Woodcock Sr.'s assistant on the Kelly-Miller show in 1949. He's been with Beatty-Cole since 1970. Another of Hugo Schmidt's assistants, Axel Gautier, remained with the Ringling show to replace Schmidt, and was in charge of the Blue Unit's herd through 1989. "You cannot make an elephant do anything she doesn't want to do," says Gautier. "My training is based totally on coaxing and rewards." ⁹ Gautier's elephants, now in their late thirties, were all imported together in 1955 as punks, a brand new herd whose adorable cuteness stole the hearts of the American public. Axel's wife Donna, and his two sons Michael and Kevin, now the seventh generation of circus Gautiers, also participated in the elephant act.

Gunther Gebel-Williams

Over on the Red Unit of the Ringling show, the wunderkind of animal trainers controls the elephant herd—and the tigers, and the liberty horses. It's very easy to get hooked by all the hype surrounding superstar Gunther Gebel-Williams, or to be put off by it. This cheery, blond-headed, muscular man,
seemingly full of his own self-importance, is a genuine culture hero, and one of the most charismatic figures the circus has ever produced. But behind all that glitz and hype is a talented, much admired, and widely respected man. Many circus experts are even tempted to call him the greatest animal trainer who ever lived. Standing in center ring, surrounded by three rings of elephants, he can utter a single command in his unique "elephant dialect," part English, part German, and part grunt, which seems to be interpreted differently by each elephant. As a result, the entire herd executes a variety of tricks all at the same time. Whatever people call him, he genuinely loves his animals, and he is never happier than when he is working with them. Gunther's son Mark Oliver Gebel, formerly "Buffy," helps with the elephant act, and is being groomed to take it over after his father completes his Farewell Tour in 1990. His daughter Tina has a Russian wolfhound act, and his wife Sigrid often presents the liberty horses trained by Gunther. But it is for his caged tiger act that he is now best known—which makes an appropriate transition to the next great category of circus animal acts.

Born in the then German town of Schweidnitz, now part of Poland, Gunther Gebel was twelve when he first hooked up with a circus in Cologne, Germany, after the war. At that time, his widowed mother briefly became a seamstress for the Circus Williams. When she left, Gunther stayed as an apprentice acrobat under the watchful idance of the Williams family. In the beginning, he wasn't even interested in animal training: "It seemed so much work," he said. But soon his natural instincts and some professional encouragement made him into a proficient horseman and elephant trainer. When Gunther was sixteen, Harry Williams died in the ring. The boy adopted the name of the man who had been like a father to him, and at Mrs. Williams' request took over the leadership of the circus. By 1968 he and the Circus Williams were widely known for the best animal acts in Europe, and especially for his famous mixed act with elephants and tigers. That year, Irvin Feld came over to make a pitch for him to come to the Ringling show. Out of loyalty to Mrs. Williams, Gunther wouldn't budge until Feld had agreed to pay her $2 million to buy out the whole circus.

Gunther Gebel-Williams made his debut with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1969, and has been with them ever since. He put together his renowned large-scale caged tiger act for the first time at Feld's request. Without a single vacation for twenty years, he has spent his entire life with his animals, feeding them, caring for them when they are sick, and rewarding them liberally. Watching him in the ring with his tigers and/or leopards is a study in the mutual respect between man and beast that marks the European "natural" tradition of animal acts. The animals are presented with a minimum of noise and fuss, in a series of tableaux and stunts that display their intelligence and beauty, as well as the power of the trainer's control. There is genuine affection and respect flowing between man and beast, if absolutely no trust. The routine may look casual and relaxed, but it's actually extremely demanding. Gunther must remain agile, and he is acutely aware of every individual personality, and alert to every mood change, tail flick, or flattened ear in the ring with him. The big cats are predictably unpredictable, as he well knows from the 500 stitches that cover his body—scars earned not from cats attacking him, but from trying to keep the peace between rival animals.

**Great Trainers of the Past**

The American style of caged animal presentation conveys a completely different mood. Now fallen out of favor in the face of more sophisticated "civilized" treatment of animals, the American school of wild animal training began with Isaac Van Amburgh, when he climbed into the National Menagerie's little rectangular cage with a lion, a tiger, and a leopard in 1833. There had been lions on display in the new world since the first one arrived in Boston Harbor in 1716, and several men had already dared to enter into the lion's cage. But Van Amburgh was certainly the most famous of early American trainers to enter
the lion’s den. He emphasized the incredible danger he faced and the magnificent courage it took to face the beast in the cage, especially since his predecessor may have been eaten alive trying the same thing. Dressed like a Roman gladiator, Van Amburgh would force his animals to perform tricks by cruelly beating them into submission with a crow bar; or in a semblance of combat he would jam his blooded arm into the lion's mouth and dare it to bite. Despite his cultivated religious image of lying down with lions and lambs, he was cruel, loud, and brash. However, in the spirit of frontier America, he represented the complete dominance of man over untamed nature that the public evidently needed to be reassured by. From this kind of metaphorical demonstration of the invincibility of man in the primitive, natural world sprang the traditional American style of wild-animal act, characterized by a primitive macho trial-and-error quality. Its popularity caused a rapid growth in imitators. By 1922 there were fifty men and women presenting cat acts on many different circuses. They included such great early twentieth-century trainers as Peru's rough and ready Terrell Jacobs, who with the help of his wife Dolly worked the largest cat act of all—in a fifty-foot cage with an advertised fifty animals—and Jack Bonavita, who lost an arm to a vicious attack by one of his twenty-seven lions.

The legendary Clyde Beatty is our most famous example of the American style. Born somewhere in Ohio, sometime around 1903 (Beatty himself claimed several conflicting versions), he came briefly under the influence of the great Hungarian trainer Louis Roth, did a polar bear act, and acquired his first caged cat act in 1925. He would eventually leave much of the training of his animals to others, while he focused on a theatrical presentation designed to instill fear for his safety among the spectators. Carrying a whip, a chair, and a gun, he advanced on his beasts and encouraged them to "attack." In one favorite routine, Nero, his best large male lion, would knock the chair from his hand and drive him from the arena, from which Beatty would "escape" in the nick of time, slamming the cage door behind him. Pausing to review the situation and wipe his brow, Beatty would then reenter the cage to thunderous applause, and subdue Nero merely by a hypnotic stare into his eyes.

Beatty became a superstar in the circus primarily because of this sense of the theatrical and a showman's knack for spreading his legend around in books, comic books, movies, and a radio show. He was responsible for spawning in his admirers many dreams of mastery in the cat cage. Among his many cage boys was a young black man named Emanuel Ruffin, whom Beatty called "Junior." Ruffin went on to be one of the few black trainers in the business. He had his own cage act with the Hoxie show under the name of "Prince Bogino," and now works for the Ringling organization in Venice, Florida. After Beatty's retirement from the ring and death from cancer in 1965, the traditional American style of fighting cat act was carried on for a while by men like Pat Anthony and Dave Hoover, but for the most part, the European tradition has become the norm. In his twenty years with the Beatty-Cole show, Hoover even dressed in safari whites and carried a pistol in the grand tradition of Beatty's fighting act, although out of the ring he was a quiet, soft-spoken, cigar-chewing gentleman, and he trained his animals to exhibit their apparently aggressive behavior by rewarding them with food.

Many people also associate the wild animal trapper and dealer Frank "Bring 'Em Back Alive" Buck with the circus, but his connection was minimal; he shared in Edward Anthony a biographer in common with Clyde Beatty, and he worked only briefly for Johnny North in 1938. But two other trend-setting big cat trainers have established high standards for their contemporary counterparts in American circuses: Mabel Stark and Alfred Court. Stark was twenty when she abandoned her nursing career and with a pet tiger went to work for the Al G. Barnes Circus as a bareback rider in 1912. Under Louis Roth's reluctant tutelage, and in defiance of all those who told her "A woman cannot do these things," she became the famous Tiger Lady and moved to the Ringling show in 1922. Over the years, this plucky little stubborn and courageous woman worked for many different circuses, rarely taking "no" for an answer from either
man or cat. She received more than her share of life-threatening maulings, but blamed only her own
carelessness and not the natural instincts of her beloved tigers. She was a heroic role model for women
all over the country seeking fulfillment in independent careers of their own choosing. Certainly she was an
inspiration to Patricia White, the talented trainer currently with the Carson & Barnes Circus. White
presents a dangerous and stunning cage act combining male and female Nubian lions, Siberian and
Bengal tigers, and a liger. Mabel Stark left the cage for the last time in 1967, after more than a
half-century with her tigers. In her autobiography, she expressed a sentiment similar to Karl Wallenda's
and one in common with many circus performers: "[Going into the cage is] a matchless thrill, and life
without it is not worth living." 11 Four months after her retirement, she was dead.

Alfred Court came to the cage in a different way, following the maxim, "If you want it done right, do it
yourself." Already an experienced acrobat and circus manager, the thirty-five-year-old Frenchman had to
fire his animal trainer for repeated drunkenness while they were on a Mexican tour in 1917. There was no
one to take over the job but himself, and he embraced it with joy. By 1940, with the Ringling show; he was
the foremost proponent in the country of the "civilized" European style of animal act. He was famous
throughout Europe and America for his mixed acts of Siberian and Bengal tigers, black and spotted
panthers and leopards, polar and Tibetan bears, Atlas and Abyssinian lions, cougars, and Great Dane
dogs. Although both carried the traditional whip and chair, Court's performance was in marked contrast to
the pyrotechnics of Clyde Beatty. His cage acts, whether or not he appeared in them himself, had a much
calmer, more stately, and less dangerous appearance; in fact, he and his nephew, Willy Storey, once
framed an act in which twelve dangerous leopards worked with six Ringling show girls. An instinctive
expert in animal psychology, his training techniques were supposedly marked by the same patient, gentle,
soft-spoken extension of friendship to his animals that has come to mark Gunther Gebel-Williams' style.
"All training is done by patience and knowledge of the animal's character and mental reactions," said
Court. "A flick of the whip for guidance is all that is ever needed, even when an animal is willful or sulky.
The trainer's voice must be the final authority in training and in public. The voice must guide the animal." 12
On the other hand, there are those who remember that Court was not always able to abide by his own
rules, but was forced to indulge in occasional brutality in self-defense.

Contemporary Trainers

Whether the acts are fighting or natural, American or European, modern trainers insist that the only
way to train a wild animal is with a combination of positive and negative reinforcement. The operative
word is "train," they emphasize, pointing out that it is never possible to "tame" a wild animal. Positive
reinforcement is with food and approval, and negative reinforcement is by disapproval. For all of the
American-style trainers, blank-guns and whips were considered no more than noisemakers to add
excitement to the act. No one owns up to physical punishment of an animal, with very rare exceptions,
primarily because beatings are an ineffective way to teach and an inefficient way to learn. Vicious,
torturing animal trainers such as the fictitious Harris Collins portrayed in Jack London's Michael, Brother
of Jerry are an almost nonexistent rarity in the circus. As any housecat owner knows, an animal will only
do what it wants to do; big cats too must be patiently and gently led to an understanding of what it is that
the trainer expects them do do in order to earn the reward of a smile, an affectionate pat, or a morsel of
meat.

Performing cats may often look lovable, but they are as a rule exceedingly dangerous. Contrary to
popular opinion, they are neither drugged, defanged, nor declawed. With more training, they grow
increasingly wary and streetwise, and not more manageable. They are not full from a good meal prior to a
show, which would only make them sleepy, but hungry and eager to be fed at the end of the performance.
Big cats in the circus don't attack because they are hungry or because of any anthropomorphic feelings of hate or revenge. They attack for reasons of their own because they have a primitive urge to kill. Most trainers much prefer to work with free-spirited, energetic, and intelligent cats, who assert their independence aggressively, even though they are far more dangerous than the "seat warmers," cats bored and lazy by nature, or whose wills have been broken by thoughtless and excessive training. Preferences for species, and claims for the mental superiority of one or the other vary with every individual trainer. The general consensus is that tigers may be more difficult to work with, because unlike lions they are loners; they fend and plot strategies for themselves and do not travel in prides. Their movements are slow and deliberate, but they give less warning of an attack. Participation in a group makes them uneasy by nature. Panthers and leopards, on the other hand, are the most treacherous cats to work with, because they are the fastest attackers.

Lest anyone be lulled into thinking that cage acts are not so very dangerous after all, it would be well to remember that literally every major wild-animal trainer in the circus, including the gentle Alfred Court despite his mythical invincibility, has acquired major scars on his or her body as a reminder of careless moves. Furthermore, since the turn of the century, twenty-one trainers have been killed in the arena. Escapes, while rare, are not nonexistent, and the results can be disastrous for both the animal and anyone who happens to get in his way.

Many circuses do not carry cage acts, for a variety of reasons. There may be animal rights considerations, and insurance coverage for both the animals and the public is growing prohibitively high. The cost of food and of carrying a cage and other necessary equipment for displaying wild animals is also increasingly expensive. Even the Big One has been skeptical of its wild animal acts. Charles Ringling loved the animals, feeling they knew a man better than a man could know his fellow humans: "Unless my animals like me, I am a failure," he said. But he couldn't talk his brothers into having cage acts until 1919, and in 1925 Mr. John once more eliminated them. Only their popularity and tremendous public pressure persuaded him to reinstitute them, despite approval of his ban by both reformers and the press. Today, the popularity of several caged cat acts round the country, including those already mentioned, suggests that they are still appreciated by the public, and that the art or skill of wild-animal training is far from dead. Beyond the thrill of an act, it can teach audiences a great deal about animal psychology and animal behavior, about potential levels of communication and interchange between man and beast, and about man's place in the animal kingdom.

Daniel Suskow shows a popular tiger act with the Tarzan Zerbini Circus. Audiences love Wayne Franzen's obvious affection and extra care for his animals in his little down-home cage act. The Yugoslavian-born former German veterinarian Josip Marcan is currently the cat man on the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus. Marcan's gentle European style displays a genuine love and respect for his mixed cats, contrasted with an ironic indifference for his audiences. He is also particularly well-known for his controversial liger breeding program. Overcoming the natural antipathy between lions and tigers, he raised a male lion cub with a female tiger cub and bred them. The resulting ligers have light ocher stripes similar to tigers, and the males also sprout manes, like lions, but they are larger than either of their parents. Bombey, Marcan's male liger, the "gentle giant" currently performing with Beatty-Cole show, now weighs a half a ton, nearly twice the weight of an average adult tiger, and may well be the largest feline in the world. Unlike that other combination of species, the mule, the liger can propagate his own breed. When a male tiger is bred to a female lion, they produce a tili, and when a liger is bred back to a tiger, the result is a "golden tabby," which looks like a faded tiger. Many zoologists question the ethics of such breeding, but the resulting animals seem as happy to be alive as the rest of us, and economic considerations necessitating increased attendance at zoos may make such unusual animals highly
Since he retired from the cage, Charly Baumann continues to work as the able and gruff Performance Director of the Blue Unit, with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. But he carries the scars of thirty-five years of working with wild tigers. His father was a popular German movie actor and stuntman before he died in the gas chambers of Bergen-Belsen, and as a boy Charly had often been asked to appear in several films with animals. His first circus work came after the war as an assistant horse-trainer with the Circus Williams in Hamburg, "when Gunther Gebel was a shoe shine boy," 14 says. His courageous rescue of the circus' wild animal trainer from a savage lion attack in 1951 earned him his first spot in the cage.

Two American trainers stepped into Baumann's shoes when he vacated the Ringling Blue Unit cage. In 1989, Larry Allen Dean was presenting fourteen lions, seven male and seven female, in an act framed by English wild animal breeder Jim Clubb. Before Dean, the handsome young North Dakotan Wade Burck had the job of working the Blue Unit's cage act with fifteen tigers, including nine magnificent performing Burmese white tigers from breeder and trainer John Cuneo, the largest such group in the world. Burck's act was a splendid presentation of the beauty and nobility of the wild beast: "The only time I use a stick is to feed a piece of meat. A small buggy whip is sufficient to direct the cats. Prodding only makes them snarl and is usually done to impress the audience with the trainer's bravery. I want the people to be impressed with the cats, not with me." 15 Burck is an articulate spokesman on the issue of endangered wild animals: "I believe with all my heart that the circus makes a substantial contribution in assuring the survival of many endangered species. If this was a perfect world, I'd turn my tigers loose in the wild. But the world is not perfect; they wouldn't survive. There are so many enemies in the jungle. Especially man. In the circus, my tigers get the best of everything—good food, quality medical care and people around them who care... I don't want to buy my sons, Adam and Eric, a picture to show them what a gorilla looked like. Or a whooping crane. Or a tiger." 16 A sensitive caring man and a magnificent performer, Burck planned to spend his life not in the circus but in animal conservation efforts.

"...And Bears, and..."

Caged cats are not the only dangerous wild animal act to make frequent appearances in American circuses. There is an ominous saying in the circus world that bear trainers never retire. The "armless wonder" Jack Hubert lost one arm to a bear and the other to a lion; Chubby Guilfoyle, a student of Beatty's, was maimed by his bears. Trained bears have been around for much longer than the modern circus; after all, England's cruel bear-baiting rings thrived for 700 years. Bears are the most unpredictable and dangerous of all circus animals, because they are "series biters," working their way through a victim by biting continuously and repeatedly, rather than tearing flesh; thus they allow much less of an opportunity for the victim to escape than do the big cats. Furthermore, once a bear decides to latch on to an arm or a leg or whatever, no power on earth can persuade it to loosen its jaws. Finally, bears show no emotion or facial expressions whatsoever, and they will attack out of instinct with no warning or provocation. If they have been given provocation by harsh treatment, they will quietly smolder until the opportunity arises to tear the offender to shreds. Those are but a few of the reasons why bears are almost always kept muzzled in performance, whether in a cage or on a leash. About the only possible upside of a bear attack is that the bite will probably not become as infected as a cat's bite, because bears are normally vegetarian, and their mouths are cleaner.

The most common circus bear is the European or Russian brown bear, but Himalayan black bears and Syrians also appear with some frequency. Emil and Catherine Pallenberg were German bear trainers...
who were with the Ringling show in the '20s. They worked their bears on leashes, outside the cage, as do most bear acts today, including the Steeples on the Great American Circus, the Weldes with their Russian bears on the Beatty-Cole show, the Bauers on the Tarzan Zerbini Circus, the Lilovs with their Siberians on the Ringling Blue Unit, and the Berouseks on the Red Unit. An intelligent and curious creature, bears take well to performing tricks. They can roller skate, skip rope, balance on balls and tight ropes, ride bicycles and motorcycles, play the harmonica and concertina, and look much more harmless and cuddly than they really are.

Polar bears are flesh-eaters, unlike their smaller cousins, and their non-retractable three-inch claws and forearms, powerful enough to flip a full-grown seal out of the water, make them the most dangerous of circus bears. They can weigh up to a half a ton and measure up to nine and a half feet from nose to tail, with eight to twelve inch wide paws—all of which means that polar bear acts are rare in the circus, and when they are presented, they are usually performed within the steel cage. Clyde Beatty once worked a large polar bear act with the John Robinson Circus at the beginning of his career. Award-winning East German circus star Ursula Bottcher presented her polar bears on the Ringling show in 1976, the first polar bear act in America in thirty years.

"...And, ...Oh My!"

There are many other animals appearing in the circus, of course—the rarer and more unusual, the better. Like Noah, Barnum's original wish was to create a menagerie containing virtually every animal known to man, and in one way or another, it was a prophetic wish. Fox and Parkinson point out that "Virtually all species at some time have been with the circus, sometimes as exhibits of viciousness or rarity, sometimes as examples of man's cleverness and the animal's ability to learn." 17 In circuses of the last three decades there have been horned rattlers, alligators, seals and sea elephants, leaping llamas and guanacos, okapis, orangutans, chimps and other simians of every variety. There are camels, which began to make regular appearances in the circus in the late 1860s, when the U.S. Cavalry imported them for desert duty in the American West. They were a bust in the service, however, and Costello and Coup bought up a bunch of them from Army Surplus for a bargain $80 apiece, for use in their 1870 Egyptian Caravan Circus. They've been a circus fixture ever since. Giraffes have also been circus fixtures, ever since the first two "camelopards," as they were then called, were imported in 1837 for MacComber, Welch & Co. There were a few famous circus hippopotamuses, like "Miss Oklahoma," "Lotus," and "Otto, the Blood-Sweating Hippopotamus," who made their rounds with the circus, sometimes on a leash, and sometimes in heavy cages with built-in bathtubs.

The largest remaining traveling circus menagerie, that of Carson & Barnes, even carried a moose in 1988, and they still carry the big three: a rhinoceros, a giraffe, and a hippo. Many of the more exotic animals are for display purposes only, although some successful acts of performing camels and zebras have been seen. Zebras can be especially stubborn, and they have a vicious kick, developed through years of fending off lions, that makes them less than desirable as performers. Much more manageable is the multitude of conventional performing dog acts that fill up America's large and small circuses. Some are quite good, usually those with a comic angle, and others are little more than canine mock-fashion shows. Bird acts, usually doves and pigeons with pastel-tinted feathers, also seem to be popular. Even the inimitable pig seems to be making a comeback in the circus, in acts reminiscent of "Uncle Henry's Porkchop Review." The intelligence of the pig once made him a circus staple, and as we have seen, a number of clowns used them for partners. One pig trainer used to operate a marvelous scam, by selling his pigs to a local farmer in every town the circus came to, claiming they had grown too large to continue performing. He would collect his money and walk off down the road. Hours later, when the circus was
nearing the end of its last performance in town, the band played the customary cue for the pig act. The sharp-eared pigs promptly smashed through their confinement pen and ran off together to rejoin their trainer at the edge of town.

**Gorillas**

There have been a few animals associated with the circus who were never required to perform. Their mere presence on display was enough to draw circus patrons to the lot. Such a creature was Jumbo, and such was the great gorilla, Gargantua, "the World's Most Terrifying Living Creature." Stories of Gargantua's strength and fierceness were carefully contrived to create long lines of prospective admirers, although he most certainly could and would have torn to pieces any human being foolish enough to enter his cage. He was not the largest or even the most ferocious gorilla outside of Africa, but he was most probably the ugliest. His face had been disfigured in 1931, when he was a baby, by a misguided sailor seeking a meaningless revenge on his captain. The sailor emptied a fire extinguisher full of nitric acid in the face of the valuable little gorilla the captain had brought from Africa, and left him for dead. Terrified and barely alive, he was immediately bought by the kind-hearted Gertrude Lintz, wife of a Brooklyn doctor, who nursed him back to health and named him Buddha, or Buddy for short. Buddy was poisoned by a second psychotic five years later, and again she nursed him back to health. He developed a not too surprising affection for her, together with an extraordinary jealousy and hatred of all males, including the innocent Dr. Lintz, earned from his ordeals with cruelty. The gorilla grew to weigh 550 pounds. While he measured only just over five and a half feet tall, he had a deceptive nine-foot arm reach, and he loved to reach through the bars and tear the clothes off curiosity-seekers who came too close to his cage.

At the end of 1937, it became necessary, for the safety of both Buddy and the family, for Mrs. Lintz to sell him to the Ringling show for the secret sum of $10,000. Weeks later, the great circus press agent Roland Butler had transformed him into Gargantua the Great, so named by Johnny North. They were delighted with the malicious, sneering look of hatred acquired from the nitric acid, which would turn Gargantua into the greatest attraction since Jumbo. Almost single-handedly, Gargantua rescued the show from the severe, financial bind it found itself in by the end of the Depression years, and in his lifetime he would earn more revenue for the Big One than had Jumbo himself. Gargantua quickly developed a disposition to match his looks and reputation. He almost did in his long-time trainer Dick Koerner, on more than one occasion, as well as North himself, when he walked too close to his first cage one day. He was eventually to be kept in a 9- by 26-foot air-conditioned, glass-enclosed, steel-barred prison on wheels, which he would never again leave in the remaining twelve years of his life. In 1941, North leased "Gargantua's Bride," Mlle. Toto, from a private source; the highly touted wedding never actually came off. Although their identical cages were parked end-to-end for years, the two gorillas had nothing but indifference to express towards each other. No one ever quite dared to lift the separating doors and allow them access to the same cage for fear of the gentle Toto's safety. On November 25, 1949, Gargantua was found in his cage, dead from impacted teeth and pneumonia he would never have allowed to be treated by any man. The Widow Toto was distraught, but she nonetheless lived happily ever after until she died as an old gorilla in 1968.

**Amazing Unicorns**

Only one animal since the days of Gargantua has received anything like the old-fashioned ballyhooing of the past: the "Amazing Unicorn," which made its magical appearance in 1985. Nothing was required of this mythical unicorn other than to be ridden around the track displayed on a royal float once
or twice in every performance, while being stroked by a lovely maiden. He was healthy, well-fed, and
deliriously happy. Nonetheless, armies of animal rights activists prepared to wage war over the cruelty to
animals issue, and on the other side armies of Ringling lawyers and publicity agents prepared to meet
them head on. "Can we do anything to animals in the name of entertainment?" cried the ASPCA.
"Children of all ages believe in Santa Claus, Peter Pan, the Wizard of Oz, and the fabled Unicorn. Don't
let the Grinches steal the Fantasy!" screamed back the full-page Ringling ads. No one would ever talk
about this creature without tongue planted firmly in cheek, so it's hard to establish just what the facts
were. Evidently, it was one of a small herd of angora goats, a word the Ringling folks never owned up to.
When they were just born, their original owner had apparently arranged to have their horn buds surgically
moved to the center of their foreheads; as the horns grew, they fused together and became one. Kenneth
Feld allegedly bought the entire herd of adult goats, in order to prevent any rival unicorns from surfacing
in the future, and in order to have available stand-ins as necessary. Those who had believed that
unicorns were supposed to look like horses were gently reminded that in the Bible unicorns are generally
referred to as goats with cloven hoofs and beards. Throughout the entire debate surrounding the "Is he or
isn't he?" controversy, people flocked to the circus to make up their own minds, and P.T. Barnum looked
down on his progeny and smiled.

Circus Animals: Yea or Nay?

The whole question of what all these animals are doing in the circus is one which may be justifiably
asked. Judy Finelli, whose Pickle Family Circus is one among those who have never included animals in
their performances on principle, calls the whole issue of animal rights the "abortion issue of the modern
circus world." No issue in today's circus can so pit friend against friend and brother against brother.
Nothing can so incense a traditional circus fan as the suggestion that animals are treated cruelly by their
trainers, and nothing can so incense an animal rights activist as the suggestion that they are not. The
typical argument might go something like this:

"A circus without animals is no circus at all," claim the traditionalists.

"Wild animals belong in the wild," insist the animal lovers. "It is not natural for them to be kept in the
confined space of a small cage or a truck compartment, being hauled around the country. It constitutes
cruel and unusual punishment."

"What do you mean by `natural'? Where would you put them? There is less and less `wild' for them to
be in," retort the circus trainers. "These animals are better cared for and better fed than they would be in
the wild. They are exercised regularly, more so than they would be in zoos, and with a constant change of
environment they are not so bored. They are happy doing what they do."

"Oh come on! No animal jumps through a burning hoop because it wants to. There are vicious
beatings, aren't there? Elephants get hit over the head with axe handles and jabbed with your bull hooks,
don't they? Lions get punished for instinctive attacks. Broken spirits and cruelty are endemic to the circus
way of life."

"There are occasional beatings, and sometimes they may seem excessive to you. Intractable animals
must be taught to obey us. We have to live with them, in close quarters, and our lives often depend on
their obedience to us."

"They didn't choose to live with you. What you make them do is undignified. Their tricks are silly and
pointless. You are doing this just to show off your power over them. You are playing God!"

"Dignity is your word, not the animal's. What's really pointless is crediting them with human feelings. Animals don't have all the opinions that you do as a human being. What seems undignified to you may be perfectly natural behavior for them. Let them worry about their own dignity. And we do this because we love animals, and because the experience of working with them is humbling and full of its own rewards, NOT because of any macho power trip!"

"Even so, you must admit that you use physical punishment to teach an animal your tricks! Animals are pushed and prodded until they go along with doing whatever you want them to do, just to get you off their backs."

"Even in the wild, animals get both positive and negative reinforcement for their behavior, every day, just like we all do. In the circus, our emphasis is on positive reinforcement and reward, No trainer worth his salt is cruel to his charges. Pain or unnecessary force doesn't help the animal to understand and be content with what is required of him, either in the natural world or in the circus world. Animals only perform well when they like what they're doing."

"But pain happens, doesn't it? Cruelty happens."

"Yes. Every creature on earth feels pain. And all of us feel the results of thoughtless cruelty. We don't like it any more than you do. But the whole circus can't take responsibility for everyone's pain, or for the cruelty of a very few people. It happens everywhere."

"By buying these animals for commercial exploitation, you are depleting the world's supply of animals in the wild, and contributing to the list of endangered species. It is short-sighted and greedy."

"By far the majority of all circus animals are born and raised in captivity. It is the expansion of human populations that is the foremost culprit in depleting supplies of animals in the wild. There is less and less room for them. And as for greed, circus people aren't getting rich quick off of our animals. What ought to concern you is the greed of expanding civilizations, and the greed of ivory hunters and those who supply skins to make coats, and more important, the greed of those who buy the ivory and the skins, and the greed of the consumers who wear the coats and chortle over the ivory at museums and cocktail parties. We're in the business of keeping these animals alive, and preserving them for the future. Aren't you?"

"Yes, but that's not good enough."

"Of course it's not. But in the meantime, we are learning from their behavior, and in our small way we are helping to teach the public that the animals are fellow creatures, as worthy as we are to inhabit this planet."

"How can you believe that? These are magnificent creatures you are keeping in captivity. They are your prisoners. You command them, in spite of an intelligence and a sensitivity of their own which are as valid as a human being's. As a matter of fact, they're even more valid. Your animals aren't systematically destroying the world's environment and bringing us down with them. We are!"

"We agree. And ... we are ALL prisoners!"

There is really no logical place to end this argument, and there are no winners; every point has a
hundred potential “Yes, but. .. “ to be appended. Careful listeners will find points on both sides with which
they agree, and in fact even the extremists on both sides are in closer agreement than they might care to
admit. Circus people were just as horrified and infuriated as the rest of the public at the abandonment by
the "Wonder Zoo" of trucks full of animals in a Virginia shopping center during a 1988 heat wave. 1989
circus programs are full of warnings about endangered species, information about how to help with the
conservation movement, and exhortations to contribute to the African Wildlife Fund. Circus owners and
trainers are constantly considering new training techniques and ways of improving living conditions. For
their part, conservationists and animal rights activists are becoming ever more aware of what they have in
common with circus animal conservationists. They are beginning to recognize the value of circus breeding
programs in helping to assure the survival of a species, the opportunity for studying animal psychology
and animal behavior that the circus provides, and the potential for circus animal trainers to educate the
public in all of these areas. Instead of asking for the circus to be boycotted, activists now ask that we
"please consider the animals we will see," which is exactly what the circuses want us to do, as well. One
recent flyer from the Animal Advocates Network in Richmond, Virginia, informed its readers, "A favorite
elephant sport is wallowing in the mud at the edge of a waterhole," and asked "Do you think a circus
elephant ever has the pleasure of a mudbath?" Conservationists and circus animal lovers alike might well
agree that mudholes and the elephants to wallow in them are tragically becoming an increasing rarity in
the world, and that it may not be too long before the circus has a large part of the responsibility for
supplying both. No one has supplied us with any answers to the problem of maintaining the richness of
life on earth. What all sides must learn to do first is to listen more sensitively to the questions.

Despite all the hubbub over the issues of animals in the circus, there is one animal, a domesticated
friend of man for thousands of years, that no one seems to mind appearing in a circus: the horse. Since in
both England and America, the modern circus was originally based on exhibitions of equestrian skill, we
have now come full circle from our opening chapter: through all the history and logistics of the circus,
through the owners and their shows, and through all the different kinds of performers in the circus. It is
fitting that at the end we should come back to the old reliable horse, the perennial staple of the circus.

Everything that can be done with a horse has been done with a horse in the circus. They can
seemingly perform on their own without leads or riders in the ring; they can pull wagons and tableaux,
yet they can do tricks; and they can carry riders in all manner of styles. Quite often, trainers become adept at
mounting a great variety of equestrian acts, like performing as trick riders, as well as serving as trainer
and ringmaster for liberty acts. The individual horse, on the other hand, is a specialist in the one particular
kind of performance for which he is best suited by nature and build.

At Liberty

There is a special kind of magic to the liberty horse act which opens the 1990 Big Apple Circus. The
ring is dark, lit with leafy shadows suggesting a forest clearing in the moonlight. Into it comes a
magnificent Arabian stallion, at first alone, and then joined by his five matching companions. Completely
encumbered and independent spirits, they mill about briefly, looking for... something, someone? Finally,
Katja Schumann walks quietly into the center of the ring. With no apparent movement or sound from her,
the horses respond and begin to form an ordered circling line. There is no whip, and there are no bridles
or lead ropes. After a few energetic maneuvers executed in unison and seemingly without command, the
horses suddenly stop, and approach her in the center of the ring. She appears only to whisper to them,
lovingly. Mysteriously calmed, they form into a single line and slowly file out of the ring.

Good liberty horse acts depend on a seemingly telepathic communication between the trainer and the
horses, and when it is done right, it is a magnificent demonstration of complete cooperation and understanding between man and beast. Katja Schumann has been doing this and other equestrian acts for years, and her family has been one of the top names in European circuses, known for their horse acts for well over a century. Before she even came to the Big Apple, Katja was the winner of the Prix de la Dame du Cirque at the 1974 Monte Carlo International Circus Festival, and a gold medal at the 1976 Circus World Championships in London. The inherent joy in her spirit was well demonstrated on June 17, 1988. While counting the paces for her liberty horse act, Katja was also carefully counting her contractions. At 10:24 p.m., just after the end of the night's show, son Max was born into the waiting hands of her husband, Paul Binder. She was only reluctantly persuaded to skip the next afternoon's performance and delay her return to the ring to the following night, less than twenty-four hours after Max's arrival.

There are many fine liberty horse acts that can be seen in American circuses today. Outstanding among them is Gunther Gebel-Williams' beautifully trained liberty act, which is sometimes presented by his wife Sigrid. If his tiger act is the more popularly known, his liberty act is to some tastes the more artistic illustration of harmonious respect between man and animal, and an impressive reminder that horses were Gunther's first love in the circus. Trevor Bale's liberty act with the Beatty-Cole Circus, now presented by his two daughters, Gloria and Dawnita, is another example of equine harmony. Also the father of daredevil Elvin Bale, Trevor is another all-round animal man with long roots in European circus traditions. Born on the Circus Schumann, he grew up in the circus, and quickly learned to perform just about everything on the circus program from clown to trapeze. "If you didn't learn, you didn't eat," he says. Already one of Europe's outstanding trainers of virtually every species of circus animal by the end of World War II, he periodically held down the tiger cage with the Ringling show from 1953 to 1964.

The Work Horse

The traditional link between horses and the circus does not rest exclusively on performances and acts. In the early days of the circus horses were both transportation and labor force. The heavy Percherons, Belgians, and Clydesdales did duty as baggage stock, pulling the heavy circus wagons from town to town, or from rail yard to lot. They were frequently used in work teams of six or eight horses for raising tent poles and hauling heavy wagons out of the mud. The most impressive hitch ever developed was the forty-horse hitch, which was never anything but a brilliant piece of showmanship used for publicity in the great circus parades. The Spalding & Rogers Colossal Dramatic Equestrian Circus had the first such team in 1853, and Jake Posey drove a team of forty matched bays for five years beginning in 1898 for Barnum & Bailey's European tour. More recently, Paul Sparrow handled the reins of a forty-horse hitch in the 1989 Milwaukee Great Circus Parade, just as his father Dick had twelve years earlier.

Wonder Horses

Still another category of circus horse is the educated horse, who seems to be able to answer questions from his trainer and perform a variety of tricks. His is a long tradition; the exploits of Morocco in the sixteenth century were described in Chapter 2. More recently, Wayne Franzen's horse Tonto is still captivating circus audiences, but in the first half of the twentieth century, educated horses were the pride of the American cowboy star. Audiences seemed to look on Trigger, Champion, Silver, and Topper as intelligent human-like spirits trapped in a horse's body; they were certainly understood to have the ability to perform any "impossible" trick asked of them by owners Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, the Lone Ranger, and Hopalong Cassidy. Their inspiration, and one of the greatest cowboy teams ever associated with the
American circus, was Tom Mix and his Wonder Horse, Tony.

Mix had a checkered career ranging from lawman to pioneer in western movies, but according to his friend Jimmy Cole his weak voice put him at a disadvantage when Hollywood shifted from silents to talkies. He joined the Sells-Floto show in 1929, and had his own private rail car, for himself and Tony, a Rolls Royce, and $20,000 a week, the highest salary ever paid a circus performer at that time. "I'm not afraid of work," he said, "but I must have my comfort." Beloved by children and the public for his outward show of courage and wholesomeness, and for Tony, Mix had his share of personal problems, brought on by fame and an overdependence on alcohol. One telltale story of his excessive drinking bouts comes from Joe McKennon in his fictionalized history of the circus in America, Horse Dung Trail. It seems that Mix could occasionally have considerable trouble hitting the balloon targets provided for his six-gun trick shooting exhibition. He had to lie down in the ring to steady his aim, but would still miss, hitting the canvas beyond the rising targets. "Look at that dirty s.o.b.!" complained boss canvasman Cap Curtis. "Another hole in my new top. With those goddam scatter shots his cartridges are loaded with, he should never miss!" Nonetheless, Tom Mix's excesses were either forgiven or ignored by an adoring public. In 1934, he elected to start his own circus, and in 1938 it became the first to move entirely across the country on trucks; but it was a disastrous year to make the change. The Tom Mix Circus and seven other shows, including the Big One, plagued by labor strife, weather, and the full impact of the Depression years, had to fold their tents before the end of the season. The show limped through one more season, beset by hoodlums and blow-downs, before it closed for good. On October 12, 1940, Mix, always a lover of fast cars, was on his way to Hollywood when he lost control of his white Cord convertible, went off the road, and was killed instantly. Only sixty years old, but long depressed, he had been pursuing still another film contract. Tony outlived his beloved human partner, and was finally put to sleep in 1944 at the age of thirty-four, the rough equivalent of 120 human years.

Riding Acts

Certainly the biggest group of circus horses performs in the riding acts, which can be roughly divided into two categories: straight demonstrations of formal riding techniques; and acrobatic and trick riding.

The riding schools, from which the circus sprang originally, continued to develop highly artistic styles of formal riding, and many of those styles continue to be the high points of equestrian acts in circuses today. In 1898, Field Marshal Von Holbein of the world famous Spanish Riding School in Vienna, Austria, set the standards for perfection in what is known as the high school, or haute école, or hoche schule style. In the highest art of horsemanship, dressage, the rider never seems to move around in the saddle, never uses a whip, and never prods with his heels. When the rider has "good seat," there is perfect harmony between horse and rider, who seem to move as a single animal through a variety of trots, gallops, dance steps, and other complicated moves. The rider's display of the high school horse's steps is often referred to as a manège act. One of the best high school riders this country has ever seen was a Dutch cavalryman named William Heyer, who starred with the Ringling show in the 1930s. While this more formal side of equestrian art is frequently practiced in more "dignified" settings than the circus, it continues to be an exciting part of modern circus performances.

Acrobatic and trick riding has always been popular in this country, but beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century it truly blossomed to become one of the main events in a circus performance. That it did so was due in no small part to two outstanding young women on the Barnum & Bailey show, who accomplished moves on the bare back of a moving horse that no one had thought possible: Ella Bradna and May Wirth. Like Katja Schumann, Ella had been an equestrian star on the
Circus Schumann, and her reputation was well-established before she came to the United States with her husband in 1903. Several years earlier she had been literally thrown into the arms of a young German cavalryman named Frederick Ferber, who was watching her performance from a front row box seat. When the two were married two years later, Fred took her family name. Eventually, the two would share center ring together with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus for twenty-nine years, Fred as the distinguished and classically dressed equestrian director, and Ella as the charming balletic equestrienne, who danced "on point" in graceful tableaux on horseback. Her well-known "Act Beautiful," all cloaked in white satin, was an even-paced tableau performance incorporating a variety of white horses, dogs, and birds, accompanied by a singing Hungarian midget named Paul Horompo, who played a white-faced Harlequin.

Trick bareback riding of a very different sort was being practiced at the same time by May Wirth, who arrived from her native Australia in 1912. In all likelihood, she was barely seventeen at the time, but the dainty May could perform a difficult forward somersault on the horse from a kneeling position. She was also the first woman to throw a double backward somersault from one horse to another, a feat which she would eventually perform repeatedly while blindfolded. In addition, she could seemingly without effort jump from the ground to the back of a running horse, with her feet planted in awkward baskets, without the use of a "cushion," or small springboard used for most mounts by others. Extremely popular with both show folk and spectators, May Wirth was one of a trio of early twentieth-century performers, along with Lillian Lietzel and Bird Millman, who are considered the "big three" women of the American circus. She continued to perform with a variety of circuses into the 1930s, when she and her husband Frank, who like Bradna had adopted his wife's last name, opened a booking agency for show people. She died in 1978.

Trick bareback riding is made possible by coating the horse's back and the rider's slippers with resin powder, in order to provide a reliable nonslippery surface. For this reason, the horses are often called resinbacks or rosinbacks. Horses selected for these acts usually have broad backs and even dispositions, like Percherons and Lippizzaners. They often wear soft platform-like pads on which the rider can stand. The pads ease the impact on the horse if the rider's landings and stances are less than gentle. Some say they give the rider a more secure foothold, but others argue they are less stable for landings.

With all bareback acts, the 42-foot diameter of the ring, established two centuries ago by Philip Astley, is usually critical. Every step the horse takes is duly predetermined and noted, and timing is carefully controlled. The bareback horse must learn to move with confidence around the ring at a slow, steady, and reliable pace. Any variation whatsoever in his speed can result in severe injury to the acrobat, who is counting on his launching and landing platforms to be in the right place at the right time. The trick rider also relies on the predetermined level of centrifugal force that his horse's movement generates, to aid and abet his balancing skills, enabling him to lean comfortably into the curve as he is lightly pressed into the horse's back.

A variation on the somersaulting and vaulting bareback acts is voltige, a French word for mounted gymnastics. In a voltige act, the rider can vault off the horse's back and run alongside the horse, holding on to a handgrip attached to the harness. Turning cartwheels and somersaults alongside, he might then spring back up to assume a rear-facing position, before he scissors around to the front. According to the late British circus historian Antony Hippisley Coxe, voltige has many variations, including "à la Richard," where the horse is unbridled, "à la cowboy," where a lariat is used. "Tcherkesse," or "Cossack" riding, involves lying across the horse's back with the ankle in a loop attached to the surcingle, the band passed around the horse's midsection. While virtually upside down, the Cossack rider can in this manner retrieve handkerchiefs and other objects from the sawdust floor, while the horse moves at full gallop.
around the ring. Cossack riding is often a popular high point of the Moscow State Circus on its American tours.

The tradition of pantomimes incorporated into equestrian acts remains strong. We have discussed some of the many variations on Astley's "Tailor's Ride to Brentford," such as the "Pete Jenkins," the "Drunken Sailor," or the "Canadian Peasant" acts so popular in early American circuses. Poodles Hanneford, about whom we shall hear more, was to make this kind of equestrian clowning extremely popular in the 1920s. Another popular tale that thrived in the nineteenth century, both as an equine pantomime and as a narrative poem by Lord Byron, was "Mazeppa." The story told of the exploits of Ivan Mazeppa, a young Polish noble who was discovered in the act of seducing the wife of one of his villainous superiors. He was condemned to be tied naked to the back of a wild horse and turned loose in the wilderness until he died of exposure. Rescued by Cossack soldiers, he was released and became a distinguished prince in the court of Peter the Great. Mazeppa's ride was often incongruously performed by women, and circuses were sometimes successful in gathering large crowds by creating the impression that the ride might be performed authentically in the buff. However, to the relief (or the consternation) of spectators, the rider always wore pink tights and a well-placed sash or two.

Another famous horse pantomime is the "Courier's Ride to St. Petersburg," which presumably portrays a courier carrying urgent war dispatches from Paris for the Czar. The strenuous act was developed in 1827 by Andrew Ducrow, the great equestrian who had taken over Astley's in London. Ducrow entered the ring standing astride two horses, which he eased apart enough to allow more horses to pass forward between his legs. Each new horse carried a flag representing a country the courier had to ride through to reach St. Petersburg. As the horses passed, Ducrow picked up their reins, until he was driving the team of new horses in front of him while standing on the original two. There have been many subsequent variations on the act. Most recently, the impressive Katja Schumann has revived it once more for the 1990 Big Apple Circus, this time called the "Pony Express Rider." The whole style of riding while standing astride two horses is now commonly called "Roman post riding," but at first it was simply called "La Poste," after the French word for Courier. "Roman" apparently did not get associated with the term until after Barnum's great chariot race revivals at the end of the nineteenth century, in which the act was frequently displayed.

Great riding acts have become a relative rarity in the American circus. At one time, they occupied the majority of the circus program, but truly talented equestrians who have spent years perfecting their art have gotten somewhat hard to find. As horse ownership declined with the onset of automotive power, audiences lost the ability to appreciate fine horses. Today, when we do find excellent equestrian acts, they are all the more impressive for their rarity. With few exceptions, single riding stars have for the most part been replaced in the modern circus by troupes. There are far too many great equestrian families with long performing traditions to treat in this kind of an introductory format. Names like Clarke, Davenport, Herbert, Herriott, Rieffenach, Zamperla, and many others all deserve a major salute from spectators who appreciate equestrian elegance. Many of the children of original equestrian families are still active in the circus, and the unusual degree of crossover and interaction between them as they share their common interests and talents is an interesting illustration of circus unity. We cannot close this chapter without taking a brief look at four such families, all of whom still thankfully have active performing relatives: the Cristianis, the Hannefords, the Loyals, and the Zoppes.

Riding Families

The Cristiani family, descendants of one hundred years of Italian circus history and veterans of Italy's largest circus, were brought to this country in 1934 by the Ringling show, fresh from that ultimate supplier
of fine equestrian acts, the Circus Schumann. For a while they entered into a bitter rivalry with the Loyal-Repsensky troupe already with Ringling. Seven of the eleven family members eventually did principal riding, including an impressive simultaneous fork jump by five of them onto the back of a single moving horse. Lucio was the most versatile and sensational of the group, with his unmatched full backward twisting somersault from one horse over a second and onto the back of a third. He also demonstrated a liberty act, dressage, and a good clown act. In 1989, Lucio and Gilda Cristiani's two sons, Armando and Tino, mounted a trial performance entitled "A Circus Fantasy," which demonstrated the continuing Cristiani acrobatic skills on the trampoline. Consideration was being given to remounting once again a full Cristiani Family Circus like the one run by the family in the 1950's.

The 1990 season marks a diamond jubilee anniversary for the Hanneford family: seventy-five years of performing in America. Mrs. Hanneford ("Nana") and her three children, George, Elizabeth, and Edwin ("Poodles"), arrived from Ireland via the Blackpool Tower Circus in England in 1915. George soon established his own separate riding act with his children, and Poodles became the great riding clown who set the whole tone for the popularity of modern equestrian comedy. He remained an active performer for fifty years, right up to two years before his death in 1967. His comic ways of somersaulting off a horse and his challenging "awkward" mounts without a "cushion" were both demanding and outlandishly funny. He also worked with his sister, Elizabeth, his daughter, Gracie, and his wife, Grace White. Meanwhile, his brother George and his nephews, George, Jr. and Tommy, were performing similar comedy in their act, but they also mixed in difficult straight horse-to-horse somersaulting. Following their father's death, George, Jr. went off to develop his own Cossack act; he would eventually start the Hanneford Family Circus, working with such future stars as Timi Loyal and James Zoppe. His brother Tommy's current Royal Hanneford Circus was built from their father's original act, and Tommy called himself "the Riding Fool," modelling his character on his Uncle Poodles' influential style. The show today includes the marvelous Mark Karoly, trained by Tommy to continue in the Hanneford clowning tradition of expert horsemanship. The son of Evo Karoly, another bareback and dressage rider, Mark has a daring routine, including a horse-to-horse somersault with a full twist, which gives a good indication of the demands made on the great riding clowns of the past. In one hilarious routine that always brings roars of laughter, he is energetically propelled by a companion head-first into the south end of a very tolerant and large horse. And what he can do with a coat and hat while standing on horseback at full gallop is impressive indeed.

A third family still active today are the Loyals, a French family, and perhaps the oldest name in the world still active in the circus. So respected is the name in France that a ringmaster there is still called "Monsieur Loyal." The Loyal-Repsensky family came to America in 1932 for the Ringling show and subsequently performed in many American circuses. The Repensky name came from Jules Loyal's mother's maiden name, and was used for its impressiveness; there were never any performing Repenskys—only Loyals. Their Ringling act was marked by an unusual seven-man pyramid based on five horses, with four Roman post riders and three top-mounters. The Alfonso Loyal-Repsensky troupe of bareback riders, featuring Mme. Luciana Loyal, is currently appearing with the Carson & Barnes Circus. Among Lucy's impressive acrobatic routines with hoops and jump ropes is a very funny modern adaptation of the old Pete Jenkins act. Her uncle, the dynamic Giustino Loyal, formed his own troupe in 1945, and worked with the likes of Ernestine Clarke and Aldo Cristiani, serving in 1960 as the equestrian director for the Cristianis. Currently, the Loyal-Suarez troupe, featuring Giustino's son and Lucy's cousin, Timi Loyal, appears in the 1990 Big Apple Circus. Timi is probably the only man in the world who can do four successive somersaults on horseback within a single circling of the 42-foot ring by his horse. At the opening of the 1990 season in Baltimore in the fall of 1989, he did five, "just for fun." He is joined in the act by his wife Denyse, and the talented Enrique Suarez troupe, a Mexican family with a hundred-year-old
tradition of equestrian artistry. Leader Enrique Suarez originally came to the United States to work with Giustino Loyal's troupe; Martha Magdalena Suarez had been a part of the George Hanneford troupe in 1970. The youngest performing member of the family is the irrepressibly spirited ten-year-old Enrique, Jr.

The Zoppe-Zavatta family is a large one, whose talents as bareback riders have enhanced many American circuses since 1936. The Aurelia Troupe, which arrived to perform with the Cole Brothers show in that year, was led by Secondo Zoppe and his half-sister, Aurelia Zavatta. Their cousin Alberto Zoppe arrived in 1948 to play the Ringling show the following season. Alberto's act featured his sister Ruggera and their cousin Cucciolo, who was only thirty-eight inches tall. More recently, in his Circus Italia, Alberto has incorporated lions and other animals into his family's equestrian performances. In 1977 his ten-year-old son Giovanni, later Nino the clown, became the youngest lad to complete a foot-to-foot somersault on a galloping horse. Alberto's daughter, Carla Zoppe-Emerson, is now featured in the Zoppe Riders, framed by the Circus World Museum, and trained by Evy Karoly, Mark's mother. Alberto now produces Zoppe's Circus Europa. Meanwhile, Secondo's and Aurelia's families developed a separate variety of acts over the years, including their "Original Indian Spectacular," the "Bedouin Riders," and "Herman & Petunia." James Zoppe, a grandson of Secondo, debuted with his own troupe in 1978, and has developed a considerable reputation for his grace and style, as he completes difficult horse-to-horse somersaults through large hoops while his horses are leaping over low hurdles at full gallop. He was featured on the Big Apple Circus in 1984 and 1985, and on the Circus Flora in 1988. 21

It is difficult to watch an outstanding bareback riding performance today without allowing the ghosts of the past to filter into our minds. Some of these riders are performing stunts that Astley, Hughes, and Ricketts never even dreamed of. But the spirit of modern-day riders seems to be a direct link to the spirit of challenge and the drive to excel that marked the riders who were instrumental in creating the modern circus. In the antics of James Zoppe, Mark Karoly, Timi Loyal, and Katja Schumann lie the shadows of eras gone by—horses like Tom Mix's Tony and George Washington's Jack; men like Jacob Bates, who performed his running ground mount in New York in 1722; men like Thomas Pool, Richard Sands, Charles W. Fish, and Andrew Ducrow; and men like the two American riders who vie in the minds of historians for the title of having thrown the first somersault on the bareback of a moving horse: Levi North and John H. Glenroy. In 1912, an aging Jimmie Robinson, the superb horseman known in his day simply as "The Man who Rides," drove his motorcycle one hundred miles to see May Wirth perform. Though not yet out of her teens, horse-to-horse somersaults and demanding tricks dumbfounded the old master. Perhaps one day the amazing equestrian acrobatics of Enrique Suarez, Jr., or of some other as yet unknown circus artist will equally impress the outstanding performer of today.
Endnotes


5. George "Slim" Lewis and Byron Fish, I Loved Rogues (Seattle: Superior, 1978) 43.

6. Lewis, 8.


