

Step Right Up

The Adventures of Circus in America

Electronic Edition

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Chapter V

Back Yards and Getting There

For those of us who sit in the seats of an old-fashioned tented circus, the mere fact that the place exists is an absolute wonder. The spell is upon us even before the first act begins. What had been so far as we knew an eminently forgettable muddy vacant lot, or a dried out field of weeds, or a deserted corner of a mall parking lot only a few hours ago, has been transformed. When we drove by this spot yesterday, we never gave it a second look. In our wildest imaginations, we could never have dreamed up this multi-tiered city. It is teeming with activity and colored lights, costumes, and with noises and smells that completely violate the ordinariness of our daily lives. If we give ourselves over to the circus for only a few hours tonight, the reward will be absolute magic. We'll forget all the impossible problems and annoyances which demanded that we worry too much, and that we settle for stop-gap solutions which we know damned well won't work. Tonight, we'll gasp at performances that are unbelievably magical, mostly because we know they're not. We'll laugh out loud at jokes we've seen many times before, and make fools of ourselves with the kids' cotton candy and popcorn. But when we drive by the place again tomorrow, we will ask ourselves whether it was ever really here. Not a trace of any of this will remain, except in our own hearts and minds. The field or the parking lot will go on being deserted and ordinary once again.

What magician snapped his fingers and made all this appear? "How did they do that?" we will ask. If it wasn't really magic, somebody—a lot of people—worked very hard to make this performance happen for us right here and now. The logistics of getting the performance in front of the public are often as intriguing as the acts themselves. Perhaps they instigate even more curiosity, because, unlike the acts, this work is usually hidden from us. "Who made the arrangements? How did all these people get here, and how did they manage to get us to come here too to watch them? When did they get here, and how did they put this thing together so fast? Where do they keep the elephants, and how much do they feed the lions? Why did they set it up like this, and have they always done it like that? What is holding that trapeze up there, anyway, and who will take care of cleaning up all this trash?" There are so many questions, ranging from the big top peaks to the dirt under the seats. One small boy was recently heard leaving a circus lot loudly and fervently demanding to know what happens to all the elephant poop. Now the program doesn't always tell us that, does it?

Early Preparations

Gone are the days when circuses arrived on the doorsteps of little American towns and announced a performance for that evening. Only a few years ago, an advance man could arrive in town, make all necessary arrangements and book a show for two weeks later. Today, most advance bookings are made five or six months—sometimes over a year ahead of when the circus will actually come to town.

Booking may be initiated either by the circus itself or by a town or sponsoring civic organization. Shrine sponsorship of circuses originally began as a fund-raising activity for the charities supported by the temple, but more recently, circuses have become a major income-producer for the annual operation of the temple itself. In 1986, according to a September 28 story in the Orlando, Florida *Sentinal*, national Shrine leaders asked all 189 Shrine temples in North America to publish the following clarification in their circus programs: "Proceeds from this Shrine circus benefit Shrine operations only. They do not benefit Shriners hospitals for crippled children."

There are other equally effective but less ambitious forms of circus sponsorship as well. Local organizations, such as auxiliary fire departments, police units, schools, service clubs, and charities may contact a circus and ask to sponsor them, either for profit or for benefit performances. Just as often it is the circus that seeks dates that conform to its route schedule. The circus then plays under its own name and splits the ticket revenue with a local sponsor on a prearranged basis. The Pickle Family Circus views their role as fundraisers for the non-profit sponsoring organization as a major aspect of their responsible interrelationship with the audience and the community. Contracts can vary widely, from set fees to percentages and guaranteed minimums. For their "take," the sponsor usually, but not always, agrees to do some degree of advance publicity and ticket sales for the circus, so that everyone ends up happy.

Occasionally, circuses will play "cold dates," with no local sponsor. Some, like the Ringling show, prefer to operate on their own, relying on their own professional staff to generate all relevant contracts and publicity. In other cases, either local regulations or insurance worries may have kept sponsors from being interested. When it establishes its routing, a circus may find it convenient to play in a location where no sponsor is available. A cold date may be desirable, for instance, in a town strategically located between two sponsored dates. Where there is high audience potential anyway, and no restrictive local statutes, a cold date also generates more revenue for the circus, without the need for a sponsor split.

Some circuses preferring cold dates view their policy as a responsible step away from the "boiler-room" telephone tactics which encouraged the sale of bogus tickets for allegedly charitable purposes. Sponsors sometimes turned a blind eye to the professional high-pressure circus salesmen, operating from banks of telephones outside the community. The result was that very little of the money raised by such means went to the named charity. Instead it went quietly under the table either to the sponsor or to the circus. Boiler-room tactics are the logical extension of the old grift shows. As regulations have grown more effective, boiler rooms have grown more temperate and honest, but scruples continue to be questioned. As recently as 1988, a Maryland judge ordered Dick Garden, owner of the Toby Tyler Circus, to pay \$1.7 million in civil fines and \$615,000 in restitution to the state's handicapped and mentally retarded children, who were supposed to have been beneficiaries from several of his shows. Although the case was settled for only \$20,000 in fines, Garden will not be permitted to raise "charitable" funds again in Maryland. ¹ Incidentally, for those who have always wondered, *Toby Tyler, or Ten Days with a Circus* was a fictional novel written by James Otis in 1880, and popularized by the Disney film. There was never a real Toby Tyler. This and other circuses have been named after the book.

Where to Put It?

Regardless of sponsorship, one of the biggest problems in planning a circus performance today is where to put it. The old pros insist that the greatest factor in the success of the circus is where it plays. Charles Sparks once said, "Any boob can run a circus, but it's the wise showman who knows where to put it." It's no longer an easy matter to put a tented show on an empty lot which is convenient for the public and large enough to hold the tents and all the necessary support equipment, and which has ample parking facilities. A major show like the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus requires a space at least 300 by 500 feet, not counting public parking, for example. Even the smaller shows like the Franzen or Roberts Brothers Circuses need something approximating the size of a football field. The lot must have proper drainage, access for the trucks, and ample parking for circus and performers' vehicles. In the old days of the railroad circus, it also had to be adjacent to or near the rail yards.

Today, the fields down by the old railroad yards are covered with condominiums, and the tracks have been torn up for urban renewal. Land values near America's cities and towns are far too attractive to

permit maintenance of an empty lot for the occasional circus which may come to town. At one time, Otto Ringling suggested that they purchase fourteen acres of centrally located choice real estate in every major American city. If they had done that, they could have certainly avoided the financial troubles that plagued them in later years. In the long run, of course, they couldn't have afforded to maintain the acreage as empty lots either, but at least it would have been a fruitful investment.

Contemporary circuses occasionally find communities that still have their old county fair grounds or ball fields on the edge of town, which makes life easy for everyone. If there is night-lighting and stadium seating, and if sponsors are willing to risk bad weather, some outfits like the Royal Hanneford circus are rigged to play to large stadium audiences without a tent. Big sponsors, like the Shriners, may even be able to buy insurance to cover their expenditures if a show is cancelled because of rain. Tented circuses can also play on the asphalt parking lots of major shopping malls, if the management is receptive and recognizes a good drawing card when it sees one. The Beatty-Cole and Vargas shows are sometimes called the king and queen of the shopping malls. When those options are not available, shows are often reduced to playing on outcast land that has proved unsuitable for development because it's too rocky, or too marshy, or located too near the town dump.

For all of the foregoing reasons, many circuses no longer travel under canvas. Instead, the small shows contract for dates in high school auditoriums, and big shows like the Shrine productions go into civic centers. Of course the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus now plays exclusively in large civic centers, except for the "Gold Unit" in Japan. As we saw in the last chapter, some of the larger shows, including Tarzan Zerbini's, Cliff Vargas's, and the Royal Hanneford are equipped to play either indoors or in tents. Several producers also take tented shows out in the summer and arena shows out in the winter, providing year-round employment for circus personnel.

It would seem that life ought to be easier, headaches fewer, and houses larger for indoor circuses. Weather and parking facilities are no longer a concern. Circus owners have no "blow-downs" to worry about, nor concerns for the high expenses needed to maintain the crews and truck fleets which are necessary for raising and lowering the canvas at every stop. There is usually plenty of seating, and there are often permanently established networks for publicity and concessions. However, indoor shows playing in small arenas and school gymnasiums find different conditions in every location, and they have their own share of headaches. If Monday's show is in a civic auditorium and Tuesday's is in a high school gym, the physical conditions for the acts can vary widely. Tents allow more consistent control over the space and layout. Indoor circuses frequently derive no income from in-house concessions, and are also forced to pay exorbitant fees to local musician unions. Additionally, small indoor circus managers may have to carry or contract for a false floor, pay excessively high rental and insurance fees, worry about whether the elephants will fit through the doors or fall through the floors, and make last minute adjustments when the school superintendent forgets to unlock the outside doors for the public. How many proprietors would agree that if economics permitted, they would rather be performing under the big top?

Tenting really should be cheaper than the rising costs of renting super domes and civic arenas these days, and there are places that circuses might want to play which just don't have auditoriums of adequate size. Even the Ringling organization is considering a brand-new tent for its international operations. If a move back towards tents and away from arenas can be detected as a trend for the 1990s, it is not only nostalgia that is at work; tenting can often reduce the high cost of renting, insurance, and local union fees and regulations. Besides, there is something about the combined smell of mud, sawdust, canvas and elephant dung that circus folks just can't quite get out of their heads.

Most tented circus people vow to stay "under canvas" no matter what, threatening to take their shows off the road rather than go indoors. Carson & Barnes owner D. R. Miller is among the many who claim that a circus is not a circus in a building. And Cliff Vargas, who played in both, insisted that he much preferred the tent. On the other hand, America has never known the European tradition of the modern permanent circus building, with the possible exception of the school circus buildings in Peru and Sarasota. Dominique Jando of the Big Apple Circus claims that a permanent home is the ideal, and that no one in his right mind would prefer tented life to a building which allows precise and completely flexible control of lighting, rigging, entrances and exits, and provides permanent rehearsal and training space for the ultimate development of circus arts. Such a site in New York remains the dream of the Big Apple Circus, and in St. Louis, of the Circus Flora. Nonetheless, circus in America is still closely associated with the nostalgic image of the old tents, and our primary interest in this chapter will be devoted to the contemporary American tented circus.

Logistics

There is a long process involved in bringing a circus to town, and each circus handles the logistics in its own way. Some kind of general agent, called by various names, and often an account executive or a vice-president of the circus, is in charge in front of the show. This "booking" or "tour," or "traffic," or "bushing" agent/director makes the initial contacts, sets up the routes and lots, and draws up contracts with the sponsors and advertisers. Circus routing is generally kept a secret until advertising begins, in order to prevent smaller or less conscientious shows from slipping into a town and taking advantage of the publicity of a big show. The booking agent must discreetly accomplish a great deal: lot owners must be contacted to negotiate rental, and necessary permits must be secured from county or city officials. Some municipalities require fire, health, police, sanitary, zoning, building and electrical permits, even for tented shows which carry their own generators.

The media and marketing directors arrange for the sale of advance tickets and promotional events. A number of complimentary tickets, "Annie Oakleys," are traded for favors to the circus. Special promotions may include discounted family days, coloring contests, elephant races, newspaper coupons, free giveaways in schools, drawings, and the involvement of morning disk jockeys and TV weather people. One of the more celebrated circus give-away traditions is the opportunity for individuals and garden clubs to cart away wheel-barrow loads of free elephant poop, that magical guarantee of giant tomatoes in home gardens. That's one answer to the small boy's question cited at the beginning of this chapter. The Beatty-Cole show promises free fuel for life to the first person to invent an automobile which runs on elephant dung.

Many circuses employ an advance clown who arrives in town a few days before the circus to generate interest wherever he or she can, and to do personal appearances for schools, the media and service organizations. The advance clown often performs demonstrations and distributes educational materials that may not be directly related to the promotion of his or her particular show; rather, they are designed to raise circus consciousness and knowledge about circus in general.

Hundreds of other not always insignificant details must be considered, including the procurement of food for the cook house and various stands and joints on the midway, and the locating of such necessities of life as dry cleaners, and laundromats. Supplies for a Ringling tour at one time included 1,144 tons of hay, 135,000 pounds of oats, 506 tons of sawdust, and 20,000 rolls of toilet paper. For today's Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus, advance arrangements must be made to deliver by 9:00 a.m. on the opening day of the circus: 30 bales of high quality hay, 450 pounds of grain, 5-10 bales of shavings or sawdust,

two 20-yard dumpsters, provisions for 250 daily meals prepared in the cookhouse, and 1,400 pounds of diesel fuel for every day the circus plays in that town. The agent must also arrange in advance for a water hook-up; asphalt repair for about 400 stake holes, if they are to play on a mall parking lot; extra labor, if needed; lot-cleaning; and the emptying of six portable chemical "donnikers," as they are traditionally called in the circus.

All jobs and deliveries are essential. If anything is overlooked, it can affect the performance in many unsuspected ways. For instance, one of the ten Beatty-Cole marketing directors, Dick Smith, recalls a day in Salisbury, Maryland, when the local contractor forgot to empty the donnikers at the appointed 9:00 a.m. hour. Since the donnikers always travel full from the previous stand so as to be less apt to tip, it was one miserable day at the circus.

As Marketing Director, Smith arrives in a town three weeks before the Beatty-Cole circus and up to five months after media teams and agents have made brief initial contacts. He doesn't leave until he is sure the lot has been thoroughly cleaned after the circus has left town. It is his job to be the liaison between the circus and the community, and to solve all problems that might interfere with a successful experience for both. He arranges for gravel deliveries to fill in the low spots on a muddy lot. He also seeks to earn respect and trust for his show, providing a reliable face for local people to identify with the Beatty-Cole Circus, and convincing them that they can't do without circus in their lives.

Many smaller shows do more of their preliminary work from their headquarters. The Great American Circus, for instance, plans much of its advance work by telephone from Sarasota, Florida. Only a few advance men, often with the help of local circus fans, can then take care of any preparations which must necessarily be done locally. The Kelly-Miller Circus plans its tour from its winterquarters office in Hugo, Oklahoma. In addition to the advance agents who travel through each town to set up contacts, they do all follow-ups from the home office and keep several WATTS lines busy year-round, assuring sponsors of a permanent responsible contact. The Pickle Family Circus, on the other hand, relies on its sponsors to do all the advance work, providing suggestions by telephone and a thorough guide book of proven publicity techniques.

Every circus has its own system for making local arrangements and generating interest. They have in common a desire for the circus experience to be a happy one for all concerned. The Beatty-Cole show has even been known to spend over \$3,000 just to re turf a lot they had damaged. After all, good circus business depends on being invited back, and children of all ages count on the circus coming back to town again next year.

Billing and Ballyhooing

If where a circus plays is vital to its success, so is the very complicated process of making us aware of the time and place of performances. So too is the often-not-so-gentle art of persuasion that is designed to convince us that we, the public, can't live another day without the circus. Since 1893, that process has been called ballyhooing, a word which developed at the Chicago Columbian Exposition. It was an English mispronunciation of an Arabic expression used for calling sideshow performers out in front of the tent to do a free show to attract a crowd. Ballyhooing involves a lot of flamboyant language and exaggeration that are the legacy primarily of two masters at it: Barnum and Charles Ringling. It has caught the public fancy, and we are rarely offended by exaggerated circus claims made in the spirit of a challenging child: "I'll bet you a hundred million dollars that ..." Said John Ringling: "There is no effort to deceive the public—but to express the hugeness of everything in figures that carry the idea. If we have fifty elephants,

and say a hundred, it pleases rather than offends." ²

Ballyhooing also meant that anything goes in advertising a circus. Hot-air balloon ascents were once an integral, spectacular opening for every circus performance, because balloons could be seen for miles by thousands of prospective spectators. Coup & Barnum's "Professor" Donaldson once took off in a balloon over Chicago in 1875; he's still missing. Today, the bulk of such advertising is handled by the media. The Ringling, Beatty-Cole, Carson & Barnes, and other big shows or sponsors rely on TV spots and newspaper ads; smaller shows put more emphasis on radio. Everyone is eager for the free and more meaningful coverage that can be generated by feature newspaper stories related to the circus. And a picture of the advance clown with a handicapped child outdraws thousands of dollars' worth of paid advertising.

Wherever possible, posters and handbills are still a vital circus tradition. Some shows use stock posters, and others develop unique looks, styles, shapes and color combinations that identify a specific circus. Billing agents are responsible for "papering" towns, or putting up circus posters in store windows and on telephone poles where they will be seen by the most number of people. The success of P.T. Barnum's paper promotion of Joice Heth, George Washington's "nurse," as "the first person to put pants on the first president," established his genius at the art of ballyhooing. Madison Avenue virtually owes its beginnings to the "Shakespeare of Advertising," as he was sometimes known.

Modern billers have to contend with city ordinances against posting on utility poles, or regulations requiring paper to be removed before the circus leaves town. They may be limited to the walls of vacant buildings, store window fronts which can be traded for Annie Oakleys, and fences around construction sites. Gone are the days when circus paper completely covered window fronts and the sides of buildings, and when large banners, hung across main street, announced the arrival of a show. But billing is still an important way to ballyhoo the circus' coming to town. For an average stand on the Beatty-Cole tour, for example, Dick Smith has 400 pounds of posters ready for his billing crews.

Circus paper comes in sizes referred to as sheets. Their 28 by 42 inch dimension was originally determined by the size and weight of the lithograph stone that could be easily lifted by the printers. Every kind of bill was determined by combinations of sheets. Dates were printed separately on half-sheets, 21 by 28 inches, and 24 sheets made up a full 12 by 25 foot billboard. Panels for narrow window spaces were in half- and one-sheet sizes; one by 28 sheet "streamers," usually containing the show's title, were used for pasting over the tops of a long row of other signs. The biggest lithographs ever printed were for the W. W. Cole, the Forepaugh-Sells and the Buffalo Bill shows, consisting of one hundred sheets each, mounted on billboards of 15 by 60 feet. ³ "Guttersnipe" referred to circus paper several feet wide by only a few inches high that was intended to go on rain gutters over store fronts; and "banners," for outdoor displays, were usually mounted on thin stiff cloth. The colorful old lithographs, offering a lot of printed and pictorial information, were designed for a more appreciative, slower-paced society than today's. Of the many major lithograph companies that handled circus printing, only one or two remain today. In the electronic age, the lithographs have been replaced by color TV. Today's circus paper is much simpler; in the tradition of video art, it is intended to provide the minimum necessary amount of information from only a casual glance.

Billing crews will now post or paper a town about a week before a circus is to open. In the old days of the giant railroad circuses, the major shows had from one to five advance "bill" cars, which would roll into town two to three weeks before the main show, attached to a regular passenger train. In 1923, John Robinson's bill car typically carried twelve billposters separated into two brigades, seven lithographers, a

paste maker, a chef, and a car manager. ⁴ It contained sleeping facilities, storage for a month's supply of dated paper, ladders, brushes, tacks, and a complete shop for mixing glue and posting bills.

Circus paper was traditionally attached in one of two ways: It was either tacked up or pasted up. The tack-spitters were so called because of their dangerous-sounding cobbler's tradition of approaching their targets with a mouthful of tacks. They were very good at spitting them onto their magnetic tack hammers and driving them into place with one smooth blow. The practice was probably begun by the North Salem (NY) shoemaker and circus founder, Aron Turner. ⁵ A good tack-spitter traditionally carried with him a loaf of bread; if he accidentally swallowed a tack, he would quickly follow it with a piece of bread, presumably to protect his stomach and bowels. A new and safer system for posting paper was clearly in order.

According to current scholarship, it was Van Amburgh that first used paste for bill-posting in Cold Water, Michigan, in 1855. May claimed that the system of pasting pictorial paper on locations open to the weather was ordered by Seth Howes. ⁶ Bill-posters had their own language: any stand of pasted circus paper was called a "daub," but they never "daubed" glue on anything.

The billing crews had to be a tough bunch. They had to work in rain, sleet, or hail, along with the traditional mailmen, and sometimes they worked from high scaffolding and in high winds. On an average day, each man was supposed to post a "hod" of 300 to 600 sheets, covering up to 7,000 square feet of space. Added up, circus paper accounts for one of the major expenses of early shows. The 1911 Ringling show, for instance, allotted 914,000 sheets for the season, and the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus of 1934 posted a total of 101,108 sheets in Chicago alone. Under average conditions, a show might be expected to use anywhere from 5,000 to 20,000 sheets per town, depending on the potential and the opposition.

Once the initial billing was complete, the job of the billing crews wasn't yet over. They were occasionally called on to engage in fist fights with rival billing brigades determined to cover everything with their own circus paper. Such tactics frequently launched full scale "billing wars." Circuses preferred to call them, more euphemistically, "opposition," but they could be ruthless indeed. Special opposition brigades were organized, whose whole purpose was a campaign of dirty tricks that would put Watergate to shame. Supplies of new paper might be intentionally rerouted to the wrong city. "Rat" sheets were printed to cast doubt on the morality of a rival circus, or the truth of its advertising. They were most likely to be libelous lies themselves, but they almost always got away with it because the printed slanders generated publicity for both shows. People would have to see them both to know who was telling the truth. Opposition crews might change the date and show title on rival circus paper. Some shows would bill a town with "Coming Soon" paper, even if they had no intentions of doing so, just to make trouble. "Wait Sheets" called for the public not to attend one circus but to wait for the "real" circus. At one time, the Ringling show was even called the "Wait Bros." because of its efforts to undercut any show preceding its arrival in a town. To the casual observer, the bright red bills insisted in big black letters, "Wait for the Big One!"

Gentlemen's agreements beginning as early as in 1883 have always tried to reduce the billing wars to more subtle forms of persuasion, but there are still recent remnants of opposition to be found. In 1959, the Adams Bros. & Sells Bros. Circus used ten times its normal amount of paper crying "Why Pay More?" as it struggled against the larger Christiani Brothers Circus in Green Bay and Appleton, Wisconsin. Again in 1974, a public war of words in print broke out between the Felds' Ringling operation and the newly founded Circus America, both of which opened in Washington, D.C., on April 2 to packed houses. In 1983, almost four months ahead of their scheduled fall dates in Chicago, Ringling crews posted wait paper which was clearly aimed at a summer stand of the Vargas Circus: "Why Settle For: Paying more for

less show and trudging across a dusty/muddy lot to swelter under a canvas tent in the hot and humid July/August heat while sitting on a hard bench?" Finally, as recently as 1988, in El Paso, Texas, a Disney ice show promoter was accused of posing as a Circus Vargas employee and stealing 100,000 Vargas free and discount admission coupons. According to the *El Paso Times*, he allegedly stole the coupons so people wouldn't know the circus was in town and instead would go to the Disney show.⁷ Clearly, billing wars and opposition are not entirely a thing of the past.

With all the circuses, large and small, still criss-crossing our country, most of whom keep their routings a closely-guarded secret, it is inevitable that they will run into each other and compete for the same audiences. But good circuses generate business and enthusiasm for other good circuses, and responsible owners don't object if they have been preceded into their territory by a good clean rival. Mutually supportive relationships have even begun to form, such as the one between the Pickle Family and the Cirque du Soleil, which resulted in a 1989 Soleil performance in San Francisco to benefit the Pickle. Pickle and the Australian Circus Oz have a mutually supportive arrangement as well, and Lorenzo Pickle found it possible to make a guest appearance with the Circus Flora in 1989. Such expressions of level-headed circus brotherhood were not unknown in the past, either, but they certainly didn't receive the exposure of the great billing wars. There is much more to be said about the fascinating world of circus advertising, but this is not the appropriate place. At any rate, the whole story has already been ably told in *Billers, Banners & Bombast*, by Charles Philip Fox and Tom Parkinson.

Arrowing

Leaving aside the job of ballyhooing the circus, there is one additional person, called the 24-hour man, who comes to town before the circus itself arrives. His jobs might include bringing the circus from one stand to the next by "arrowing the road." It is no easier, although probably far less offensive to local farmers, than the old practice of "railing the road." Small, usually red, easily seen arrows are temporarily taped to existing road signs and utility poles along the highway. Some roads are obviously easier to post than others, depending on traffic speed, available pull-offs, and the number of signs. As might be expected, the New Jersey turnpike has a reputation for being one of the more demanding of American highways to arrow. If two shows are following the same road, different colors, initials or other characteristics may be used to distinguish one show from another. The arrows are the "rails" which guide the circus vehicles to the lot of the next stand, and if the public spots them and knows how to read them, they are an easy way to find the circus in a new town. Their language is simple. For instance, either a "SLO" sign followed by an arrow pointing downward, or two or three arrows pointing at the ground mean "Slow down." Three arrows pointing at a 45 degree angle to the right mean "Take the next exit."

The 24-hour man is usually responsible for laying out the circus lot. He determines where the center poles of the big top will be placed and where the front and back doors will be. He marks each key location with a ribboned wooden stake or metal pin, if the lot is dirt, or a spot of color-coded spray paint, if it's an asphalt lot. Working from a single point, perhaps the front door, and using a chain or other measuring device, he sets all subsequent measurements from that point, including the placement of every stake line and center pole and all the trailers and trucks. If physical obstructions interfere with his ideal stake lines, the general manager or owner may choose to find another lot, modify the standard stake lines if it can be done safely, or as a last resort blow the date.

Circuses haven't traveled in a tight convoy since World War II, in order to avoid both highway traffic hazards and the congestion that would result if everyone arrived on a lot at the same time. The 24-hour man meets the first trucks when they arrive to show them where to park. But once drivers are oriented to

the location of the front door, everything else is usually the same on every lot. The peculiarities of a lot may demand flexibility for interior seating and back yard design, but trailers almost always have the same neighbors, and the trucks are always parked in the same relationship to each other. There are practical considerations governing parking procedures, as well as remnants of the old circus caste system. Owners and managers are always on the front end of the lot, near the ticket wagon. Performers' trailers and motor homes are parked together, and dormitory trucks are well out of sight in the back yard, near the cookhouse. Animals are located together on the same part of the lot, sometimes tethered out on the grass, when practicable, and downwind when possible.

Getting There

With the exception of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, today's circuses all travel in trucks. Before they leave their winter quarters, the list of preliminary preparations is long. They must obtain and meet the rules and regulations of all the various states governing the transportation of animals across state lines. Their trucks must be licensed in every state whose borders they will cross, and display Department of Transportation approval stickers guaranteeing that all fees have been paid.

Any manager knows that a reliable means of reaching the site of a promised performance is absolutely essential. Because circus people can't afford the inevitable loss of income and reputation resulting from a blown date, they must either own and maintain or lease a fleet of reliable trucks.

The size and nature of the fleet varies from circus to circus. At minimum, every show under canvas carries at least one self-contained generator truck, which provides all the electric power the circus will use. The constant noise from the generator trucks and the rapid-fire talk of the candy butchers and side-show grinders have always been associated with the atmosphere of the circus. Another truck which is included in all circus fleets is the ticket office, still uniformly called the "red wagon," even if it's in a modern white air-conditioned semi rig. In addition, there are usually concession trucks, canvas trucks, pole and seating trucks, dormitory trucks, animal trucks, and the cook house. The three largest tented shows in the country, Beatty-Cole, Vargas, and Carson & Barnes, travel with a total of twenty-six, twenty-three, and forty-two show-owned vehicles respectively. Smaller circus outfits like Wayne Franzen's and the Great American travel with only thirteen and ten. These figures do not include the many privately-owned motor homes and trailers where individual performers prefer to live, or the trucks that belong to complete acts that are leased by the circus. For example, flying acts and animal acts usually own their own vehicles and equipment. Privately owned trucks and motor homes can double or triple the number of vehicles that must be accommodated on a circus lot.

Increasingly, circuses seek to own similar model trucks to simplify repairs with uniform replacement parts. Clearly, among the most sought after and well-paid employees of the circus are reliable, safe and loyal truck drivers, able to maneuver onto some pretty inhospitable sites, and willing to carry strange cargoes and share the demanding hours of circus life.

Traveling by truck is a complicated process, and the Ringling show still finds it profitable to do their moving by rail, the only one to be doing so since the end of the railroad era in 1956. Starting in 1957, they too scraped by without their own train, moving like a regular truck show, except that the animal acts were shipped ahead via three railroad-owned stock cars. But in 1960, the Ringling show went back on the rail in fifteen of their own tunnel and stock cars, redesigned from old coach cars by manager and former flyer Art Concello. Since 1969, there have been two Ringling Circus trains crisscrossing the country, one each for the Red and the Blue units. In 1989, the red unit used forty-four cars and the Blue Unit forty-five, and

the flat cars have grown to almost ninety feet in length; all their cars together are as long as any circus train ever, except for the big Ringling tented show trains in the heyday of the railroad circus. Of course, both contemporary units are strictly arena-based, so they don't have to undergo the old logistical nightmare of carrying canvas, poles, and canvas crews from town to town. In addition, some equipment still goes by truck, and many of the Ringling performers travel by motor home or truck, preferring to avoid the limited space, noise and confusion that go with life on a crowded circus train.

Railroading

Technically, the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus may still be a railroad show, but it's a far cry from the days which followed W.C. Coup's original 1872 move to rail. Because the success of the circus is so intertwined with the rapid expansion of the railroad, the golden days of the railroad circus merit a closer look.

Circuses grew as fast as the trains and the westward development of America would allow. They could now jump hundreds of miles in a single night, instead of five to fifteen miles. In any single season, they could play at a greater distance from their winter quarters than ever before, in virtually any city in the United States serviced by a railroad. They could even bring their audiences to them on special excursion trains, increasing their exposure still more. By 1891, at least seven of the hundred or so circuses in the country were large railroad shows. By 1911, at the peak of the golden age of the railroad circus and only forty years after the first major railroad show, there were thirty-two.

Traveling by train was never an especially cheap proposition for the circus. Transportation of a large circus was an enormous logistical operation: There were hundreds of horses, elephants and other performing and menagerie animals to transport, feed, water and exercise. They also carried enough canvas to make the bigtop, menagerie, cook house, sideshow, and other support tents, with all of the necessary poles, chains, and miles of ropes; seating for sometimes upwards of 12,000 people; wardrobe; lighting; an adequate food supply for animals and people; wagons for parades and for moving equipment from the railyard to the circus lot; and of course all of the workers and performers themselves, who at times may have numbered 1,600 people on the Ringling show. The daily task of loading, moving, and unloading a circus train instituted a tradition of clever transportation design that remains typical even in today's truck circuses.

In his first year with Barnum, Coup found that a whole new uniform rail flat car design would be necessary, and he ordered forty new ones from Columbus, Ohio, for the 1872 season. Railroads charged the same rate for all flat cars, long or short, so Coup's cars were twice the usual length of thirty feet, in order to carry more wagons for the money. They were reinforced to stand the great weights of the circus wagons. They were of low uniform height, to keep the center of gravity of the heavy wagons as low as possible, to allow them to clear overhead bridges, and to facilitate loading. Brake wheels on the ends of the cars were removable, so as not to interfere with rolling wagons on and off the car. Because railroads had not yet agreed on a standard gauge, Coup's cars also had a system for changing the width of the wheel axles.

Later, circus flat cars grew to a standard seventy-two feet long by nine feet nine inches wide, long before the railroad companies had ever conceived of "piggy-back" cars for themselves. After 1922, most of the new steel circus flat cars were made by either Mt. Vernon Co., in Mt. Vernon, Illinois or the Warren Co., in Warren, Pennsylvania. The Warren cars are easily recognizable in profile, because they bow upwards in the middle, unless they are fully loaded, whereas the Mt. Vernon flat cars have a straight top

edge and an angular straight bottom edge.

Uniform circus flat cars permitted the train to be unloaded from either end from designated "run" cars. For efficiency, the car consist was designed so that a train could be "cut" and unloaded in two or more sections. The 24-hour man phoned the train crew to inform them to load the train with "poles to caboose," or "poles to engine," or "poles to middle." The crew then faced each circus wagon pole or "tongue" in the proper direction on the flat cars for efficient unloading. Ramps called "runs" would be placed off the end of the designated flat cars. Using horse, elephant, or tractor power, wagons were pulled across steel plate bridges placed between the other cars to the end of the run cars. To prevent the wagon from rolling down the run too fast, a rope attached to the rear was wrapped around a "snubbing" post midway on the side of the run car. Crews eased the wagon down the run, checking its speed by tension on the rope. Guiding the wagon down the run on the front end was the "poler," who had the most dangerous job in unloading a circus train. With one false move he could jackknife the wagon and turn it over onto himself. Not uncommonly, if the "snubbers" lost control and the wagon came down too fast for him to stay clear, the poler could be seriously injured. The whole efficient but dangerous system of loading and unloading circus flat cars can still be seen daily in a fascinating demonstration at the Circus World Museum, in Baraboo, Wisconsin. Small "cross cage" wagons, which would be placed side by side across the flat cars, were hefted into place by hand. The term "razorbacks," for the men who load and unload the rail cars, derives from the men who squat under the side cages and position them across the flat cars on the command "Raise your backs!"

After each wagon was unloaded, it was customarily hitched to a team of Percherons. This traditional breed of heavy draft horses, along with Belgians and Clydesdales, were called baggage stock in the circus. They were responsible for pulling the wagons from the railroad siding to the lot. In the old days, the baggage stock was a major portion of the animal population in the circus; in 1916, the Ringling show carried 300 such horses.

The way from the rail yard to the circus lot was marked by arrows chalked on telephone poles, the only kind of arrowing really needed for railroad shows. At night, the way back to the yard would be marked with smudge pots.

A Circus Day

The Ringling show in its heyday used to travel in four separate trains. In the 1923-1928 seasons there were a total of one hundred cars, not counting the billing cars attached to an earlier passenger train. The efficiency of train travel can best be understood with a look at a typical circus day on a Ringling lot in 1946. The first show train arrived in town at about 5:00 a.m. It was called the "Flying Squadron," after the name for the 1873 crew who arrived a day early to pound in stakes and otherwise prepare the lot. The three stock cars, eighteen flat cars, and five coaches of the Flying Squadron brought in everything necessary to lay out the lot, and its two most important items were the cookhouses and the stake drivers. As a crew of 174 men began to prepare breakfast, the second train, containing the big top, arrived at 6:30 a.m. or so. By the time the third train with the seating arrived at 7:30, the stakes had been driven for the major tents, and the wagons were already rolled onto the lot. Poles were up by 8:30, and an hour later the great canvases rose from the ground like enormous mushrooms. The fourth and last train, consisting of eighteen coach cars, rolled in shortly afterwards, bringing the performers. For the rest of the morning, workers spotted the cages and trunks, erected the seating, and hung the banners for the sideshow. Aerialists hung or checked their own rigging. By 11:30 a.m., everything was ready for the show, and the cook house flag was raised to signal lunch was ready.

At 12:30, the circus opened for business, with the shouting of "DOORS!" and the candy butchers, bugmen, and side-show talkers and grinders went to work, calling out, "Step right up ..." Those gentlemen with the canes and straw hats soliciting your business at the circus, by the way, are "talkers," or "grinders," and are never to be called "barkers"! Following a brief band concert, the first performance of the day began at 2:15 p.m. sharp. There is still today, indeed, a time-honored tradition for the circus, unlike the theatre, to begin promptly as advertised. At 3:00 p.m., during the show, the side-show workers were fed dinner, so they could be ready for the "come-out." Immediately following the departure of the first audience, everyone else was fed, and the cook tents, known as the "Hotel Ringling," were taken down and loaded on the wagons. They were returned to the Flying Squadron train by 7:00 p.m. As soon as the cages and animals were led out of the menagerie tent for the performance, it too was taken down and packed into the wagons for transport to the train. By 9:30 p.m., the Squadron left town with the cook house and menagerie tents, and all the animals except for the elephants who would be needed for labor in dismantling the rest of the circus.

At 10:30 p.m., immediately following the performance and before the public was even out of the tent, the massive job of dismantling the rigging and seating began. The third train was loaded next, with all the seating, rigging, props, and costumes, but it couldn't leave before the second unit, so that the arrival order for the next day could be preserved. The big top was down by midnight, unlaced, baled, loaded on wagons and bound for the second train, followed by the big poles. The railroad siding power plant, the last item to be loaded on the train, was usually numbered 130, reflecting the 1:30 a.m. time that the managers expected the last train to leave town. The next day, the whole process would start all over again. The overall guiding principle for circus transportation logistics stressed the importance of a loading order which reflected the order that the show required the equipment on the lot: cook house, menagerie, sideshow, big top, seats, props, rigging, wardrobe, and lighting.

Roustabout Life

The whole moving process developed into an exacting science. Giving the lie to the old maxim, "It's a real circus in here!" to describe pandemonium and chaos, the circus move was and remains one of the more highly controlled and organized of human activities. Switching from rails to trucks has simplified the moving process only slightly from the old days. The loading and unloading down at the railroad yards and the wagon processions to and from the lot have been eliminated. Even the large tented circuses of today deal with moving far fewer animals and a much smaller population from place to place than did the only moderate-sized railroad shows of yesterday. Shorter average distances between stands have held travel time to a manageable level. Nonetheless, it's not an easy life for those who elect to work for the circus. "Roustabouts," as they are called, may start as members of the canvas or the prop crews, or in any combination of other labor-intensive jobs. They may be paid somewhere around \$100 a week, and if they stick out a whole season they'll usually get a bonus that may be enough to buy a car and tide them over during the off-season. They sleep at night in tightly-packed dormitory trucks. Showers can be a rarity on some shows, but are readily available requirements on others. They may be makeshift outdoor camp-shower arrangements, but they are a significant improvement over the old system, when the water truck supplied each man with four buckets of cold water per day, two in the morning and two at night. There is rarely time to leave the circus to explore local towns; and the tradition of not mixing with townspeople, affectionately called "towners," or "lot lice" when they come on the circus lot, remains strong.

On the other hand, there are enough "pluses" to make life as a roustabout worthy in the eyes of those who choose it. It offers the freedom of moving about the country in a kind of rootlessness, a spirit of

adventure that is reminiscent of pioneer days. Roustabouts still tend to be a tough and self-reliant lot of pioneers. Occasional thefts, fights, substance abuse, and violence on the lot serve as reminders that many circus people don't live ideal lives. But more commonly, roustabouts are good, fun-loving wanderers, risk takers, and adventurers, in flight from boredom. As Doris Earl, co-owner of the Roberts Brothers Circus observes, "Their faces change, from one year to the next, but the men don't." Sometimes called America's French Foreign Legion, circuses offer anonymity: few questions are asked of prospective roustabouts, so long as they show a Social Security card or a green card and a willingness to work. So the circus often serves as a haven for those who would prefer to forget an unhappy life or misdeeds back home.

By contrast, daily life for a performer in the circus can carry significantly greater financial rewards. Headliners like Gunther Gabel Williams and Dolly Jacobs are among the highest paid performing artists in the world. But weekly salaries of performers with less star appeal at the ticket window can range from \$125 to \$300. It's not enough to get rich on, but when all family members are working, it's enough to get by. The personal satisfaction brought on by public approval of their demanding performances can feed the ego at least.

On the other hand, many circus performers claim they are sometimes not treated with the respect that is their due as artists. They can be victims of a longtime prejudice which unfairly assigns them to a third-rate "gypsy" status. With restrictive social traditions and the heavy demands of touring, life can be lonely, unless performers are traveling with their families.

Rules and regulations of behavior for circus employees vary considerably. Some show managers are eager to preserve the family image of circus. The Kelly-Miller Circus' David Rawls tolerates no use of drugs or alcohol on circus lots whatsoever, and even discourages the men from smoking in public; he demands a clean appearance at all times, and no swearing. Infractions of the rules can result in immediate dismissal, but he says there are few infractions among a happy and dedicated crew. Other contemporary shows are just as rigid, but some are considerably more lax, and sometimes it's difficult for outsiders to know ahead of time which shows have high standards of behavior. The result of a few unsavory shows is commonly a bad reputation for all circuses.

Grift Artistry

Pay-offs and outright scams are now more the exception than the norm, but the opposite was the case in the early days of American circus. >From the 1860s to the 1920s, the circus had an overabundance of shifty grift artists and gamblers. Poge O'Brien, Adam Forepaugh, and Ben Wallace ran notorious grift shows, and they were among the many who developed clever methods of cheating and short-changing customers. A common practice was for circuses to hire teams of professional pickpockets to work the crowds. Forepaugh even hired a blind woman to "collect alms" in front of his red wagon, 90% of which went into his famous vest pocket and 10% to her. Forepaugh's vest pocket was the notorious repository for all off-the-record fees and pay-offs. Grift privileges were often sold to employees for a weekly fee; according to historian Gordon Yadon, the privilege of stealing laundry from clotheslines while the townspeople were at the circus went for \$100 a week.⁸ The high ticket window in the red wagon and the high platform of the sideshow ticket sellers were created specifically to make counting change difficult. Sometimes an invisible slot in the eye-level surface of a ticket stand peeled bills back off the bottom of a pile of change after it had been counted out by the seller and pushed forward towards a naive customer. Many grift shows were soon forced to avoid towns where they knew tar and feathers and lynch mobs angrily awaited their return from last year's stand. Jaded towners were often ready to believe that circus

people were morally corrupt to the last man and woman.

The end result was that the occasional more moral, family-oriented circuses had to protect their wholesome images ever more vigorously. They were called "Sunday School shows" by their less than savory rivals, because they allowed no gambling, swearing, drinking, fraternizing with towners, sloppy or tasteless dress, or contacts between the show girls and anyone else. The Ringlings were particularly adamant about the clean image of their shows, refusing to allow any sort of grift anywhere in their operations. Many old-timers still feel that the real reason John Ringling was forced to close the American Circus Corporation shows after he bought them in 1929, is that their operators refused to give up their grift operations, and Mr. John would not risk tarnishing the Ringling image.

Seventy years ago, the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, the biggest Sunday School show of all, printed a list of "Rules and Suggestions" for its employees. It prohibited among other things sitting cross-legged on any float or tableaux wagon, smoking or chewing gum or tobacco in public, and gambling and the loaning of money. The ballet girls were required to sign in to their sleeping car by 11:00 p.m., and were not permitted to stop at hotels or talk or visit with any male members of the show company except the management, or with any towners. Even an "accidental" encounter with a man was not considered excusable. Unbeknownst to a general public which was determined to see all circuses as morally corrupt, life on such a show was a family affair. In its heyday, the circus wasn't a bad place to raise kids, in an atmosphere that was often considerably more wholesome than that in many of the cities and towns it visited.

Family Life

Most performers are born into circus families, and do what they must do out of compulsion, or because they know no other life. Circus families are close-knit units; they live together in their own rigs, and the children are often trained into the family act as soon as they can walk. Their schooling may be taken care of by a traveling tutor, as is the case with the Ringling, Pickle Family, and other shows. The state of California requires that a tutor certified to teach in California be available to children traveling with any circus in California. When children travel with it, the Big Apple Circus maintains its own "One Ring Schoolhouse," organized by Michael Christensen, providing a certified teacher for a full academic course load, in addition to weekly classes in circus arts taught by the performers. During the school year in other shows, children may be left at winter quarters or with relatives. Occasionally they can make arrangements to complete their schooling by correspondence with home teachers, or through the popular K-8 home instruction courses offered since 1897 by the Calvert School in Baltimore. Calvert provides a fully accredited structured curriculum by mail; their courses include testing and grading procedures, books, and instructional materials prepared for parents with no teaching experience. Schooling for circus youngsters is not easy to come by. It can be thorough, and full of real-life adventures that surpass the seat of a school desk, but it can also be ignored.

Life for circus children may not always be as relaxed, clean and wholesome as social agencies might wish. For every child among the circus audience who yearns for a life in the circus, there is probably a circus child looking back, longing for the security, warmth and space of a permanent home. On some shows, crowded life in a tiny shared train or truck compartment, with dirty windows that don't open, a total lack of privacy, and parental indifference to schooling is not unknown. Living conditions are not always even minimally sanitary. Legally required tutors are not always used, leaving some circus kids woefully weak in reading and math skills and ill-equipped to handle life outside the circus should they ever have to leave. Clearly the circus does not necessarily offer children any idyllic escape from the perils of poverty and drugs. It's a life that can make a child grow old fast. But then idyllic childhoods can be hard to come

by in other branches of society these days.

On the other hand, circus kids often can demonstrate, along with their impressive performing skills, a little more energy and dedication to hard work, a greater ease in dealing with people, a high degree of tolerance, a worldly self-sufficiency, a better sense of time and space, and a greater facility for travel than some of their non-circus peers. Even if they are "deadheading" non-performers, they learn discipline at an early age. They know not to stick fingers in cages, not to leave the yard, and to watch out for tractors, the back ends of horses and the front ends of elephants. And finally, performers at an early age learn to control the fears that plague us all, children and adults alike: of failing, and of falling. Among the hundreds of reasonably happy and well-adjusted kids traveling with American circuses is Mark Oliver Gebel, who will take over his famous father's elephant act after the completion of Gunther Gebel Williams' farewell tour with Ringling. Another is fourteen-year-old Lorenzo Pisoni, born and raised on the Pickle Family Circus. Lorenzo even did a stint as ringmaster in 1988, and he enthusiastically continues independently as a gifted clown, acrobat and juggler, despite the retirement of his parents from performing with the show.

For performer and roustabout alike, there is a spirit about the circus which they say can't be found in any other lifestyle. There is the freedom and adventure of travel. There are the personal rewards of transcending their own limitations. There is at least a steady income, with little opportunity to spend it. There is at least a place to live, and warm, like-minded people to live with. There is at least the opportunity to raise a close-knit family with old-fashioned values. Last, but certainly not least important, there is food on the table; and the food for circus people is legendary.

The Cookhouse

Like the army, the circus also moves on its stomach, and the reputation of the "cook house," the dining tent, is often the determining factor for an applicant seeking a circus job. Roustabouts know who has the best cooks, and owners know that the best way to keep good help is to provide good food. Cook house stewards Charles Henry, "Ollie" Webb, Joe Dan Miller, and John Staley are all legendary in the business for the meals they planned. Especially sumptuous were their traditional "Christmas" dinners, always held on the Fourth of July, because circus people were always scattered in the off-season around Christmas time. In the old days, the "Hotel Ringling" fed as many as 1,600 people—everyone connected with the circus—three full meals per day. An ice box wagon, a steam boiler, and a kitchen tent with field ranges and steam tables located near the cook house were in almost constant use.

Inside, the tables were always strictly organized according to a tight circus caste system. On the "short" side of the tent, so-called because of the short length of their tables, the owners and their families, the ticket sellers, ushers, front door men, and the "candy butchers," who were highest ranked in the circus caste system sat near the front door. Performers also sat on the "short side" of the tent, following the pecking order of riding acts, featured trapezists and wire walkers, animal trainers, acrobats, clowns, and sideshow "freaks." Last, if they were allowed to eat in the main cook house tent at all, came the black side-show band.

The performers were never allowed to associate with non-performers, and they were separated by a curtain from the "long side" of the cook house. There, all the workers and their crew bosses ate at longer twelve-foot tables. Black roustabouts had their own separate dining tent. Regardless of racial and caste discrimination, however, everyone connected with the circus was served the same food. A tip to the waiter might have brought some extra milk and butter, but no one went hungry.

On the modern truck shows, it is mostly the roustabouts who are fed in the cook house, whereas the owners, managers and performers tend to eat in their own mobile homes and trailers. Racial discrimination and formal dining traditions have virtually disappeared. But the cook house is still the first truck to arrive at a new stand in time to prepare breakfast, and the first to leave late that afternoon for the next stand. And the cook house flag still goes up at meal times inviting any hungry circus employee to eat all he or she wants.

Raising the Tent

All major circus big tops are now made of long-lasting polyvinyl, except for the Circus World Museum's and Hanneford's, but fortunately no one talks of raising a "vinyl." Despite the Beatty-Cole Show's retirement of the last canvas three-ring big top in 1988, the word "canvas" is still used. It's relatively rare to hear old-time circus people use the word "tent," which they continue to call a "canvas" or a "top." Stuart Thayer suggests quite logically that the word "top" comes from "topped canvas," so-called to distinguish it from an open-to-the-sky arena with canvas sidewalls.⁹ Our use of the word "tent" may be frowned upon by circus purists; nonetheless, for clarity among non-circus audiences, we've slipped it in occasionally.

Circus big tops can easily cover a space larger than a football field. Size is usually expressed first by the diameter of the circular ends, and then by the number and width of the sections placed between the ends. Within the last half-century, in 1946, for example, one of the largest Ringling tents had six center poles joining five 60-foot sections with 200-foot round ends, making it a total of 500 feet long, and providing over 91,400 square feet of circus magic. The old Barnum & Bailey show had even larger tops: In 1886, they used 252-foot rounds with four 59-foot centers, making a tent that was 252 feet wide by 488 feet long (109,350 square feet); and in 1892, their top had 220-foot rounds and five 56-foot centers, making it 500 feet long (99,620 sq ft). Historian Joe McKennon reports that an even earlier Barnum & Bailey tent had eight poles and may have been 600 feet long, with a declared capacity of 10,000 spectators. By comparison, the big modern Carson & Barnes push-pole tent has 150-foot rounds, and center sections totalling 246 feet. It is thus 396 feet ("a full city block") long, and provides 54,600 square feet, or about half the space of the 1886 Barnum & Bailey big top. According to their press release, the Italian polyvinyl top is made by Scola Teloni, and it bridges a total of eight center poles. The new Beatty-Cole vinyl tent, made by Anchor Tents in Sarasota, Florida, has 140-foot rounds, and three 48-foot center sections. It is 283 feet long and has four center poles. And the Vargas tent, new in 1988, has 150-foot rounds and three 50-foot centers. While these contemporary shows are not as big as the biggest, clearly, the charge that the big tented circus is a thing of the past is wholly inappropriate.

One of the first trucks to arrive on a new lot, along with the cook house, is the stake driver. The innovation of the mechanical stake driver has all but done away with the "hammer gangs" of yesterday, and has considerably reduced the time and energy required to raise a big top. Stakes can number from a few hundred to thousands, depending on the size of the show. The old wooden bull and jigger stakes which secured the center poles could be as much as four inches thick and six feet long. Today's stakes are usually wooden for dirt lots, and steel for asphalt parking lots. Some circuses carry both varieties for flexibility, and others rely on steel pins for all conditions. The stakes are driven 24 to 30 inches into the ground. The number depends on their function: most are for the "stake line" which secures the edges of the circus top; other stakes are driven for extra tent strength and for high wire and other aerial apparatus.

Elephants have been used for over a hundred years to raise the big top, and they are still the most efficient and impressive power source travelling with the circus. Crowds often gather in the early morning

to watch the elephants work, and few owners want to disappoint them. Most shows advertise the tent-raising as a special free event, and it's not unusual to see school busses lined up at the circus lot at 8:00 a.m. Elephant tent-raising has taken the place of the circus parade and the balloon ascent as a way of arousing anticipation and building audiences.

Bale-Ring Method

There are two basic methods for raising the top, and there is still heated debate among circus experts as to which method is the better, safer, faster, or cleaner-looking. Historians don't agree on which was developed first, or whether they evolved at about the same time. The bale-ring top is raised on elevated poles, just as sails were raised on the masts of old sailing ships. The push-pole top is pushed up by the poles as they are dragged into place underneath it. The former thus has a naval origin, and the latter undoubtedly owes its roots to field army traditions.

The bale-ring tent-raising procedure is now used by the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers and the Vargas Circuses, and others, just as it has been used by most of the larger big top circuses of the last century. The driving process begins before the sun is up, while the crew is positioning the center poles, quarter poles, and the side poles. "Toe pin" stakes are driven to mark the positioning of the center poles and to prevent them from sliding when they are raised. Today's center poles are sometimes made in two or three sections of aluminum, that can be sleeved together prior to the set up. In the early years, they were solid 50- to 70-foot logs of Oregon fir; for strength, the lower, heavier end of the tree served as the top of the pole. A spoked, forged steel "bale ring," anywhere from one to three feet in diameter, is slipped over the base of the center pole. The canvas, as well as all the aerial rigging, will later be laced to the bale ring. A heavy block of wood, approximately one by three feet and rounded on the bottom, is attached to the bottom of the pole with a pin or a sleeve. This "mud block" will allow the pole to roll on its base as it is being raised, distribute its weight over a larger surface, and prevent it from sinking into the mud. All the cables and guidelines which will be used for steadying the poles as they are raised are then lashed to the main guy bull and jigger stakes located beyond the stake line.

A spool truck next makes several passes over the site, unwinding sections of the big top adjacent to the center poles; alternatively, as in the Vargas and many smaller operations, bundles of carefully folded canvas may be dropped at strategic ground locations. For a bale-ring tent, the elephants raise the first center pole, which will be used for leverage in raising the others. In 1989, co-owner Johnny Pugh came up with a new method for raising his four center poles on the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus. The poles are connected together by steel cable; the hydraulic system on the spool truck, identical to that used to haul in the nets on commercial fishing trawlers, is used to winch the four poles up simultaneously.

As soon as the poles are up, the canvas is spread out manually; the sections are speedily laced together by a simple and efficient zipper-like system of rope loops, and lashed to the bale ring. When the canvas crew have guyed the big top out to the stake line and inserted all the side poles, it takes on the appearance of an enormous oval soup bowl. In areas where there is any possibility of major wind, storm guys are also used as added safety ties to prevent a potential "blow-down."

A blow-down can happen in any freak wind condition, and it is still one of a circus man's greatest fears. Every circus has experienced it at one time or another. It can cause physical injury and considerable damage to the top and circus property. Downpours can create large water pockets heavy enough to rip the canvas and snap the side poles, and high winds can lift quarter poles right off the ground. Dealing with a storm is not much fun for anyone. Spectators are generally reluctant to leave the

deceptive safety of a tent to go out into the weather, and the men know that tugging on wet guy ropes can tear the skin off raw hands. They also know that lightning is an ever-present danger when standing in ankle-deep water, and that stressed tent stakes can pull free from saturated mud at any time. With all these potential dangers, circus managers and all hands pull together. Every possible precaution to prevent a blow-down is taken, including parking the big trucks on the windward side of the tent to act as a wind break, extra storm guys, and regular emergency drills for evacuating and lowering the tent as rapidly as possible in a high wind. As a result, serious injuries from a blow-down are extremely rare.

Once the "guying out" is completed, ropes and chains are attached leading from the bale-ring, over the top of each pole, back through a pulley at its base, and out to a harnessed elephant. On signal, the elephant teams "pull peaks," raising the bale-rings approximately half-way up the poles. Sometimes this is done on one pole at a time, but other circuses pull all peaks at the same time in order to provide less stress on the tent material and the poles. This sight of the giant canvas taking its first breath and heaving itself off the ground has inspired many a poet and young runaway, and it remains a sure crowd-pleaser today. As soon as they can get under the canvas, crews of men and elephants quickly begin to insert the quarter poles into the canvas and pull them to a 35 degree upright position. Cries of "Move up!" "Move Back!" and "Stop!" echo under the tent as the elephant trainers and their beasts "shoot" the quarter poles into place. A quarter pole is a lighter, smaller pole with a long slender prong in one end that stabs through a grommeted hole in the canvas. The supposed invention of Old "Doc" Spalding, quarter poles are necessary for the prevention of water pockets, and to elevate the canvas from sagging onto the patrons' heads if the tent is over 110 feet wide. Still larger tents may use two sets of quarter poles, long ones and shorter ones, to bridge the distance from the center poles to the tent perimeter.

There is considerable variation among methods for "shooting," or raising the quarter poles. Jimmy "the Whale" Whalen, the great boss canvas man for the Ringling show for almost thirty years, preferred to use teams of horses, because he considered them faster and more maneuverable under the low canvas than elephants. Later, the Ringling show, as well as some smaller contemporary circuses elected to use tractors or teams of men to shoot the quarter poles. After they are in place, the bale rings can then be pulled to their full height, often five or more stories high.

Push-Pole Method

The push-pole method of raising a top is simpler, and just as suitable for small circus tents, although many veterans will insist that it can't look as tight and finished as a bale-ring tent. On the other hand, the Carson & Barnes Circus has the biggest contemporary tent in the world; yet it's a push-pole design with crisp clean-looking lines. Its owner carries the nickname "Push-Pole Shorty," and indeed D. R. claims his system is faster, simpler and safer. For the push-pole process, all center and quarter poles are laid out on the ground in assigned locations. The canvas is then spread over the poles; its pieces are laced together and attached to the center poles. Bale-rings, no longer essential for raising the tent, may or may not be used for simplifying the attachment of rigging and allowing a space for heat ventilation at each pole. The pronged side poles at one end are inserted through grommet holes in the canvas, and elephants, horses or tractors are then used to shoot the base of each quarter and center pole into place. As the canvas slowly begins to rise from one end, small canvas crews work their way down the length of the tent and "hand-guy out," rhythmically tugging on the guy lines, tightening and lashing them in place: "Heave it! Weave it! Shake it! Take it! Break it! Make it! ... Move along."

Circus Seating

Whichever the method, once the big top is up, other crews go quickly to work attaching the side walls, mounting the rigging for the aerialists, setting up the seating, and spotting all the props and necessary equipment. Seating has always been one of the more challenging items for circuses to transport and maintain, and many managers and owners take great pride in the seating systems they have invented. The now-standard jack-and-stringer system, whereby boards are lashed across light-weight wooden jack frames, providing an easily dismantled, portable bleacher-like structure, was another of the inventions of Doc Spalding. But the collapse of even small grandstands which are not properly maintained or are poorly made can lead to major injuries, as was alleged in 1986 with regards to the Toby Tyler Circus. On June 16, in New York State, seventy people were injured when a section of seating collapsed prior to a performance. Subsequent legal actions shut down all operations of the Toby Tyler Circus and all assets were frozen. The operations of all circuses have been adversely effected by increases in insurance rates resulting from this accident. That one event has also resulted in a new wave of anti-circus legislation which has been of as much concern to every conscientious, legitimate, safety-conscious circus owner, as it has been to the less responsible ones.

A great deal of energy has been spent on the design of safe and efficient seating systems for circuses. David Rawls, co-owner of the Kelly-Miller Circus, designed a new modified jack system for his seating. It uses locking steel triangular jacks which are ultra-safe and just as portable. Since the seating requires no lashing, it is much faster to erect and dismantle. Often, larger shows, such as Beatty-Cole, combine a reinforced stringer-and-jack system with folding chairs for its reserve section, with specially designed trailer trucks that cleverly incorporate fold-out bleacher seating. Carson & Barnes uses modular steel seating units, supported by steel jacks. Each unit folds flat and is lifted onto flat bed trucks by elephant-powered winches for transport from site to site. Duke Keller's small open-air Wilder Bros. Circus has two very clever seat-wagons designed from converted buses, and a trailer carrying a third section of seating; the units seat 300 people altogether, and each of the three has a canvas canopy that rolls out to shade the seats. The ultimate in circus seating systems, however, was the invention of Art Concello, general manager and former aerialist with the Ringling show in the '40s. His portable "Artony" grandstand revolutionized the circus industry, providing fast, safe, and comfortable seating. Folding upholstered chairs were bolted to accordion-like folding platforms incorporated onto flatbed trailers. Once they were towed into place, a jeep provided the power to unfold them into inclined decks which together formed a great steel bowl.

The Rings

At the center of the bowl, whether steel or wooden, are the 42-foot rings, the real core of the circus experience. The three-ring circus is commonly thought to be a strictly American tradition, and in fact it is one of the characteristics that now distinguish American circuses from their European counterparts. Actually the first use of a three-ring circus was by George Sanger in England in 1860.¹⁰ Barnum didn't get around to it in this country until he joined up with Bailey in 1881, and insisted on giving the American people more for their money. That was nine years after he first claimed to have three rings; but then he was counting the hippodrome track as one, solely in order to out-draw Andrew Haight's Great Eastern Circus & Menagerie's two-ring format.

Most American circuses, even some of the small ones, now carry three rings, although there is considerable variation. Some of the newer circuses, like Flora, Pickles, Big Apple, and Soleil, have adopted the European tradition of a single ring. We often forget that the single ring was the norm in American circuses too before Coup and Barnum made the change to two. Single ring advocates claim it is better to focus attention on one display of artistry at a time, and that more is not necessarily better, even if

it's commercially more profitable! On the other hand, the big Carson & Barnes Circus top contains five rings of continuous action, in the grand tradition of Barnum.

Big Top Designs

While the push-pole and the bale-ring systems are the two traditional methods for raising large circus tents, other systems and variations have been and continue to be explored. In 1942, a banner year for the Ringling show, Norman Bel Geddes was the official designer. This theatrical veteran, with many Broadway plays and the interior design of the Pan Am Clipper to his credit, was responsible in that year for Gargantua's special display tent. Furthermore, he dreamed of an ambitious and impressive circus tent of the future, which was described in the official program for that year. It would have been supported by steel scaffolding towers 160 feet high, three times as high as the show's then-current center poles. The canvas would have been supported from these huge towers by steel cabling which was entirely outside the tent structure, leaving the interior free of obstruction. The playing space would have been easily large enough for three rings arranged centrally in a triangular pattern. The tent would have been expensive, and it might have created enormous stress on both the scaffolding and the canvas; it was never built.

The newest and most contemporary circus tents, however, employ structural scaffolding which looks startlingly similar to the Bel Geddes tent. The new French and Italian tents used by the Big Apple Circus, the Circus Flora, the Cirque du Soleil, and the Tarzan Zerbini Circus are designed around four truss-like towers. These towers are joined in pairs by two 40-foot connecting trusses. Initially, the top, lashed to an oval Cupola in the center, is located under the towers on a specially designed flatbed truck. As the cupola is raised to a height of 42 feet by cables attached to the towers, the tent unfolds below it. The sides are then guyed out to a conventional stake line. These tents are round and relatively small, containing only the single ring and holding around 1,500 people. But, in the European tradition, they offer a crisp and colorful appearance and the more intimate sight-lines have minimal interference from poles.

The high-tech tent for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Gold Unit was designed by Ogawa, a Japanese manufacturer, to withstand 90 mph winds and a five-inch snow load. It's a square-cornered tent, covering an acre and a half. Its sixteen cupola'd peaks are created by two rows of eight center poles, and no quarter poles, and it will seat 8,000 people. In 1989, another radically new tent design was being tested for possible use in Ringling's international tours, using aluminum roof trusses and inflatable sidewalls instead of poles. It would seat 8,500 spectators in air-conditioned comfort, a concept that was tried only once before by Johnny North and Art Concello and ended in failure. And still another new top design by Future Tents, Ltd. of Manhattan is under development for the Pickle Family Circus. Traditionally they have played under open skies with a sidewall only, or in auditoriums, but they expect to change all that in the '90s. Clearly, the 1990s could be witness to a revolution in completely new circus tent designs.

One sure indication that the circus business is on the increase is that the tent-makers' business is on the increase. Anchor Industries' custom tent manufacturing operations, one of the nation's largest, moved into a new 41,000 square foot Florida facility at the end of 1989. Only three years earlier, Anchor had bought the Leaf Tent Company, founded by a former Ringling show employee, and the increase in orders required the move to a larger factory. Other major circus tent manufacturers are also doing a brisk business, judging from the number of new vinyl big tops that mushroomed across the country in 1988 and 1989.

Despite the warm, nostalgic feelings that the sight and smell of a circus tent can bring on, it is clear that a tent doth not a circus make. No one would take away the "circus" from the title of the open-air

Pickle Family Circus or the arena-bound Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus merely because they do not appear under a big top. And if we could learn all there is to know about life in the back yard, and how a circus advertises and moves, we would still not understand the phenomenon of the circus itself, and what it is that people come to see. The true spirit of the circus is in the people whose skills are exhibited, and it is to them that we now turn our attention.

Endnotes

1. *Circus Reports* (Aug 21, 1989) 12.
2. John Ringling, "We Divided the Job—but Stuck Together" in *American Magazine*, SEP, 1919, quoted in Charles Philip Fox, *A Ticket to the Circus* [New York: Bramhall, 1959] 46.
3. Charles Philip Fox and Tom Parkinson. *Billers, Banners and Bombast: The Story of Circus Advertising* (Boulder, CO: Pruett, 1985), 12.
4. Fox and Parkinson, 63.
5. Earl Chapin May, *The Circus from Rome to Ringling* (New York: Dover, 1963) 41.
6. May.
7. Fred D. Pfening III, "The Circus Year in Review," in *Bandwagon* XXXIII:1 (Jan-Feb, 1989) 8.
8. Ted Schaefer, "When the Big Top was Big Time in Delavan," in *Lake Geneva* I:4 (August, 1988) 65.
9. Stuart Thayer, "Notes on the History of Circus Tents," in *Bandwagon* XXX:5 (Sep-Oct, 1986) 30.
10. George Speaight, *A History of the Circus* (London: Tantivity, 1980) 44.