

Different and on the Margins

Many important events in the history of the circus changed the circus and its development. In 1793, in the tradition of Philip Astley's equestrian-based circus, John Bill Ricketts exhibited the first circus in America. Other important events were Joshua P. Brown's invention of the circus tent in 1825 which enabled the circus to perform at more dates and locations than before. At the same time, the rise of menageries influenced the development of the circus. In 1872, the Barnum, Coup and Costello show went on the railroads, and in 1881 the American circus expanded into three rings. These major events in the history of the circus impacted how the American circus evolved and the American circus experienced a Golden Age from 1872-1905.¹ The circus in America has experienced many important changes as well as exercising influence over many aspects in American life. American language, culture, and entertainment have all been influenced by the circus, but the circus and the performers remain outside mainstream American culture. By examining *The Daily Dispatch* from Richmond, Virginia in 1880, one can see the circus as an entertainment and important feature in society and the circus' existence on the periphery of American society.

Common to all newspapers, obituaries and deaths were featured in *The Daily Dispatch*, but it was unusual for deaths to appear from across the state, region, or the country. *The Daily Dispatch* reported the death of Rebecca Lyon from Syracuse, New York. Lyon, "known as the 'Bearded Woman,' who traveled for many years with Barnum's, Forepaugh's and other shows died Friday and was buried Sunday."² Performers and acts gained notoriety in the circus, as thousands of people across the nations saw them, and the attention Rebecca Lyon's death

¹ Hoh, Lavahn. "The Circus in America:1793-1940." [The Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities](http://www.circusinamerica.org). 2004. University of Virginia. 18 Apr. 2006 <http://www.circusinamerica.org>.

² "Death of the 'Bearded Woman.'" [The Daily Dispatch](#) 14 Sept. 1880: 3.

received showed the widespread importance of the circus and its performers in 1880. Lyon, as the “Bearded Lady,” obtained attention because she was different and unlike anyone else, this uniqueness caused her to be outside “normal” American culture. The circus allowed her to work despite this difference, and the paper noted that she worked with at least two different circuses. However, her ability to work in the circus as a bearded lady meant she lived on the periphery of American society. The widespread attention the circus and performers obtained came from their unusual appearance and skills or their dangerous acts.

The dangerous, exotic and unusual acts fed the public need for an escape from their ordinary drudgery-filled lives, but it also reminded circus goers of the dangers. *The Daily Dispatch* picked up a story from the *New York Clipper*, which received information from Wisconsin about the death of Herr Elijah Lengel, a “lion tamer” from Philadelphia. This story came from across the country and its publication vouched for the interest and attention Americans paid to the circus. Lengel was working with the Zoological Circus

when he made a false step, and one of the tigers caught him by the head and neck, and in less than five minutes he was torn to pieces. His jugular-vein was cut, his ear on the right side completely eaten off, and his body was a mass of mangled flesh and bones... The guard and also a few private individuals commenced firing with revolvers and rifles at the tiger, and soon killed it, thereby enabling the attachés to drag the body of Lengel through the compartment. The remaining living tiger at once fell upon the dead animal in the presence of the audience, and tore it into fragments. No pen can describe the horror of the scene.³

The thrill of seeing the exotic animals caused people to attend menageries and circuses. Elephant and cat acts with human trainers were among the most popular acts. People wanted to see these acts and were thrilled by their dangerous and exotic qualities, but the same qualities that contributed to the circus’ popularity cause the circus and its performers to be cast as outsiders.

³ “Torn to Pieces by a Tiger.” *The Daily Dispatch* 13 Oct. 1880: 2.

People wanted to see the animal acts but few wanted to actually be in the ring. Circus employees dealt with danger, constant travel and unusual circumstances.

The constant traveling of the circus could provide a safe and ideal haven for petty criminals. While the circus could provide an escape, being outside everyday society made circus employees and performers vulnerable to accusations and lynchings. Four men from Boyd and Peter's circus appeared before a judge for various crimes including kidnapping. The four men were charged with kidnapping fourteen year old Salome Burkett of Pittsburgh. The paper depicted Burkett as an innocent country girl, and she testified "to the outrageous treatment she had received, fully identifying the prisoners as part of the circus-gang that had maltreated her. She is in a very deplorable condition...intense indignation prevails...and threats of lynching the offenders are freely made."⁴ The mobility of the circus could provide individuals with an escape, but the lack of roots and the questionable reputations of some circuses and their employees made them vulnerable to violent attacks and lynchings from locals. The victim, whether telling the truth or not, held the upper hand over circus employees who existed on the margins of society. The circus, an escape for criminals, could be an escape from the everyday for the public.

Coup's circus came to Richmond in 1880, set up on Broad Street, and gave four performances in two days. The articles in *The Daily Dispatch* presented all the reasons to attend the circus and how important it was to Americans in that time period. The paper characterized the street parade as worth miles of travel to see it and said, "The circus combines all that is novel, much that is wonderful, and is complete in all its appointments and appurtenances."⁵ The fiercest, rarest, and prettiest birds and beasts were to be shown, equestrians, beautiful, graceful and daring ladies, and gentleman famous across "two hemispheres for their acrobatic

⁴ "Threats of Lynching Circus Kidnappers." *The Daily Dispatch* 23 July 1880: 3.

⁵ "See the Conquering Circus Comes." *The Daily Dispatch* 27 Aug. 1880: 1.

skill...[along with acts and animals, from Greenland, India,] the jungles of Asia, the polar regions, and the mountain tops of Africa.”⁶ The circus saw itself and the newspaper clearly presented it as the best and rarest of the world’s attractions, with the most talented performers.

The exotic and unique qualities of the circus provided an escape and entertainment from the public’s normal lives and experiences. The newspaper characterized the circus as “a never-to-be-forgotten event, and the one around which cluster the happiest memories of their lives...[and as] a happy day [that] will be a memory through all the vicissitudes of future years.”⁷ The circus and *The Daily Dispatch* saw the experience of a circus performance as unique, exotic, and a memorable opportunity. The day after the circus came to town the newspaper reasserted its previous opinions that the circus was the premier form of entertainment. The parade of “Coup’s great united monster shows, comprising the congress of all nations” had two brass bands, birds and animals, witty clowns, Japanese “live Indians, heathen Chinese and other novelties.”⁸ The uniqueness and exoticness of the performers and acts created a show that was “wonderful, novel, and beautiful and cannot fail to interest all who attend.”⁹

The popularity of the circus in America was a combination of exoticness, uniqueness, skills and talented performers, and oddities all of which attracted Americans. Many of the qualities that made the circus popular also made it suspect. Performers gained notoriety and fame, but this came from their different appearances and talents so far from the mainstream. The “otherness” of performers and the circus in general including its employees also made them vulnerable to violence and accusations. The unique and exotic qualities that fueled circuses’ popularity and fame also caused circuses to be suspect and to exist apart from mainstream culture.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “The Circus.” *The Daily Dispatch* 25 Aug. 1880: 1.

⁹ Ibid.

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