



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the P.T. Barnum Collection, 1866-1890

NMAH.AC.0068

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1983

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	P.T. Barnum Collection
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0068
Date:	1866-1890
Extent:	0.5 Cubic feet
Creator:	Barnum, P. T. (Phineas Taylor), 1810-1891
Language:	English Collection is in English.
Summary:	The collection consists of five children's books about the circus, a brochure announcing the show in London, an 1873 advertisement for the Great Traveling World's Fair of Barnum's, and two scrapbooks.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Immediate source of acquisition unknown.

Provenance

Transferred from the Division of Numismatics, on August 31, 1983.

Other Finding Aids

Inventory available; contact the Archives Center for more information.

Processing Information

Processed by Robert S. Harding, 1983, Ed. D. Haberstich, 2/27/12.

Preferred Citation

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Biographical / Historical

Phineas Taylor Barnum was born on July 5, 1810 in Bethel Connecticut. He worked hard as a small boy to help support the family. When Barnum was 15, his father died, leaving him almost penniless. Although he attended school irregularly, he was excellent in calculations and could drive a hard bargain. This was later referred to as his Yankee shrewdness.

In 1835 he found his true calling—show business—when he exhibited a black woman, Joice Heth, who claimed to be 161 years old and a nurse to George Washington. Barnum bought her for \$1,000 and soon had his investment returned.

In 1841 Barnum obtained the American Museum in New York City, which became a famous place of amusement. He displayed exhibits which were forerunners of the sideshow, as well as performances of moral plays such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

In November 1842, Barnum engaged Charles Stratton, whom he christened Tom Thumb. They were received by English royalty, including Queen Victoria, and other notable figures throughout Europe.

In 1850, Barnum engaged Jenny Lind and made a fortune for both of them. He lost his fortune when he speculated in the Jerome Clock Company of East Bridgeport, and regained it slowly due to multiple disasters.

About 1877, he became a partner of James A. Bailey, who started the two-ring circus in 1879. Bailey was the administrator of the Barnum and Bailey Show and was considered an excellent manager.

In March, 1882, Barnum bought Jumbo from the London Zoo for \$10,000. Jumbo was a very popular elephant with the English people, who resented Barnum's purchase and subsequent export of Jumbo to the United States. After the circus's trip to London in 1890, which was a tremendous success, the English forgave Barnum. Jumbo met an untimely death in 1885. His bones went to the Smithsonian and the stuffed hide to the Barnum Museum of Natural History at Tufts College. Barnum had given the Museum to Tufts in 1884 and contributed a \$55,000 stone building to the institution.

In November, 1889, Barnum brought his circus to London for fourteen weeks. He could not stay longer because the show had obligations in the United States. Other Europeans hoped to have the show visit their countries, but Barnum said the logistics and the railway tunnels prevented it.

Notices of the Circus coming to London were plastered all over England, with advertising techniques never before seen by the English. The Show, called the Great Moral Show in England, was considered more stupendous than the Wild West Show with Buffalo Bill, which had recently been shown in London, as well. About 30,000 people a day came and many others were turned away. The Circus took in \$900,000, but had large expenses with over 1,800 staff on the payroll.

Barnum himself was a great hit in England. Most of the English royalty attended his circus, many more than once. Queen Victoria requested a private showing but did not receive one, and therefore never saw the show. Even the elderly Gladstone attended. It was said that the English liked audacity, Americans who were not a toady and who offered pleasure, all of which described Barnum. It is also interesting that Barnum supported Irish Home Rule while he was in England.

Barnum was a genius in public relations for himself and his enterprises. He was a great believer in the power of advertising, and made it his business to be talked about. He liked to say that his name did not have to appear beneath his picture because everyone knew him.

Barnum loved children and was known as "The Children's Friend." He often went to the show's matinees to be with the children and talk to them. He gave generously to the Children's Aid Society and made it a beneficiary of a percentage of the show's profit after his death.

With regard to religious and political beliefs, Barnum was a Universalist who believed in the salvation of all men. He was originally a Democrat, but became a Republican because he was a Union supporter. He was elected to the Connecticut General Assembly four times, where he advocated the rights of individuals against railway monopolies. He was also Mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut, and during his time in office brought many businesses to the town and invested in local real estate. He established a system of building houses and sold them to working people on long payments and low interest rates; he also gave the land which became Seaside Park to the community of Bridgeport.

Barnum was married twice, the second time in 1874 to an English woman who was half his age. He had three daughters by his first wife, and his two grandsons were his only male heirs. In 1883, he made his first will so "no business cares should devolve upon his wife at his death." He left the management of his interests to his grandson, Clinton H. Seeley whom he required to change his name to Clinton Barnum Seeley; he had previously made an agreement with Bailey for the Barnum and Bailey Show to continue for 50 years.

Barnum had a reputation for giving everyone their full money's worth. He acknowledged the unreality of some of his attractions with frankness in his autobiography, but he said he was not a humbug; he was just a showman who gave the public what it wanted. He claimed he never pretended to be more than that. After Bailey implemented the two ring circus in 1879, and subsequently a third ring, people complained that they were being given more than their money's worth with so many activities going on simultaneously.

In the interviews and stories about the Barnum and Bailey Circus, it was evident that the circus people had strong training and excellent discipline. But some backstage interviews revealed low ages, poor boarding house food, bad dressing rooms, and strict discipline, with fines often meted out for slight infractions of the rules. The treatment of the animals also was questioned. Bailey reported that 38 horses had to be killed because they had been injured during the hippodrome race in the Nero act of the show.

P.T. Barnum was involved in four lines of entertainment: (a) circus; (b) museum of curiosities; (c) theatrical (he produced plays and helped several actors and actresses get their start); and (d) musical impresario with Jenny Lind.

Barnum was known as a great story teller. He enjoyed playing jokes on himself and others. He died on April 7, 1891 at 80 years and nine months.

Scope and Contents

The P.T. Barnum collection consists of five children's books about the circus, a brochure announcing the show in London, an 1873 advertisement for the Great Traveling World's Fair of Barnum's, and two scrapbooks. The scrapbooks mostly contain newspaper articles, 1889 1893, as well as cartoons, pictures, and drawings of circus events and circus personalities including P.T. Barnum and James A. Bailey. Interviews of circus people, anecdotes of circus life, and techniques of training children for circus horsemanship and tigers for the ring are also a part of the scrapbook coverage.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the articles is their description of the logistics of bringing 440 performers, 380 horses, 13 elephants, lions, tigers, deer, llama, camels, a bear and other animals, administrative and support staff, and 80 tons of advertising material to and from London for a 100 day run.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Amusements
Circuses (performances)

Types of Materials:

Books
Scrapbooks -- 19th century

Names:

Bailey, James A.
Barnum and Bailey.

Container Listing

- Box 1 P.T. Barnum Autograph, 1866, 1888
- Box 1 "P.T. Barnum's Circus Museum and Menagerie" , 1888
"P.T. Barnum's Circus Museum and Menagerie" text and illustrations arranged for little people by P.T. Barnum and Sarah J. Burke. 1888 London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1888, unpagued.

A charming story book about 3 children who are taken to the circus by P.T. Barnum in New York. The characters and animals that make up the circus are described with illustrations and anecdotes.
- Box 1 "Scrapbook 1889 1890", 1889-1890
[Image\(s\)](#)
Described the trip to and from London when Barnum and Bailey took the circus there in 1889 February 1890. It included about 440 performers, 380 horses, camels, bear, monkeys, leopards and 13 elephants, lions, tigers, llama, and deer. Went for 100 days and cost about 12,000 per day. Also 80 tons of advertising materials were taken over. Barnum wanted to show that Americans could do anything better. The advertising techniques and circus show itself wowed them in England.

**It is interesting to note that on the trip over meat was frozen in cubical cakes and packed in refrigerators between layers of ice.
- Box 1 "Barnum and Jumbo's ABC", undated
No author. Not dated, unpagued. A child's book of the alphabet in which each letter describes animals and/or persons that make up the circus.
- Box 1 "P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth", 1889 November
A brochure prepared for the London showing in November 1889. Distributed free. 16 p. 8/20/89.

This was to be their only show in Europe because the amphitheatre, "The Olympia", was the only one large enough to handle the show. Includes description of the acts featuring Jumbo (as restored and his skeleton) and "the classic drama of Nero", the side show and the 3 circus rings.
- Box 1 "The Royal Military Tournament", undated
Not dated, no author, unpagued. A picture book of the acts performed by the Royal Scots Greys, the 1st Life Guards, the Royal House Artillery, the Royal Engineers, the Coldstream Guards, and the 5th Royal Irish Lancers.
- Box 1 "Routledge's Barnum's Show", undated
Not dated, no author, unpagued. Picture book, presumably for children, of several acts from the show.
- Box 1 "Barnum's Show", undated
Cover torn in half vertically, no date, no author, unpagued. Picture book of several acts from the Barnum Show.

Box 2 "P.T. Barnum's The World in Contribution", 1873
An ad from March 15, 1873 [?], announcing the Great Traveling World's Fair. Went to nearly every large town in New England, Canada, and States east of Mississippi and north of Ohio.

Box 2 "Circus Scrapbook, London 18 ", 1889-1890

[Image\(s\)](#)

(Presumably kept by Helen Barnum Rennell, a granddaughter whose name and address appear on back of front cover). A scrapbook of Barnum and Bailey's show in London from November 16, 1889 to February 20, 1890. The circus was there for 14 weeks. The scrapbook also contains cartoons and pictures as well as newspaper articles. Includes his death and the unveiling two years later of his statue. Includes some flyers from the Great London Circus.

**Has page with autograph of Barnum to his great grandson.

N.B. There were 5 different ABC books about the circus published in London for the show.