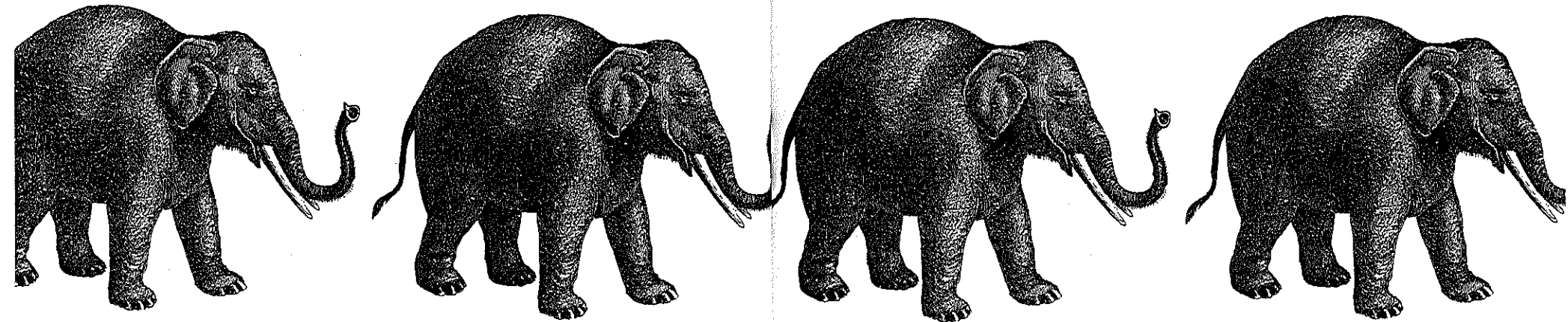
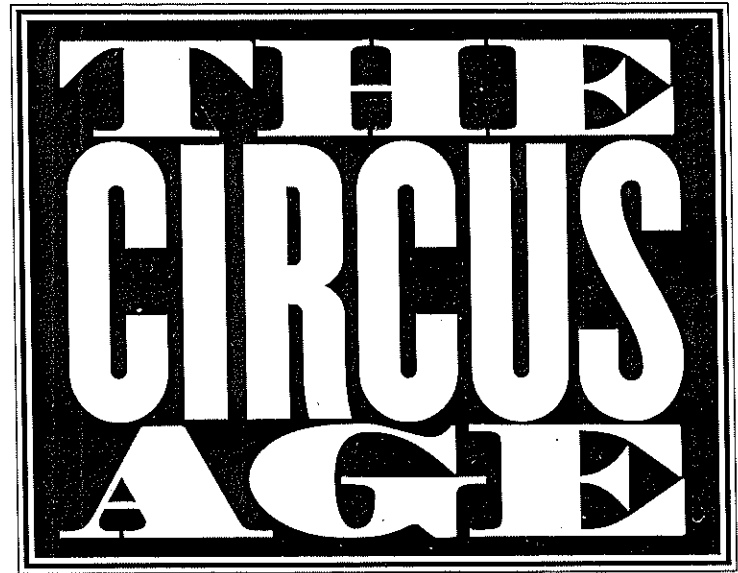


CULTURE
& SOCIETY
UNDER THE
AMERICAN
BIG TOP

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1910 the Humpty Dumpty Circus became "Humpty Dumpty in Africa," based on Theodore Roosevelt's African safari of 1909. The play set included a Roosevelt figure and a black guide, in addition to the usual stock of circus characters.⁹⁹ The modern child often first glimpsed the exotic Other through circuses and toys, a formative encounter that helped make colonial power relations part of the unconscious, "natural" world of child's play.

Many recent studies have broadened the parameters of diplomatic history to include topics like play sets and other facets of everyday life. Shaped by the new social history, itself a product of the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, these works consider how ordinary people (as well as elites) have participated in and shaped U.S. foreign relations. Using gender, race, and class as their analytic tools, practitioners of the new social history have demonstrated the interconnectedness of domestic culture—including sexuality, the division of labor, civil rights issues, and consumption patterns—and U.S. foreign policy.¹⁰⁰ Scholars of popular culture, influenced by the field of cultural studies and the work of Antonio Gramsci,¹⁰¹ have also located power relations outside traditional political boundaries.¹⁰² Robert Rydell, in particular, has pioneered this interdisciplinary approach by demonstrating that American international expositions at the turn of the century and in the 1930s promulgated U.S. domination overseas, Euroamerican racism, and the political and economic interests of "captains of industry." Building upon these studies, this book explores the powerful relationship between popular culture, ideology, national identity, and state formation.



When Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth rolled into Kansas City, Missouri, in 1917, Emmett Kelly, a teen-aged industrial painter (and future hobo circus clown star) remembered the scene vividly. Transfixed by the size of the circus, Kelly counted a hundred railroad cars: "I could hardly believe the size of it. . . . The show traveled on four separate trains and looked like a big town. There was a blacksmith shop and big cook and dining tents and a barbershop tent and I could see a man delivering mail like a regular postman, and there were electric-light plants and water wagons—it was a sight I'll never forget."¹

People awoke hours before dawn to catch the first glimpse of the mile-long configuration of circus trains pulling into town (fig. 6). Carl Sandburg recalled scrambling out of bed as a boy in Galesburg, Illinois, on Circus Day: "When the circus came to town we managed to shake out of sleep at four o'clock in the morning, grab a slice of bread and butter and make a fast walk to the Q. [Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad] yards to watch the unloading in early daylight."² With amazement, countless spectators watched what circus folk called "the greatest *free* show on earth." They gazed at the dazzling gilded wagons rolling smoothly off railroad flatcars; they saw elephants assisting muscular men erecting voluminous canvas tents; they smelled huge vats of coffee that would produce two thousand cups for bleary-eyed workers, and sizzling bacon, sausage, eggs, and pan-

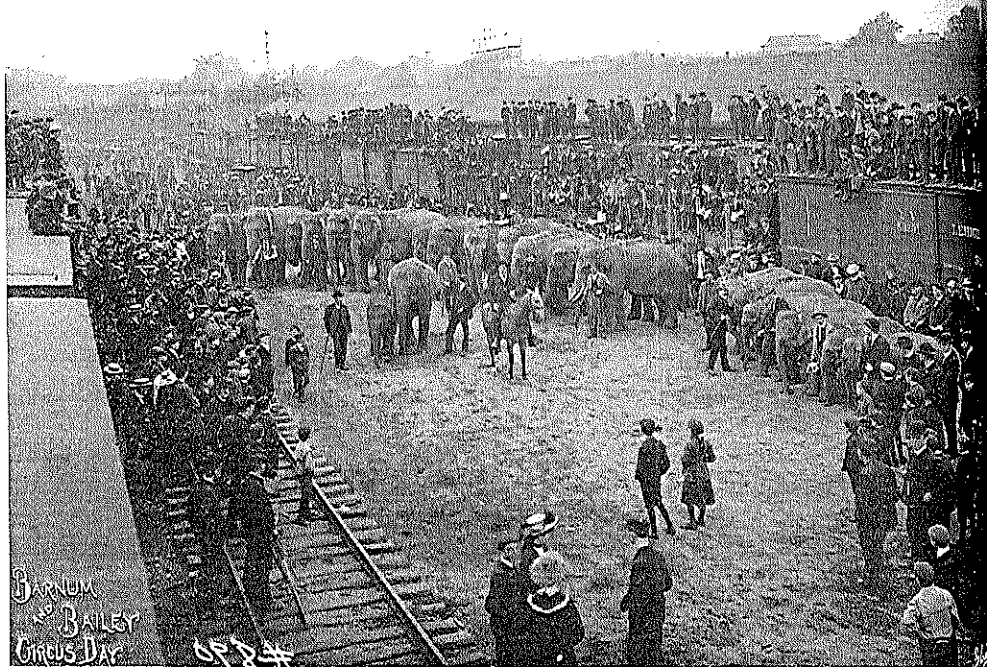


Figure 6. "Circus Day," Barnum & Bailey, Brockton, Mass., 1903. Unloading the circus train was part of the "show" for the masses who awoke before dawn to see this logistical spectacle. (Frederick Glasier Collection, neg. no. 890; black-and-white photograph, copy from glass plate negative, 10 × 8 in., museum purchase, Collection of the John and Mable Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Fla.)

cakes in the cook tent that would soon feed more than 1,000 employees. In 1890 the *Detroit Free Press* estimated that Barnum & Bailey employed an "army" of 800 men and 200 women.³ In 1893 this circus also had 407 horses and ponies, 2 mules, 1 giant and 1 hairless horse, 12 elephants, 4 camels, and 8 dromedaries. There were 102 wagons, including 55 baggage wagons, 22 cages, 2 ticket wagons, 4 band wagons, and a clown cart. The ground crew of "roustabouts" (manual laborers) erected a total of 68,000 yards of canvas each working day and used 173,397 feet of rope as part of this process.⁴ In 1908 the *Eau Claire (Wis.) Daily Telegram* observed that the Ringling Bros. circus employed 75 cooks and kitchen helpers who prepared 3,200 meals a

day using 4,000 pounds of meat; for breakfast alone, the kitchen staff cooked 3,600 eggs and 800 pounds of mutton.⁵ Spectators witnessed an efficient two-hour transformation of an empty lot into a vast, fragrant, nomadic city.

What did this gargantuan logistical display of human and animal labor tell its audiences about the Gilded Age? How did the railroad industrialize the circus? What did the circus's size and labor structure reveal about the ideologies of its owners and workers? This chapter shows that the railroad circus's great size, its participation in monopoly capitalism, its specialized division of labor, its ethos of efficiency, the individual "rags-to-riches" narratives of its owners, and its structural and ideological embodiment of a (traveling) company town gave its distant patrons an intimate look at the beliefs, values, and material practices of the new corporate order. Still, the railroad circus presented this industrial order in ways that evoked an older preindustrial world, where humans and animals were stronger than machines, and talented individuals could "rise" through hard work and self-discipline. Echoing Raymond Williams, who argues that culture is a "social material process," this chapter illuminates the thick, physical framework in which the circus produced its ideological content.⁶

THE CIRCUS AS BIG BUSINESS

At the turn of the century, the size and scale of the railroad circus mirrored the growth of big business and the expansion of the industrial workforce. Between 1895 and 1904 over 1,800 manufacturing companies merged into 157 horizontal combinations which dominated their respective markets.⁷ By 1900 nearly 450 other companies employed over 1,000 people and more than 1,000 companies employed between 500 and 1,000. In the iron and steel industry, the workforce of the average firm, which stood at under 100 in 1870, had since quadrupled.⁸ Other parts of the amusement industry ballooned as well. The Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit became a monopoly, a harbinger of the growth of big business in movies and radio, and later of such synergistic media conglomerates as Disney, Sony, and AOL Time Warner. Beginning in the 1920s, the "Big Five" motion picture companies (RKO, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, Warner Brothers, and Twentieth Century Fox) virtually controlled American film production and distribution. The Big Five owned large movie theaters in lucrative markets and also practiced "block booking," selling only big blocks of movies (instead of individual films) to independent theaters.⁹

National media used the giant circus as a colorful trope for monopoly

capitalism. Newspaper cartoons commonly depicted business trusts and industrialists as animal and human circus actors. In one cartoon, John D. Rockefeller and Averell Harriman, obese with bulging eyes, sat in plush box seats with bemused detachment as they watched a big-top performance in which terrified monkeylike citizens careened wildly atop galloping donkeys, labeled "trust extortion," which represented the oil, railroad, beef, sugar, and coal trusts.¹⁰ Yet the relationship between the circus and big business was more than metaphorical, because the circus *was*—relatively speaking—big business at the turn of the century.

Although much smaller in scale than giant trusts like Standard Oil and U.S. Steel, a few giants created by several circus mergers in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth controlled the railroad circus routes. P. T. Barnum and James A. Bailey merged their operations in 1880. By 1904 Bailey (Barnum had died in 1891) owned two of the nation's biggest shows—the Greatest Show on Earth and the Adam Forepaugh & Sells Brothers circus, itself the product of a merger of the Adam Forepaugh circus and the Sells Brothers circus in 1896. From 1895 Bailey also supplied capital, equipment, and managerial expertise for Buffalo Bill's Wild West.¹¹ The Ringling Bros. successfully captured the American circus market while Barnum & Bailey's circus toured Europe from 1897 to 1902. In the 1890s, and then again in 1904, these rivals agreed to separate their routing territory so that they would not overlap and draw business away from each other. After Bailey died in 1906, the Ringling Bros. bought his entire holdings during the depression of 1907 for \$410,000, a bargain price.¹² Yet for purposes of comparison, U.S. Steel was worth \$1 billion¹³ in 1901 when it was created out of several horizontal combinations.¹⁴ The Ringling Bros. operated the Barnum and Bailey circus as a separate unit until 1919, when they merged the two circuses into a single production, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's Combined Shows. In 1929 John Ringling, the last surviving brother, bought out the American Circus Corporation, a stock corporation composed of five circuses; the buyout, unfortunately, forced Ringling into debt. His financial resources were further eroded by the arrival of the Great Depression that same year. By 1932 Ringling, now ailing, was forced to relinquish control of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus to unscrupulous creditors. Ringling remained as the show's president, but in name only. The firm New York Investors controlled his assets and forbade him to exercise any authority over the circus. Ringling's ex-friend Sam Gumpertz, a former Wild West rider, acrobat, Coney Island manager, and real estate magnate with close financial ties to the New York Investors, served as the

general manager of the circus from 1932 until 1937, when members of the Ringling family regained control after John's death in the preceding year.¹⁵

In 1907 rival showmen balked when the Ringling Bros. purchased Barnum & Bailey. Although the federal courts never held that the circus business was a violator of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act (1890), other circus owners accused the Ringling Bros. of monopolistic practices. For example, E. Sherman Dandy, an agent for the Hagenbeck circus, charged that the Ringling "trust" paid railroad contractors for their competitors' routes. He also contended that they sabotaged smaller outfits by showering their routes with bills for upcoming trust shows. "[T]hey make . . . the country a chess board, and move their attractions from one point to another, canceling dates without regard for obligation to the public simply to put an established show ahead of one which is struggling for recognition."¹⁶ Moreover, Dandy accused the Ringling Bros. and the railroads of price fixing: railroad companies agreed to haul the trust productions for one-fifth the regular rate in order to keep their business while forcing Ringling competitors to pay the regular rate.¹⁷ Al Ringling justified such practices by stating that his family's circus operation was "nothing more than survival of the fittest." Other Gilded Age capitalists like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller explained their success with such Spencerian language as well.¹⁸

Employing over a thousand workers and performers, the biggest railroad circuses like Barnum & Bailey and the Ringling Bros. shared other structural and ideological similarities with turn-of-the-century corporations. The circus's division of labor was highly specialized and was bound to the clock to meet fixed railroad schedules. As on the assembly line at Henry Ford's new automobile plant in Highland Park, Michigan, each railroad circus worker had a specific job that atomized and segmented his labor. And as on the alienating assembly line, railroad circus managers often treated workers as anonymous cogs in a vast production machine. At Barnum & Bailey, each workingman wore a numbered identity badge because numbers were easier to remember than hundreds of different names.¹⁹ At small wagon circuses, or "mud shows," though, the division of labor remained "preindustrial" because these outfits ran independently of the railroad clock and the duties of the workforce overlapped considerably—performers and managers alike sold tickets, in addition to doing any other job that needed to be done.

Greater specialization and discipline at the large railroad circus emerged concurrently with other developments in the American industrial workplace. Industrialists extolled the financial rewards of "scientific manage-

ment." An engineering executive and author, Frederick Winslow Taylor, used the stopwatch and the time-and-motion study to increase workers' output. Taylor analyzed various jobs, from iron forging to bricklaying, over a thirty-year period, beginning in the late 1870s, and concluded that shop managers could create a more congenial and productive workplace if they provided laborers with detailed instructions for each task and rewarded those who performed most efficiently. According to Taylor, "The task is always so regulated that the man who is well suited to his job will thrive while working at this rate during a long term of years and grow happier and more prosperous, instead of being overworked. Scientific management consists very largely in preparing for and carrying out these tasks."²⁰ Reflecting Taylor's objectives, railroad outfits meticulously planned and parceled out each part of the labor process. Impresarios carefully chose managers who designed the route a year ahead of the show date; they organized teams of workers who secured local contracts months in advance, and managers choreographed the activities of the workingmen who erected and tore down the tented city on Circus Day. The complicated act of simply advertising the production gave future audiences an intimate peek at the "industrialized" work spectacle they would witness on Circus Day.

PUTTING THE SHOW ON THE ROAD: THE CIRCUS ADVERTISING MACHINE

Circus proprietors and routing agents wove a complex web of market research to plan their routes. The circus historians Fred Dahlinger and Stuart Thayer write that circus advertising became increasingly sophisticated from 1871 (when Barnum entered the circus business) to the turn of the century, when the Ringlings became undisputed "circus kings." While Barnum and his manager W. C. Coup focused on population, the Ringlings considered a range of marketing factors in determining where to perform most profitably. They analyzed seasonal patterns and regional weather conditions, specifically the incidence of drought and rain, crop reports, factory conditions, bank clearings, and the presence of summer resorts to determine an area's level of prosperity.²¹ In October 1900 the *Greenville (Tex.) Evening Banner* proudly noted that six circuses were currently in Texas—a sure sign of a booming economy: "It is a well known fact that circuses always pick out the states where the people are most prosperous and the fact that so many are here now is a hint to outsiders that should not be overlooked."²² Circus routing agents also studied how often competing circuses visited a specific

region and the content of their rival productions. This was a particularly important consideration: when a showman's routing turf was seemingly intruded upon, he might destroy his rival's bills and plaster the remains over with his own posters ("sticker wars," in the words of Charles Ringling), or a brawl might erupt between competing outfits.²³ Proprietors and routing agents gathered this information through a flurry of correspondence with bankers, newspaper editors, railroad traffic managers, and postmasters. These men also worked in tandem with the railroad contractor, a circus manager who secured travel arrangements with railroad officials.²⁴

Advertising the route was daunting. Months before an actual show date, teams of contractors, advertising agents, and billposters traveled to future markets in brightly painted railroad cars designed to advertise the circus. Long before Circus Day, these workers, known collectively as "advance men," provided townspeople with a prelude of the disciplined pagant of labor that was to come. The advance men secured various contracts for fuel, animal feed, water, fuel, eggs, milk, meat, and other perishables, and inundated future markets with colorful lithographs and handbills. Although the precise number of employees working ahead of the actual circus varied, Barnum & Bailey's circus in 1894 provides a window into the complicated advance system at the largest outfits and serves as the primary example for the following discussion. Barnum & Bailey had four advertising cars (confusingly called Cars Number One, Two, Four, and Six) which followed each other a week or two apart on the same route; each car cost \$1,000 per week²⁵ to operate, and each typically had eight to eleven billposters, a boss-billposter, several lithographers, a manager, and on occasion an advance press agent who confirmed advertising arrangements with local newspapers.²⁶

Car Number One, also known as the "skirmishing" or "opposition" car, was a trouble shooter. The advance men riding in it made certain that competing shows, collectively called the "opposition," did not steal a previously arranged date or sabotage earlier transportation contracts made soon after circus managers had determined the route for the upcoming season. The general contractor was the first circus worker to cover the route, and he made written arrangements for virtually everything that the outfit needed at each stop: licenses, exhibition grounds, billboards, liverymen (local drivers), animal feed, meat, hotels, and food for circus employees.²⁷ Often the general contractor and other advance men had legal training, in order to wade through complex contracts and local laws.

An advance agent, press agent, and several billposters traveled in Car

Number Two. In this car the agent in charge had a list of all contracts made in advance, as well as detailed information concerning the town's population and local roads; he also served as his crew's banker, accountant, and railway agent, carrying cash in a small safe from which he paid his team. He also kept track of every lithograph and sheet of paper received, where posted and by whom, and the number of complimentary tickets issued to people willing to have their buildings pasted. The contracting agent had already arranged where this crew would eat breakfast and the number of liverymen who would be assigned to take the billposters out on the country roads along the specified route. Using this information, the boss billposter divided his workers into groups which covered the town and rural routes. These groups moved quickly, because they only had one day to blanket each town and outlying areas. As Car Number Two rumbled to its destination, billposters stood on platforms with armloads of circus handbills, bombarding every small hamlet, farmhouse, or crossroads as they roared past.²⁸

While en route in the train at night, billposters prepared the sticky flour-and-water-based paste which they used to put up the bills the next morning. Wearing "pasty suits," they boiled the paste in six big iron cans. On the road, they used two to three barrels of flour in towns and five or six in big cities. Each crew took several buckets of thick paste, to be diluted with water, and was required to keep track of how much paste was used and the number of bills posted. Car Number Two was outfitted with a shrill, piercing steam whistle which the advance team blasted as a way to announce its arrival in a new community.²⁹ After breakfast in town, each bill posting-crew and its liveryman rode into the countryside, searching for suitable pasting sites: barns, stables, or shops. But they did not (usually) paste a building without getting a written contract from its owner. In exchange for two to six complimentary tickets to the upcoming circus, the property owner allowed circus workers to cover his buildings with posters for a period of time specified by the circus.³⁰ Billposters often covered a spectacular breadth of territory; before the 1891 season, Forepaugh's agents Geoffrey Robinson and Whiting Allen posted circus bills atop Pike's Peak at its pinnacle, an elevation of 14,110 feet!³¹

Billposters pasted approximately 5,000 lithographs per locality.³² The Barnum & Bailey circus usually played for an entire month at Madison Square Garden in New York City and in nearby Brooklyn; in 1893 the circus plastered 27,110 sheets in New York City, including 9,525 on the railways, and an additional 8,186 in surrounding cities.³³ Charles Theodore Murray saw the advance men as magicians of sorts: "The circus bill-poster was a

member of the Santa Claus family—coming from nowhere and vanishing into nothing, but leaving the glowing traces of his visit in highly colored pictorial illustrations that covered the dead walls in town and along the country roads. Sometimes it was done in the night when we were in bed; sometimes while we were at school. But I never succeeded in catching the circus man in the act."³⁴ A turn-of-the-century trade publication, *Billboard Advertising*, observed that the circus was the first business in the United States to master the use of the poster. Initially featuring just one color in its antebellum days, each fin-de-siècle railroad circus poster contained at least six or seven eye-catching colors. Some posters were designed as individual puzzlelike pieces that formed a single giant banner when pasted together; one banner, comprising thirty-two posters, was reportedly some 70 feet long.³⁵ In 1896 Ringling Bros. spent \$128,000³⁶ for posters alone.³⁷

Months before Circus Day, the advance team transformed gray, weather-beaten barns and dull, brick stores into a colorful frenzy of clowns, tigers, semibare women, and elephants. Spectators knew far in advance that the circus was coming, so they could make transportation and work-release arrangements for the big day. In short, circus billposters marked the landscape, claimed it, and transformed it months before the actual onslaught of crowds, tents, and animals.

Subsequent cars made certain that the upcoming show remained visible. Cars Four and Six verified the arrangements made by the second car; retracing the routes of their fellow workers, these advance men and billposters checked to see if bills had been defaced, destroyed by rain, or covered by a rival or another advertiser. If a farmer or business owner violated the terms of the bill-posting contract, the circus rescinded his ticket privileges. Meanwhile, press agents (often ex-newspaper writers) confirmed previous advertising arrangements with local newspapers and obtained permission from the local drug or book store to sell tickets there on Circus Day. The press agent from Car Number Two made the initial contracts with the newspapers and submitted a different press release for each of the four or five dailies in a town. (After the show, press agents often submitted faux "reviews" of the show that were unflaggingly positive. These same "after-blast" reviews—ostensibly written by a local reporter—appeared verbatim at towns hundreds of miles apart.)³⁸ Press agents also gave local reporters, policemen, and politicians complimentary tickets ("comps") as a way to generate positive press and to provide additional surveillance on Circus Day.

Car Number Four publicized the upcoming production along the rural

periphery, so that the most isolated audiences felt the circus's reach. Called the "excursion" car, Car Number Four traveled all railroad routes within a fifty-mile radius of the circus stop. The billposters on this car covered this area with bills advertising special train schedules and excursion rates. The manager of the excursion car verified the arrangements for special rail ticket prices and travel times that had been made earlier by the excursion agent, who worked directly with railroad officials to make special travel arrangements for circus audiences.³⁹ Within a week or two of the production date, Car Number Six finalized the arrangements and billing work done by the previous cars and quickly remedied any gaps in press work or bill posting.⁴⁰ After Car Number Six finished all remaining business, the circus was ready to come to town.

THE CANVAS CITY

The "army" of canvasmen who erected and tore down the billowing canvas tents was a crucial part of the total labor show. Audience members traveled in horse-drawn wagons over miles of bumpy dirt road in predawn darkness just to observe how circus workers (aided by horses and elephants) created a magical, movable city on an empty lot (fig. 7). At the turn of the century—an age of increased mechanization and de-skilling in the industrial workplace—human and animal labor still performed virtually all the on-site jobs, before gasoline-engine stake-drivers and other motorized machines began replacing some of the human labor in 1910–20. The creation of the tented city was a thrilling physical feat in which human labor functioned as a seemingly seamless, corporate body.

Immediately after the circus trains arrived at the show grounds, the boss canvasman, who directed the erection of the tents, scouted out the lot, which occupied ten acres or so. He first decided where the big top should stand, which determined the position of the other eleven tents. A group of canvasmen used iron rods to mark the positions of the five center poles, which would be the tent's center of gravity, and then mapped the perimeter of Barnum & Bailey's 1894 big top—440 feet by 180 feet—with more rods, topped with little flags, color-coded red or blue to identify each tent site. Next, the boss canvasman and his crew marked the placement of the menagerie tent, which was connected to the big top by a neck of canvas. The perimeter of the menagerie—360 feet by 160 feet—was identified by rods topped by white flags. This process was completed in just eight minutes from start to finish. The crew then quickly mapped out the placement of the

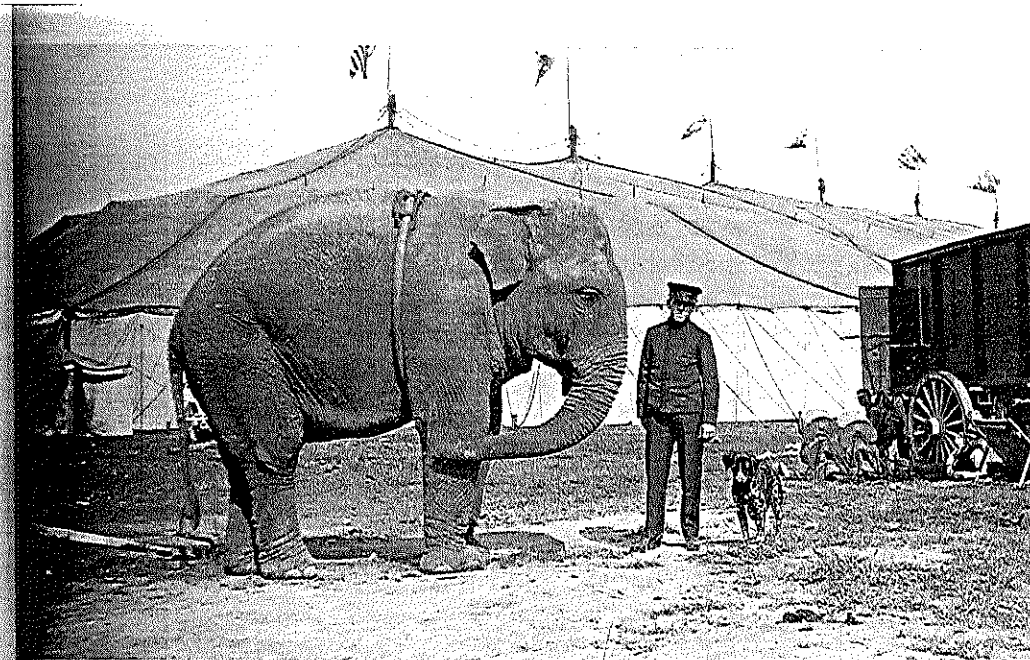


Figure 7. "Elephant Laborer," Barnum & Bailey, 1906. In addition to performing tricks under the big top, elephants helped set up and tear down the canvas city. (Photograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., B+B-N81-06-1-N)

dressing-room tent, two horse tents, the wardrobe tents, the sideshow tent, the freaks' dressing-room tent, and several smaller tents for the blacksmith shop, the repair shop, and so on. The canvasmen finished this whole job in half an hour.⁴¹

Next, the boss canvasman directed the unloading of the stake and chain wagons, the pole wagons, the canvas wagons, and other baggage wagons, each drawn by four or six horses. He divided the eighty-five muscular men who composed the "big top gang" into two groups, of which one laid the stakes into the ground and the other handled the sledges. Each stake was four to five feet long and two or three inches thick, and three-fourths of its length had to be hammered into the ground. Using sledges with three-foot handles and heads that weighed seventeen pounds, groups of about seven men stood in a circle and took turns hammering each stake into the ground, singing rhythmically as they worked. Each group had a leader who initially tapped the stake into position (fig. 8). Meanwhile, groups of pole riggers placed the tent's center poles into position. Within forty-five minutes a whistle signaled that the stake drivers and pole riggers had finished,



Figure 8. "Sledging Gang," Barnum & Bailey, Brockton, Mass., 1903.
 With near military precision, stake drivers singing sea shanties and other songs rhythmically pounded into the ground the heavy stakes used to secure the fifty-foot center poles. (Frederick Glasier Collection, neg. no. 1319; black-and-white photograph, copy from glass plate negative, 10 × 8 in., museum purchase, Collection of the John and Mable Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Fla.)

and summoned additional groups of workingmen to help raise the poles. The center poles (as well as the linchpin "king" pole) were raised with heavy ropes attached to the stakes. In the middle of this process, other workers started joining sections of canvas that would form the tent's roof and side walls. They lifted the canvas using horses, pulley blocks, and a complex array of small side poles. By this time three huge cook wagons had arrived at the site of their tent, and butchers began chopping 500 pounds of meat into individual cutlets, while cooks prepared coffee and eggs. The workingmen raised all twelve tents by six o'clock in the morning—just two and a

half hours after they had typically arrived. At that moment, a loud bell or whistle alerted every circus worker that the dining tent was now open. Now all wagons were stationed at their proper places. The empty field had been transformed into a temporary canvas city.⁴²

The complex disassembly process began immediately after the 8 p.m. performance began. First, workingmen took down the menagerie tent. All "cage stock" (animals not appearing in the big top) were loaded into cage wagons and taken to the train. Concurrently, workmen lowered the open-flame burners (called chandeliers) from the center poles and extinguished all but one of the naphtha (petroleum) jets.⁴³ Then, all players appearing in the "ethnological congress of strange and savage tribes" readied their trunks and boxes to be loaded into the baggage wagon. Quickly the canvasmen and pole-riggers disassembled and loaded the canvas side walls and scores of side poles in different wagons, and finally, using pulley ropes, lowered the five center poles and separated the 40,000 feet of billowing canvas into six units. Twenty workingmen were on hand to load the heavy canvas and center poles into specially designed wagons. This complicated process, involving dozens of workers, each performing a specific job, took approximately thirty-one minutes.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, upwards of 10,000 people sat under the big top, unaware that the tented city was being swiftly disassembled as they enjoyed the evening program.

The members of the transportation, or railroad, gang (also known as polers, or polemen) were busy soon after their evening meal. They loaded the wagons in the order in which they were to be used the following day, beginning with the bulky cook wagon. Working by lantern light under the direction of a boss transportation man, the railroad gang ran wagons up two inclined planes that were each thirty-five feet long, four inches thick, and sixteen inches wide, with four-inch guards on either side. From there, the gang rolled each wagon into position on a specific flatcar. Then another group of workers, the "razorbacks" (from "raise your backs!"), secured the wagons and cages into position atop the flatcars. The railroad gang and razorbacks quickly loaded the canvas, poles, stakes, cook tent apparatus, and 200 stock horses, so that the first section of the train could pull away by 12:15 a.m., carrying 300 sleeping cooks, tent polers, stake drivers, butchers, and others, who were the first circus workers to awake the next morning. Simultaneously, other transportation crews loaded the remaining two sections of the train. The second section contained the ring stock, the wardrobe wagon, and all the seating apparatus for the big top. Scores of animal men and grooms slept in this section. The third section held the elephant cars

and four sleepers, as well as the proprietor's private car, and the cars for the big-top artists, the freaks, and the ethnological congress. By 1 A.M., all three sections had departed for the next town. Three hours later, the workingmen who were asleep on the first section would arise for another day with the circus.⁴⁵

Audiences enjoyed the spectacle of human and animal labor so thoroughly that many were willing to pay for the opportunity to see it. As far back as the 1850s, impresarios capitalized on this fascination by instituting the after-show "concert," which immediately followed the evening performance. At the turn of the century, the size and scale of the circus's logistical operations made the concert a big draw. Impresarios charged spectators twenty-five cents, ostensibly to watch minstrel acts or Wild West stunts, but the real show was the workingmen bustling around, moving animals, equipment, and tearing down adjacent tents.

The train, or "iron horse," was an essential player in the circus labor performance. Its physical presence, the circus notwithstanding, was also a form of spectacle, from its earliest years in the 1820s to its explosive expansion in the Gilded Age. The earliest memory for Al Rosboro, a ninety-year-old ex-slave in the late 1930s, was of the construction of the railroad in White Oak, South Carolina, and the arrival of the town's first train: "When de first engine come through, puffin' and tootin,' lak to scare 'most everybody to death. People got used to it but de mules and hosses of old marster seem lak they never did. A train of cars a movin' 'long is still de grandest sight to my eyes in de world. Excite me more now than greyhound busses, or airplanes in de sky."⁴⁶ Laura Ingalls Wilder recalled—with terror—her first encounter with a train as she and her family waited at the depot on the wide prairie of Tracy, Minnesota, in 1879:

They could not talk very well, because all the time they were waiting, and listening for the train. At long last, Mary said she thought she heard it. Then Laura heard a faint, faraway hum. Her heart beat so fast that she could hardly listen to Ma. . . . The train was coming, louder. . . . The engine's round front window glared in the sunshine like a huge eye. The smokestack flared upward to a wide top, and black smoke rolled up from it. A sudden streak of white shot up through the smoke, then the whistle screamed a long wild scream. The roaring thing came rushing straight at them all, swelling bigger and bigger, enormous, shaking everything with noise. . . . Then the worst was over. It had not hit them; it was roaring by them on thick big wheels. Bumps and crashes ran along the freight cars

and flat cars and they stopped moving. The train was there, and they had to get into it.⁴⁷

As the most far-flung reminder of the industrial society, the roaring train reordered the American landscape. Thousands of railroad workers tunneled out mountain passes with pick axes and dynamite, built towering bridges, and filled gorges with dirt to enable the train's movement with 165,000 miles of track by 1890.

In addition to its awesome physical presence, the train turned the pastoral circus into an enormous industrial amusement, with an elaborate division of labor and a disciplined, time-bound industrial work ethic. The historian E. P. Thompson has analyzed how the advent of machines in eighteenth-century England created a regimented, fiercely extractive workplace where time became a form of currency, something to be "spent," not "passed."⁴⁸ The train engendered a similar transformation at the circus workplace by essentially "speeding up" and specializing the labor process through a new dependency on railroad timetables. As mentioned earlier, trains enabled circus proprietors to expand their operations dramatically after the Civil War, once the railroad industry standardized its gauge and completed the first transcontinental railroad in 1869. Showmen made train travel more efficient for their circuses by building special flatcars from which they could easily load and unload wagons of ring stock, menagerie animals, and supplies.

Not only did the train discipline the circus, it also standardized the nation's sense of time. As travel by train became commoner after the Civil War, railroad managers became frustrated by the absence of uniform time zones across the nation. Each town kept its own clock: when the sun crawled directly overhead, church bells rang and townspeople adjusted their timepieces accordingly to twelve o'clock, high noon. Railway companies were unable to enforce punctual arrival and departure times because people's measure of time differed from town to town. Consequently, in 1883, the railroad business unilaterally—without seeking federal legislation—divided the nation into four time zones, thereby unifying the nation's perception of time, space, and place.⁴⁹

Time-consciousness pervaded all aspects of the railroad circus. Even the peppy brass big-top band instilled labor discipline. Under the big top, each circus act was carefully scripted to music. Performers knew exactly when they were to enter the ring, based on precise musical cues. Similarly, laborers worked quickly to meet each day's grueling railroad schedule. Yet

paradoxically, for circus audiences, Circus Day was all about the suspension of time, when daily routines came grinding to a halt. The colorful panoply of foreign animals and human performers seemingly compressed time and space when the entire world appeared on Main Street. Inside the crowded tents, time also seemed in abeyance as spectators tried to comprehend three rings, two stages, and an outer hippodrome track of constant, relentless activity.

"RAGGED BARNUM" AND OTHER CAPTAINS OF THE CIRCUS INDUSTRY

Like other turn-of-the-century capitalists, circus owners vigorously participated in perpetuating the popular American ideal of the self-made man. P. T. Barnum, James A. Bailey, William F. Cody, and the five Ringling brothers all came from modest means; most floated around a number of different occupations before entering the amusement business; and each man's success was the product of luck as well as pluck. These impresarios claimed that their own humble backgrounds augmented their productions' good character—even though their success was often predicated upon exaggeration and hoaxes.

This popular "rags to riches" mythology flowered during the Gilded Age. From the 1860s until his death in 1899, Horatio Alger wrote over a hundred popular novels featuring the exploits of poor, deserving boys who rose from unfortunate circumstances through hard work and help from respectable members of society. The steel magnate Andrew Carnegie interpreted his own rise from modest circumstances to great wealth as the result of prudence and perseverance. Yet paradoxically, long-term economic upheaval severely tested the ideal of the "self-made man" at the same historical moment when this myth became most visible in American culture. In the twenty years following the market crash of 1873, business failure rates in the United States reached around 95 percent.⁵⁰ Working conditions were brutal in the new industries: between 1890 and 1917, about 72,000 railroad workers were killed on the job and 2 million injured.⁵¹ Industrial workers in the Knights of Labor and rural populists in the Farmers' Alliance and People's Party rejected the prevailing social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner in favor of building "cooperative commonwealths" that would protect individual liberty through collective action. Their social movements advocated mutuality in an age when individual

farmers and workers had become increasingly vulnerable to the impersonal vagaries of the industrial marketplace.

In contrast to this ethos of mutuality, P. T. Barnum stressed individual initiative throughout his career. Born in 1810 to a large, old family from Bethel, Connecticut, Barnum began working as a clerk in a country store at fifteen to support his family after his father died. Over the next two decades, Barnum ran several lotteries and gained notoriety in the amusement and museum business with hoaxes such as those of Joice Heth, an elderly former slave billed as the 161-year-old nurse of George Washington, and the Feejee Mermaid, a shriveled fish corpse with monkey parts attached to it.⁵² From 1841 to 1865 Barnum created several American celebrities, specifically the midget couple Tom Thumb and Lavinia Warren, and the opera star Jenny Lind, the "Swedish Nightingale."⁵³ First published in 1854, Barnum's autobiography, *Life of P. T. Barnum*, was a hugely popular rags-to-riches story that began with the American arrival of Barnum's seventeenth-century ancestor, Thomas Barnum, an indentured servant. In tandem with the American Museum, the autobiography helped make Barnum rich enough to provide most of the funding needed (approximately \$320,000)⁵⁴ to create his Great Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan and Hippodrome (1871) with his partners Dan Castello and W. C. Coup, who provided the rest of the initial capitalization.⁵⁵ After becoming a circus owner, Barnum carried thousands of copies of his autobiography for sale at the show grounds, and when his new circus commenced rail travel in 1872 Barnum designated certain railroad cars just to carry piles of his book.⁵⁶ In his writings and speeches, Barnum highlighted his own background as ample proof that individuals could rise above unfortunate circumstances without state-sponsored assistance. Until the eve of the Civil War, Barnum was an enthusiastic Jacksonian Democrat who supported open markets and briefly owned slaves before eventually supporting abolitionism.⁵⁷ Free competition had always been lucrative for Barnum, because his public squabbles with his rivals—notably the white elephant war with his competitor Adam Forepaugh in 1884—only increased his notoriety.⁵⁸

Barnum was also a vigorous reformer. A devout Universalist and temperance advocate, Barnum subscribed to the notions of human perfectibility that bloomed during the Second Great Awakening. Press agents echoed this gospel of self-discipline and self-improvement: "This man started out without a cent . . . [and] worked himself up, step by step, leap by leap . . . until he stands . . . without a rival, one of the richest men in the country . . . [h]e

is restless, earnest determined, industrious, zealous.”⁶⁹ Barnum’s emphasis on self-discipline drew him to the temperance cause, a social movement led in part by bourgeois business owners who were alarmed by sluggish, drunken behavior in the workplace, where employees took frequent “grog” breaks that sabotaged productivity. After witnessing drunken behavior in Saratoga in 1847, Barnum drained his liquor cabinet permanently. He explained his actions in his autobiography: “I felt that I had now a duty to perform—to save others, as I had been saved, and on the very morning when I signed the pledge [of temperance], I obtained over twenty signatures in Bridgeport. I talked temperance to all whom I met, and very soon commenced lecturing upon the subject in the adjacent towns and villages. I spent the entire winter and spring of 1851–1852 in lecturing free, through my native State, always traveling at my own expense, and I was glad to know that I aroused many hundreds, perhaps thousands, to the importance of the temperance reform.”⁶⁹ As a museum proprietor, Barnum produced several temperance dramas, including “The Drunkard.” He lobbied vigorously for the Maine Laws in 1850 and continued to press for temperance legislation when he was elected to public office in the 1860s and 1870s. Barnum’s focus on temperance and human perfectibility carried over into the administration of his circus, for he allowed no drinking or gambling among his employees. Barnum’s crusade for human perfectibility also influenced his promotion of the circus as a pedagogical entertainment that could improve its audiences.

The life of P. T. Barnum’s circus partner, James A. Bailey, was a variation of the rags-to-riches narrative. Born on July 4, 1847, in Detroit as James A. McGinnis, Bailey lost both his parents by the time he was eight years old. Although his mother left approximately \$20,000 for the care of her seven children,⁶¹ “Jimmy” was constantly beaten by his eldest sister and guardian, Catharine, and at eleven he ran away. Later, he privately recalled his childhood to his brother-in-law Joseph McCaddon: “Instead of being treated as a ward for whom considerable provisions were made, I was made to work like a dog, and on the least provocation was whipped. My sister had boys of about my own age, and for their misdeeds I was punished. . . . I was worked so hard that I was always late at school, so I was continually being punished after school; and then for being late in getting home I was whipped again. I stood that treatment until I was about eleven years old.”⁶²

Jimmy’s escape from his violent family eventually led him to the circus, a free space, where he felt safe. He came of age immersed in the outfit’s daily operations. From the age of thirteen until his death forty-six years

later, Bailey worked at a circus, first as a billposter on the advance advertising team with Robinson and Lake’s circus. Jimmy A. McGinnis became James A. Bailey after he adopted the surname of Robinson and Lake’s advance agent, Fred H. Bailey. James Bailey’s diary chronicled how the bulk of the labor fell upon him as the junior employee. “Sunday, August 30, 1863: in Grayville [Illinois?] Stevens was so sick that he could not do any work I had to put up the bills all alone in Albion i put up the bills And in Olney Stevens and Mr. Bailey went to the show and left me to do the [] I put up a part of the bills up that night and put the rest up the next Morning before breakfast. J.B. Monday, August 31: James Bailey put up the Bills alone. Tuesday, September 1: James Bailey put up the Bills alone. September 2: Mr. Stevens and Bailey gone to the show. i put up bills. James Bailey.”⁶³

Bailey’s early work with the circus familiarized him with all angles of its operation. McCaddon observed, “In the beginning of his career, he had driven over the roads of all the midwest and southern states, year after year . . . in advance of the old-fashioned wagon shows . . . and he would familiarize himself with junctional points, distances, [and] the chief industries or products.”⁶⁴ Armed with intimate knowledge of the circus, Bailey later acted unilaterally, meddling and unable to relinquish his authority. He frequently threatened workers with “instant dismissal” and bristled when challenged. McCaddon noted that employees had to “learn to obey orders. If he directs you to post a bill upside down, be sure you understand correctly and don’t argue about it.”⁶⁵ Bailey’s tight-fisted, autocratic efficiency was a stark contrast to the Barnum’s savvy for publicity. While Barnum attracted audiences through public spectacles as a politician, reformer, writer, and promoter of celebrities and hoaxes, Bailey remained invisible, choosing to absorb himself in single-handed management of his circuses—down to the smallest detail.

Press agents praised Bailey’s self-discipline. Accordingly, Bailey “made himself great,” possessing “tremendous energy,” working since boyhood, “with the untiring tenacity and ambition which later characterized his entire career.”⁶⁶ Other newspaper articles observed that “[Bailey] Likes His Work More than Anything Else.”⁶⁷ Yet Bailey’s bitter past with his biological family left him brittle and cold to his partners and employees, and it undoubtedly contributed to a nervous breakdown which took him away from the circus in 1886–87. Even his partner P. T. Barnum addressed him as “Mr. Bailey.”⁶⁸ When an earlier circus partnership, Cooper and Bailey, lost money while performing in Argentina in 1878, Bailey decided to “red-light” (i.e. desert) his workers by stranding them in Buenos Aires without

pay or transportation back to the United States. Among the workers he red-lighted were his brother-in-law and Cooper's young nephew!⁶⁹

Bailey disliked the masses that thronged into his circuses, even though programs ballyhooed Bailey's three-ring circus as a quintessentially "democratic" amusement that appealed to "all classes." Bailey yearned to produce an elite and "tasteful" one-ring, European-style circus that would attract "higher class" urban patrons. Before his death, Bailey planned with McCaddon to open such a one-ring "Big City Circus" that would celebrate individual artists, consequently avoiding the "mechanical sameness" of the contemporary three-ring railroad production. McCaddon later recalled the defining features of their proposed circus:

The circus delux must be a place of beauty and thrills. . . . No more meaningless advertising street parades. . . . No more cheap side shows, or concerts, or peddling of toy balloons and other cheap articles to the annoyance of patrons. No more menagerie of drowsy animals in narrow cages, dimly lighted. . . . The New Circus, in lieu of the old style menagerie will have the first tent devoted to an exhibition of animals, all highly trained . . . that will later be seen in the arena. There may also be strange and curious living freaks, attractive illusions and other interesting exhibits. . . . The New Circus will be in smaller tents, water proof, more compact, comfortably seated. . . . Reserved numbered chairs and private box seats may be purchased by diagram from one to two weeks in advance, so patrons may avoid the pushing crowds.⁷⁰

Bailey planned to eliminate mass audiences by making tickets prohibitively expensive for the "pushing crowds" who flocked to his three-ring outfit. Yet he died in 1906, before he could make his exclusive, urban circus a reality. In general, Bailey's abusive childhood and virtual lifetime immersion in the circus business shaped his rigid and taciturn style of management which helped create an efficient—yet occasionally resistant—workforce.

William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody also crafted a narrative of individual initiative and self-improvement. According to Joy Kasson, "Cody was a Gilded Age businessman who loved to portray himself as a rags-to-riches hero."⁷¹ Like Barnum, Cody created a profitable public image centered around hard work and colorful exploits. Cody also used the language of uplift to characterize his Wild West, but did so in ways that departed from Barnum's emphasis on individual propriety and proper domesticity. Buffalo Bill's "mission" emphasized American Indian cultural preservation and gender equality—both of which were strands of contemporary social reform. Cody

marketed his own experiences on the trans-Mississippi West as an example of romantic heroism, adventure, and upward mobility on the democratic frontier. But one should also bear in mind that he epitomized the flip side of the western success story: even though his Wild West outfit made him rich, he experienced tremendous financial failure with speculative boondoggles in gold mines and mineral springs.

Cody loomed large as a central character in his production. Although poorly educated as a boy, he wrote four autobiographies and made several movies, such as "The Battle of Wounded Knee," produced by the Colonel W. F. Cody Historical Pictures Company. Born in 1846 on the eastern edge of the trans-Mississippi West in Iowa, the youthful Cody was a messenger for a freight company that eventually ran the pony express and later served in the 7th Kansas regiment, drove a stage coach, and hunted thousands of buffalo (hence his nickname) in order to feed the hungry crews laying the track for the Kansas Pacific railroad. In 1868 Cody was hired as chief of scouts for the 5th Cavalry. He became an actor in the 1870s, and participated in what Kasson calls "plains showmanship": buffalo hunts, feats of marksmanship, and horse races.⁷² In 1883 he opened his Wild West. With long silver hair, a clipped goatee, a cowboy hat, and a leather coat, Cody had an appearance that reinforced his image as a "real" western icon. Moreover, Cody and his partner, the actor Nate Salsbury, hired hundreds of Native American players, including at least one famous chief each year beginning with Sitting Bull in 1885, and a stream of cowboys and cowgirls, notably Johnny Baker and Annie Oakley.⁷³

Like other Gilded Age showmen, Cody credited his success to hard work. He was a virtual whirlwind of capitalist promotion. In letters to his family, "excuse haste" was a constant refrain, as he apologized for his perpetual busyness. He was involved in dozens of risky ventures—from gold mines in Arizona to a proposed scheme to turn the Grand Canyon into an exotic game park. Despite his volatile financial decisions, Cody maintained his Alger-like optimism that hard work would lead to financial success.

Cody mandated discipline and sobriety for all employees: "And I will have no one with me that's liable to let whiskey get away with him in this business a man *must* be perfectly reliable and *sobber*" (emphasis in original).⁷⁴ Yet Cody battled the bottle throughout his career. In 1905 he wrote to his favorite sister, Julia, that he had rejected liquor through his faith in God: "And I realize how easy it is to abandon sin and Serve him. . . . Through this knowledge I have quit drinking entirely. And quit doing rash things simply by Controlling my pasions."⁷⁵ Employees remembered that Cody constantly

"downed one tumbler after another of his high potency mixture" on the show grounds, but that he never even appeared "tipsy."⁷⁶ Yet his alcoholism, coupled with bad financial investments, eventually undermined the stability of his Wild West—his one profitable venture. When Cody died in 1917, his Wild West show had changed ownership several times and he had only a nominal monetary interest in the outfit.⁷⁷

Cody's actual relationship to the western frontier that he so successfully recreated in the ring was ambivalent. He advertised his production as a glimpse at a "vanishing" way of life and mourned the "disappearance" of the trans-Mississippi West and its chief human artifact, the American Indian, as casualties of Euroamerican expansion. Yet he helped hasten industrial development and settlement through his participation in the building of a transcontinental railroad, and he vigorously plugged settlement and development of Wyoming, his adopted home state. He garnered federal subsidies for the construction of an automobile and horse-stage line from Cody, Wyoming, to Yellowstone National Park, schemed to turn a local hot springs into a mineral spa (to "advertise the state"), built the Irma Hotel in Cody to promote tourism, ran a local newspaper, *Cody Enterprise*, and planned to build the Cody Military College, or International Academy of Rough Riders, in Wyoming. In a letter to a member of the State Land Board, Cody wrote, "I am working for Wyoming all the time."⁷⁸

Cody's reformist beliefs shaped the content of his productions. Elected to the Nebraska state legislature in 1872, he advocated women's suffrage and the rights of working women. Cody's Wild West exhibited several female sharpshooters, most famously Annie Oakley, who worked there for seventeen years beginning in 1885. And he used show programs as a platform to express his political views on subjects ranging from western expansion to women's rights:

You take a single woman earning her living in a city and the average man looks at her suspiciously if he hears that she lives alone. That makes me tired. A woman who is capable of financiering for herself is capable of taking care of her morals, and if she wants to take an apartment and live alone where she can do her work more quietly, or have things her own way when she comes from business, she has just as much right to do so as a bachelor. If a woman is a good woman she will remain good alone; if she is bad, being surrounded and overlooked, and watched and guarded, and chaperoned by a hundred old women in a boarding house won't make her good. This applies to society women as well as to working women.⁷⁹

Cody's relationship with Native American was conceptually inconsistent. He publicly supported the rights of American Indians, although he had helped decimate the Plains Indians' chief food source, the buffalo. Cody provided a good income for hundreds of Indian employees, particularly refugees from the massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1890, yet these actors were hired to play roles that reinforced stereotypes of Native American "savagery."⁸⁰ Cody attempted to use his Wild West to help preserve Native American cultures at a time when the Bureau of Indian Affairs and reformers were mandating wholesale assimilation. Cody argued that efforts by the bureau to prevent Native Americans from earning an "honest dollar" at Wild West shows constituted virtual "imprisonment" on their reservations: "the Indians are becoming restless cooped up on their reservations. And if they are not allowed some liberty they will sooner or later give our frontier people trouble."⁸¹ Cody also publicly exhorted all Native Americans to engage in agricultural cultivation as a way to prevent their "extinction": "But now, with the abundant acres of land that his white conquerors, with great justice, have allotted to him in the shape of reservations . . . [h]e now finds that fences are to be made, ground broken up, seed planted. . . . [He must] follow in fact, what he has often claimed in desire and spirit to follow, 'the white man's road.'"⁸² As a showman and capitalist, Cody made contradictory claims, asserting that Native Americans could "uplift" themselves through assimilation, while at the same time protesting that they were "cooped up" on reservations.

The Ringling brothers also used the myth of individual mobility to explain their meteoric rise in the circus business. Their identity as a family operation shaped their management structure and their "wholesome," "Sunday School" reputation. Resonating with Gilded Age industrialists, the Ringlings freely attributed their self-made millions to hard work and individual volition. Alf T. Ringling, who managed the press department, fashioned the brothers' autobiography as a self-improvement tale, breathlessly describing the boys' meteoric rise from modest means to great wealth.⁸³

They had attained these results by years of patient labor, by many hours of thoughtful counsel, by careful conservative means, by dint of the greatest individual and collective exertion, and by the steadfast, unwavering determination to have the greatest tented exposition in America. During their early career they had passed through storms that threatened their hopes with destruction. They had gone through danger and had experienced all of the vicissitudes that befall those who embark in great

and enormous undertakings. . . . But when others were giving up the struggle under such adversities, the Ringling Bros. would summon up all their strength. Their motto was never to stop moving, to keep their show going.⁸⁴

The Ringling brothers' actual background substantiated their claims. Al, Otto, Alf, Charles, and John Ringling were the sons of an itinerant immigrant German harness maker, August Rüngeling (who later Anglicized the family name). The father worked throughout the Midwest before settling in Baraboo, Wisconsin, in the 1870s with his wife, Salomé, and their eight children. Living in McGregor, Iowa, from 1862 to 1871, the five boys were inspired in 1869 to start a circus when they saw the John Stowe & Company circus and its unusual (for its day) Appaloosa horses. Andrew Gaffney, a performer with the circus, gave the Ringlings a complimentary family show pass after August repaired Gaffney's leather props free of charge because Gaffney was a local.⁸⁵ The Ringling boys quickly fashioned a "concert company" comprising panoramic (pictorial) comedy sketches and charged their youthful audiences "ten pins" (literally straight pins) instead of cash.⁸⁶ In 1879 Al worked part time as a juggler and acrobat, in addition to steadier employment as a carriage trimmer.⁸⁷ Three years later the brothers began performing a blend of blackface minstrelsy, comic skits, dance, songs, and juggling routines in hall shows around Wisconsin as the Ringling Brothers' Classic and Comic Concert Company. Facing blizzards, clems (fights), and sometimes no business at all, the brothers experienced rough times during these early years of touring. At one Wisconsin town, lead miners staged a wrestling match on the outskirts that drew away nearly the entire audience: only a handful of boys and the janitor attended the show that night.⁸⁸ Still, the Ringling brothers accumulated approximately \$1,000 to \$1,200 by 1884, enough to expand their operations.⁸⁹ They hired the veteran showman Yankee Robinson to form Yankee Robinson and Ringling Brothers Great Double Shows for their inaugural season under canvas. Robinson, sixty-six, died that same season, but the brothers plowed on.⁹⁰ In contrast to P. T. Barnum, who financed his own entrance into the circus industry, the Ringlings during the early years financed their circus with a series of small, promptly paid bank loans of as little as \$20 at a time.⁹¹ As their operations grew (particularly once they began buying other outfits), they borrowed more money, taking out a \$77,000 loan⁹² in 1905 from a local bank.⁹³ By 1907 the Ringling Bros. circus owned Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth, in

addition to several other circuses, making the Ringlings the most powerful circus showmen in the United States.

Throughout their careers, the Ringlings capitalized upon every aspect of their business as "proper," as proof of their own self-discipline. The brothers' autobiography solemnly professed: "It is said of the Ringling Bros. that in all their association with each other not one unkind word has ever passed between them. Certain it is that not one of their hundreds of employees can name an instance that would contradict the assertion, and none of the brothers remembers an occasion where friction has occurred between them."⁹⁴ Alf T. Ringling attributed the circus's moral code to the brothers' having run the show. As part of this familial ethos, the brothers did not sign official contracts with one another, relying instead on blood loyalty. They also split all profits equally among themselves.⁹⁵ In some ways, their family circus was evocative of an idealized pastoral social order, where families, not strangers, labored together. Otto handled the finances. John managed the routing and transportation arrangements. Alf T. ran the press department and made certain that the circus was prominently featured in local newspapers. Al was the equestrian director, choosing acts for the big top and sideshow, and deciding the order of the program. Lastly, Charles was in charge of advertising the circus. To the end of his life each brother ran a critical part of the overall operation, which magnified the circus's clean family name.⁹⁶ Yet by the 1930s, the brothers' survivors had disintegrated into permanent, bitter factions.⁹⁷

Because the brothers prohibited graft, games of chance, and insobriety wholesale, they began calling themselves a "New School of American Showmen" in 1891. By 1894 press agents had adopted the more familiar "Sunday School" moniker.⁹⁸ As a "Sunday School" outfit, Ringling Bros. ensured that its contracts contained strict rules of conduct,⁹⁹ and it hired Pinkerton detective agents to enforce its upright environment.¹⁰⁰ E. E. MacGilvra, a rancher from Montana, knew the Ringlings as a child in Baraboo: "They were fine fellows. They carried their own police force, their own detective force. I can remember as a kid standing along side the ticket wagon and watching these farmers come in, you know, big families and all excited and everybody tugging at papa's coattail or mama's skirts and he's up there trying to buy tickets. He'd turn around and leave, maybe without picking up his change, but there was always a detective there to grab him and say, 'Here mister, you pick up your change, we won't touch it.' That's the kind of outfit they ran."¹⁰¹

In some respects, it is curious that Barnum, Bailey, Cody, and the Ringlings marketed themselves as taciturn models of self-discipline and frugality when their productions ballyhooed excess. (Indeed, in *Ragged Dick* (1868), Horatio Alger included Barnum's Museum as part of the "tip-top" world of "low" amusements that drained Dick's scant income from bootblacking; only when Dick stopped going to Barnum's and the Bowery opened a bank account, saved his money, took regular baths, and dressed neatly did he begin to succeed.)¹⁰² Advertisements for the railroad circus trumpeted its extravagance: its splendid cacophony of three rings, two stages—all "too big to see at once"—and its dizzying array of people and animals. Route books and newspaper articles raved about profligate consumers on Circus Day who spent their hard-earned cash on ephemeral stuff—cotton candy fluff, pink lemonade, games of chance, and sideshow displays—even though the circus itself was a well-oiled model of human (and animal) discipline, set to music, that incited its audiences to behave in decidedly undisciplined ways.

LABOR AND HIERARCHY

The social structure of the railroad circus was built upon an occupational hierarchy akin to a caste system, in which musicians ate and slept with musicians, and candy "butchers" with candy butchers. An outfit's size magnified this caste system and ultimately made the labor process more efficient. At big railroad circuses, often workers barely saw one another because they traveled and performed their duties at different times of the day. As we have already seen, advance men traveled several weeks before the actual show; tent polers, transportation men, railroad gangs, and other workingmen arrived at the grounds several hours before the performers and prepared for departure while the evening big-top show still played. Al Mann, a Wild West concert rider with the Ringling Bros. in 1923, and his wife, Irene Mann, a trick roper, rider, and aerialist, observed this social system in action. Both knew few sideshow acts, because the big-top and sideshow players worked at opposite ends of the show grounds. Consequently, according to Al, they "didn't go up there and hang around."¹⁰³ Because workers spent a great deal of time with people performing the same labor, they forged close bonds within their given occupation, which, in turn, further reinforced the division of labor at the circus.

The geography of the grounds enhanced the hierarchy. In the dining tent, canvas side walls ran down the center, dividing the tent into two sec-

tions with two separate entrances. Owners, managers, and performers in the principal big-top acts sat on the right side of the partition, while laborers sat on the left. In both areas, tables were arranged to reflect the hierarchy. The owner's table was at the front of the tent, followed by show managers and star acts. Secondary players sat in the back of the tent.¹⁰⁴ Each occupation had its own table: ushers and ticket sellers, different groups of band musicians, Wild West actors, sideshow players, and so on. The bands were divided into a descending hierarchy comprising the big-top band, the after-show concert band, and the sideshow band, also called the "nig show" because African American musicians worked in it.¹⁰⁵ Each worker was assigned a specific seat at his or her occupational table. One waiter served approximately twenty-four people.¹⁰⁶

Designated by job, race, and sex, sleeping arrangements on the circus train further augmented the occupational hierarchy. The advance cars, which traveled independently weeks before the departure of the actual circus train, housed only male workers. The floor plan of the advance cars reinforced the hierarchy within the advance team itself: billposters slept together in separate berths in a communal area of the car and shared a bathroom. The head advance staff and additional professional management staff shared a stateroom containing a desk, a safe, a sofa that could be extended into a double berth, an upper berth, and a private bathroom.¹⁰⁷

In the circus train itself, single male and female employees occupied separate Pullman cars, while married couples slept in the same car, either together or in different berths, depending on the size of the berths. Star big-top acts and managers were privileged enough to sleep in spacious staterooms. Fred Bradna, an acrobat, rider, and later the equestrian director for the Ringling Bros.' circus in 1915, and his acrobatic equestrienne wife, Ella, fondly remembered the day they moved into a stateroom:

No one can realize, unless he and his wife have spent every night of their married life in an upper and a lower berth, the feeling of release, of exhilarated spaciousness, resulting from removal to a stateroom with twin beds instead of bunks, windows to curtain, a bath and, most wonderful of all, privacy. I carried Ella over the doorsill of this, our first home. She wept when her trunk was hauled in and the delivery boy asked, "Where shall I put it?" Imagine such capaciousness that there was more than one place to put a comb and brush, let alone a trunk! She rushed downtown the next day, and returned with curtain materials, needles and thread, paint and brushes. For half a morning she walked about, actually able

to take five steps in any direction without stumbling over something or someone, babbling to herself in her happiness.¹⁰⁸

Sleeping assignments within the cars were an index of occupational status. Fred Bradna noted that after eight years of trouping, he and Ella no longer had to sleep over the wheels in the married couple's car. By 1911 they had "moved up" to the center of the car, where the ride was smoother.¹⁰⁹ If the circus possessed more than twenty cars, then the show might have an "owner's car," usually the train's last car, which was elegantly appointed with staterooms, private bathrooms, and a spacious dining area. In contrast, workingmen slept in densely packed bunks or hammocks, often converted from day coaches. Laborers also slept in stock cars or on flats, close to the areas in which they worked. The elephant men, for instance, slept in a narrow space above their animals, which meant that they were with them virtually nonstop. In 1895 some 300 Barnum & Bailey laborers occupied three sleeping cars that were each designed to hold fifty to sixty people, or half the number of people actually sleeping there. Not surprisingly, these crowded quarters were potentially dangerous. In 1884 sleeping quarters for the male laborers were so cramped on the Orton Brothers' circus train that bunks were erected in front of the doors once they were closed for the night. When a trash can started burning one night, sixty men were trapped inside the burning car—the only exit point was a tiny window at the front of the car, and at least eight men died.¹¹⁰

Ballet girls, like male laborers, lived in congested conditions on the train. The Single Ladies Car (commonly called the "virgins' car" by circus workers) often held four berths per section, although each section was designed to contain just two berths. Tiny Kline, a Barnum & Bailey ballet girl in 1916, recalled that women occupying the upper berths all wore pajamas to bed because none could execute the bodily contortions needed to wiggle in and out of the cramped quarters in a nightgown without exposing herself.¹¹¹ The lavatories in this car had no walls; show managers had them removed to prevent workers from monopolizing the bathrooms. The porteress kept a vigilant eye on the lavatory and made certain that passengers did not wash their bodies below the neck and arms. (Performers would have the opportunity for a full body bath once they reached the dressing tent before the first show each day: they braced themselves clean using buckets of icy water.)¹¹² To maintain order, a monitor was stationed at each car—male or female depending upon the passengers. Four washbasins were positioned at each end of the car, and each person had one hook in a giant closet for hanging his or

her clothes. Everyone was required to tip the car porter twenty-five cents a week; the porter polished shoes every day, took care of the laundry once a week, and cleaned the berths.¹¹³

Circus workers maintained and policed the caste hierarchy among themselves. Employees often treated top players with deference. Josephine DeMott Robinson, a star bareback rider from the 1880s to the 1920s, wrote that a female performer's spot in the women's dressing room reflected her importance within the show. In the days before electricity, Robinson's dressing area was directly under a chandelier, the brightest area in the dim tent.¹¹⁴ Photographs of the star aerialist Lillian Leitzel from the 1920s reveal a scene of even greater privilege: a maid primps Leitzel's hair and makeup in a private dressing tent, nicely appointed with chintz-covered chairs, a table with linen, and fresh flowers.¹¹⁵

In the big-top dressing tents, trunks sat in the same place throughout the show season, arranged end to end in four straight rows. The location of each trunk revealed a performer's position in the hierarchy. In the women's big-top dressing tent, the first row was the most spacious and private position in the tent, indicating where the star players—usually bareback riders and aerialists—dressed. Trunks positioned further down this "queen's row" and into the second and third rows belonged to women with less status. Finally, the lowest members of the female hierarchy—ballet girls, statue girls, and performers in other secondary acts—had their trunks placed in the fourth row, set against the outer side wall of the tent, where they were exposed to constant foot traffic and to the wind and rain that often seeped through the tent. Male players' trunks were also positioned to reflect their status. In the men's dressing tent, clowns (with the exception of those who were famous) generally received the least desirable place to dress.¹¹⁶

A worker's wages reflected his or her position within the circus caste system. Not surprisingly, those who received the most deference were among the best paid, while the large team of roustabouts lived in crowded train cars and were paid the lowest wages at the show (fig. 9). All circus employees received free room and board in addition to their actual wages; consequently, their total compensation package was much higher than their monetary earnings—a fact that one must bear in mind when comparing circus jobs with other jobs.

Circus work was usually seasonal, and artists' wages varied greatly, depending above all upon the public appeal of the individual or group act. (Employees working as part of a group were paid as a group, not individually, and records generally do not reveal how group earnings were collected

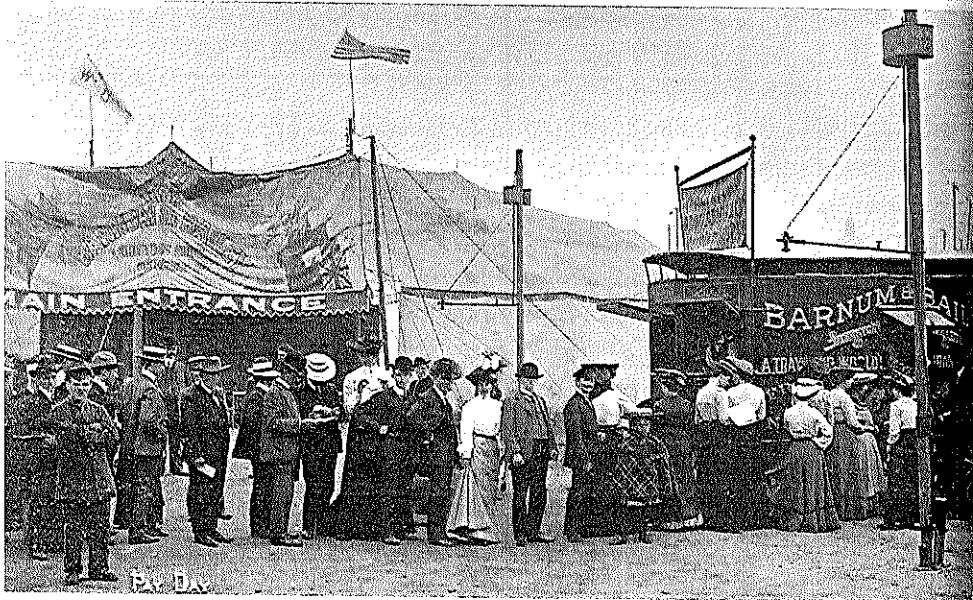


Figure 9. "Payday," Barnum & Bailey, Brockton, Mass., 1903. Although the circus's social structure was characterized by a caste hierarchy, all waited in the same line each week to receive their pay check. (Frederick Glasier Collection, neg. no. 1403; black-and-white photograph, copy from glass plate negative, 10 × 8 in., museum purchase, Collection of the John and Mable Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Fla.)

or divided up.) The pay range for circus workers ranged dramatically and was generally determined by three factors: skill, gender, and race. Lastly, rates of pay differed from circus to circus; the largest railroad outfits usually paid higher wages than smaller circuses.

Advance agents were generally Euroamerican males who were fairly well compensated by the standards of the day. Because some advance agents had legal training, one might compare their earnings to the earnings of contemporary professional workers. In 1892 a bank accountant earned \$16.63 a week¹¹⁷ on average.¹¹⁸ Although data for advance agents come from the years 1902 to 1912, wages in real dollars differed very little from 1892 to 1912, because the value of the dollar fluctuated by a maximum of only nine cents throughout this twenty-year period.¹¹⁹ Detailed financial records exist from 1902 to 1912 for the Gollmar brothers circus, another outfit of five brothers based in Baraboo, Wisconsin (cousins to the Ringling brothers, in fact), that took to the rails in 1903 and eventually consisted of over twenty cars. At the Gollmar brothers, an advance agent's wage ranged from \$10 to \$50 a

week,¹²⁰ depending on the year and the agent's rank. Billposters, who accompanied the advance agents, received considerably less money, earning about \$5 to \$6 a week¹²¹ in 1902.¹²² At Barnum & Bailey's circus, the advance agent paid the billposters their weekly wages. To make sure that the billposter stayed for the entire season (and that he refrain from swearing, drinking, gambling, or anything else "immoral"), the advance agent retained part of his weekly wage, called a "gratuity," or "holdback," which the billposter did not receive until the end of the season. This practice extended to other jobs in the circus business.¹²³

Big-top acts were usually paid larger salaries than sideshow performers of similar fame. In 1917 Lillian Leitzel received \$200 per week¹²⁴ during the Ringling Bros.' long Chicago engagement, and \$165 per week¹²⁵ during her season on the road. Her contract stipulated that she receive a stateroom during the traveling season and a small dressing room tent, "if desired." In contrast to less popular performers, whose contracts stated that they must also "make themselves generally useful," Leitzel was only required to execute a "first class aerial ring act," and she did not have to appear in the parade.¹²⁶ At the sideshow that same year, the long-standing Sumatran player Krao, "the Missing Link" Farini, was paid \$50 a week,¹²⁷ or a fourth of Leitzel's salary. Farini's contract stated that she "Exhibit self in Side Show and as required, same as 1916. First class costumes etc. . . . Not required for entrees, specs, parades. Can have ladies artist size trunk 20" × 22" × 28"."¹²⁸ Because Farini was well known, she was better paid than most sideshow acts, and she received a larger trunk, a notable special privilege at the nomadic circus. Unlike many big-top actors, sideshow players (Farini included) usually did not appear in opening parades and grand entries because their marketability depended upon their curious bodies—if audiences were able to preview the freaks, there would be little reason to pay ten to twenty-five cents extra to gaze at them at the subsequent "kid show" (sideshow in circus lingo). The concept of "skill" was integral to explaining the wage disparity between big-top and sideshow stars: managers deemed that athletic prowess constituted a higher skill than sheer bodily exhibition at the sideshow.

Popular female big-top acts occasionally received bigger wages than their male coworkers. The bareback rider Lizzie Rooney, of the famous Riding Rooney family, made \$50 a week¹²⁹ in 1906, whereas her brother Charles, also a bareback rider but less known, was paid \$15 a week¹³⁰ that same year.¹³¹ As part of husband-and-wife or brother-and-sister teams, many women were not individually compensated for their labor, and there-

fore it is often difficult to determine the actual distribution of wages to female members of a family troupe. Harry Brandon, the principal clown with the Gollmar Brothers, received \$35 a week¹⁵² along with his wife in 1904, but in the following year he was paid \$25 a week¹⁵³ when performing without his wife.¹⁵⁴

But secondary women under the big top (i.e. ballet or chorus members) made less money than their male counterparts. Work contracts from the Ringling Bros. circus from 1900 to 1910 reveal that minor female performers earned approximately \$7 a week¹⁵⁵ on average, compared with earnings of \$10 to \$15 a week¹⁵⁶ for male players in secondary roles.¹⁵⁷ These figures are generally commensurate with the wages of working women in other fields. In New York City, for instance, 56 percent of female factory workers earned less than \$8 a week,¹⁵⁸ and most women earned less than \$7.50 a week¹⁵⁹ in retail trade.¹⁶⁰ Yet, as noted earlier, free room and board were included in the total compensation package at the circus, and therefore the effective wages paid to female circus workers were actually much higher than those paid to women in other jobs.

The circus also maintained a large, inexpensive, and expendable unskilled labor force of workingmen. Because of their transience, only the boss of their departments and the cashier in the office knew their real names. Typically they were known by their town or state of origin (e.g. as "Boston" or "Kansas"), by their ethnic group ("Frenchy," for instance), or by a defining physical characteristic (such as "freckles" or "blackie"). If a roustabout bore a strong resemblance to George Washington, Daniel Boone, or any other notable, then he assumed that name.¹⁶¹ The workers were virtually interchangeable. Fred Gollmar, the stage manager for the Gollmar Brothers circus, noted that a few days of rain could wipe out three-quarters of the workingmen, and that he spent much time in Chicago and other large cities securing new work gangs.¹⁶² James Bailey also stated that these faceless laborers were "dispensable," adding that it was cheaper simply to add new workers at every stop rather than entice workingmen to stay the season by paying higher wages and providing better working conditions.¹⁶³ In 1892 the Walter L. Main circus, a medium-sized outfit with twenty to twenty-five cars, paid its "inexperienced and cheaper class of labor" \$3 a week¹⁶⁴ for jobs not specified, with no mention of additional hold-back pay at the end of the season.¹⁶⁵

Experienced workingmen commanded higher pay than other roustabouts. The Walter L. Main show recorded a detailed list of its salaries

for "first-class experienced men." In 1902 this list included the following big-top assembly jobs: canvassmen, ring makers, stage men, seat men, and chandelier men (who set up and tore down the open-flame gas or oil lighting containers attached to the center poles); train polers, or polemen; and others. These positions paid \$15 a month,¹⁶⁶ with an additional \$5 or \$10 a month¹⁶⁷ held back until the end of the season.¹⁶⁸ The rates of pay for experienced workingmen were similar to those of laborers in other industries, if hold-back pay is taken into account. In 1892 an American laborer made approximately \$23.67 a month,¹⁶⁹ excluding room and board, which were included for all circus workers.¹⁵⁰

Circus owners described the workingman's labor as good for one's health. Managers for Barnum & Bailey in 1908 told the journalist Harriet Quimby that hundreds of men with lung problems applied to become workingmen in order to regain their vitality: the applicants wanted to work in the open air and escape the confinement of indoor factory labor.¹⁵¹ Impresarios even extended to laboring circus animals their association with labor, health, and solid character. In a defense of "working" animals that countered the logic of contemporary animal welfare activists, Dr. William T. Hornaday, a naturalist and Director of the New York Zoological Society (who also worked closely with several circuses), asserted that hard work was wholesome for both animals and humans in his "Wild Animals' Bill of Rights": "A wild animal has no more inherent right to live a life of lazy and luxurious ease and freedom from all care, than a man or woman has to live without work or family cares. . . . Human beings who sanely work are much happier per capita than those who do nothing but grouch. . . . [I]t is no more wrong or wicked for a horse to work for his living—of course, on a human basis—either on the stage or on the street, than it is for a coal carrier, a foundryman, a farmer, a bookkeeper, a schoolteacher or a housewife to do the day's work."¹⁵²

But roustabout labor—for humans and animals—was grueling. Working hours were long and intensive, filled with the physical stress of constant travel and little sleep. Ceaselessly moving and lifting heavy materials, machines, and animals was also dangerous. Route books document in gruesome detail frequent accidents involving workers who were crushed, maimed, or knocked unconscious on the job. This entry from the Ringling Bros' 1892 route book is typical: "Poleman Phillips breaks his leg under ticket wagon as it comes down the run from the train."¹⁶³ Additional entries describe roustabouts dying from their injuries. Indeed, as I will explore

later, dangerous labor was also a form of masculine spectacle. Unquestionably, the dangers of roustabout labor help explain the high turnover rate among workingmen.

Senior workingmen were generally Euroamerican males. But the Sells Brothers circus was an exception. Based in Ohio (which historically had a relatively large free black population), the Sells Brothers employed scores of African Americans in the 1880s. Still, other big railroad outfits did not hire blacks until the turn of the century. The boss canvasman Bill "Cap" Curtis recalled that when James Bailey combined the Sells and Forepaugh circuses in 1896, Bailey reversed the Sells Brothers' practice by no longer hiring black canvasmen.¹⁵⁴ George Bowles, a press agent for Barnum & Bailey, explained that the circus in 1903 hired African American canvasmen (to work together in a segregated workplace) only in response to a shortage of white workers:

Times were so prosperous that any man with a good pair of biceps could not only get a job, but would have people bidding for his services, and many employers who wanted husky boys overbid the circus, whereupon the canvasman, figuratively speaking, folded his individual tent and silently stole away. These disertions were so frequent that the circus for about six weeks was constantly in more or less trouble. We sent everywhere for men. . . . The problem was solved only when, for the first time in the history of the circus, Mr. Bailey imported a large force of Virginia negroes, who were greatly pleased with all the excitement and novelty of circus life. He tried to avoid this move, but there was too much doing for white men, to leave any other recourse.¹⁵⁵

For decades, African Americans had been employed as circus acts—side-show musicians, "savage" freaks, or occasional big-top players, often at good pay. In a closely knit working community, these jobs were nonthreatening to white laborers because African American entertainers were paid to play roles reinforcing racial stereotypes that confirmed white supremacist ideologies. African Americans were also hired to work in the dining tent as waiters, a position that complemented pervasive stereotypes about black servitude. The presence of black and white laborers working the same jobs, nevertheless, threatened to undermine prevailing racist norms. One can surmise that James Bailey was reluctant to hire African Americans as workingmen because white workers interpreted the presence of blacks as a threat to their own social and economic standing. The perceived threat of the black (or Chinese, or Chicano) worker "taking" white jobs for lower pay was an

integral part of contemporary Euroamerican unionist discourse and helps to explain the failure of the Knights of Labor and other labor groups to create a racially united labor movement in the Gilded Age. Those shows that hired African American workingmen paid them substantially less than white workers. The salary list for the Walter L. Main circus duly chronicled, "if should go south and use Darkies," black manual laborers were to be paid \$2 a week,¹⁵⁶ with no additional hold-back pay. Euroamerican common laborers, in contrast, made \$3 a week.¹⁵⁷ On the job, African American laborers generally remained segregated from white coworkers in separate work gangs.

Although the circus comprised an international array of people, the big-top program was generally divided along racial lines. Nonwhite big-top acts typically performed with members of their own race and were often described as family members (even when unrelated). At the Gollmar Brothers circus in 1903, the three Japanese acrobats who made up the M. Ando tumblers were collectively paid \$40 a week,¹⁵⁸ a fairly typical wage for minor big-top acts.¹⁵⁹ Nonetheless, few African Americans performed under the big top. Eph Thompson, a black animal trainer with the Adam Forepaugh circus in 1888, found scant employment opportunities at the American circus during the late nineteenth century; as a result he moved to Europe, where he became a successful elephant trainer in London and with Carl Hagenbeck's menagerie. As late as 1966, John Ringling North, owner of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus (and nephew of the five original brothers), sparked an uproar in the circus community when he hired Priscilla Williams, an African American aerialist apprentice.¹⁶⁰ By and large, only certain positions were available: as workingmen, as waiters, and exoticized performance roles. Given the circus's racial division of labor, opportunities to move into more lucrative positions as big-top acts or managers were effectively closed to African American circus workers.

The black circus owner Eph Williams was the rare exception to this rule—but only because he set out on his own, away from an established show hierarchy. As a bartender and barber at the Plankinton Hotel in Milwaukee, Williams began training horses and dogs in his spare time during the 1880s. From 1888 to 1902 he owned a show that played under a variety of names, including Prof. Williams's Consolidated Railroad Shows, and traveled first by wagon and then on two to five railroad cars. His intrepid circus roamed the rough, booming timber and iron range frontier of northern Wisconsin and the upper peninsula of Michigan, and into Minnesota and the Dakotas. He quit the circus business in 1902 and bought

a tented minstrel show, Silas Green from New Orleans, which made him wealthy.¹⁶¹

"LIKE A BIG FAMILY"

Despite the constant racial, gender, and class divisions within the circus caste system, show people still saw themselves as part of a closely knit traveling community. Circus people often perceived themselves to be removed from the rest of society because home, for most circus folk, was on the road.¹⁶² Al Mann remembered that "circus was a family," that even John Ringling, or "Mr. John" as he was known among Ringling workers, visited freely with performers as they waited to enter the ring: "I talked to him a lot. He used to visit and talk to me and the same time he'd be watching everything they's doing with loading and tearing down at night during the concert . . . [H]e was right there with his black cigar, standing on that platform and he'd talk to me while I was waiting to get on the bucking horse."¹⁶³

Circus workers maintained a sense of solidarity within their particular occupational group.¹⁶⁴ Carrie Holt, a fat lady, felt a fierce sense of camaraderie with her fellow sideshow actors: "As for the sideshow, the public don't know anything about us from just seeing us on our platforms—on exhibition. Why, we're just like a big family." Holt and her racially and physically diverse coworkers formed a social club, complete with dues, rules, and a big party at the end of the season: "I had a grand time. I was in everything even if I was fat."¹⁶⁵ Other circus workers expressed this same kind of solidarity. George W. Stevenson, a billposter, referred to himself as a "Brother Paste." His ditty, "Only a Bill Poster," written in 1896, playfully illustrated his consciousness of his social position: "There's a class in this world of the Miss Nancy Kind / Who turn up their noses (the largest part of their mind) / For he's 'only a Bill poster' without any brain / Crowding through life for positive gain."¹⁶⁶

Circus workers referred to noncircus folk as "outsiders," "gillies," or "rubes," and frequently mentioned in their autobiographies that they were only comfortable with other show folk. They spoke a language peppered with jargon unfamiliar to the "gillies" that widened the gulf between insiders and outsiders. For example, an elephant was commonly known as a "bull," "punk," or "rubber mule," big-top acrobats were "kinkers," zebras were "convicts," the sideshow was the "kid show," and a circus's off-season grounds were its "winter quarters." If spectators became violent on the show grounds (typically outside the tents), a worker would shout "Hey

Rube!" and all employees would drop what they were doing, grab a tent stake or any other handy object, and descend upon the offending party. The cry "Hey Rube!" was a show of solidarity, and an effective means of maintaining order for circus folk working among thousands of potentially violent audience members, especially when local law enforcement was ineffective or lacking.

"Hey Rube!" also demonstrated that this collective spirit could (temporarily, at least) transcend racial divisions. A newspaper noted this potential at the show grounds of Buffalo Bill's Wild West in Brooklyn, New York, after a cowboy named "Wild Bill" accidentally bumped into an Italian peanut vendor and the enraged vendor stabbed the cowboy with a stiletto knife. The *Brooklyn Citizen* observed: "The other cowboys, the two Indians who were in their war paint ready for the afternoon performance, the two Cosacks, and the Mexican vaqueros forgot their race differences for the moment and rushed to Wild Bill's assistance. One of the Mexicans let go a lasso he carried. He missed the Italian, but he caught the peanut stand, which, with a crash, was overturned and deposited its load on the Halsey street car tracks" (emphasis mine).¹⁶⁷

A "Hey Rube" could nonetheless leave a circus vulnerable. Lawsuits inevitably followed a melee, and circus folk were invariably blamed. W. E. "Doc" Van Alstine, a canvasman (among other jobs) with several big railroad shows at the turn of the century, remembered a couple of particularly violent "Hey Rubes" in an interview for the WPA in 1938: "I was in a Hey Rube in Lincoln, Illinois, once. It was one of the toughest battles I ever seen. The town boys was coalminers and some of the toughest customers I ever seen. We strung out in a circle around our stuff and stood 'em off with 'laying out pins' [used to set up the tents] and whacked 'em with 'side poles,' finally giving 'em the run, but they sure could take it. Another Hey Rube in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was started by a gang of students from the University of Michigan, for no good reason at all except perhaps they thought it was funny. It cost the circus I was with more than \$35,000 in lawsuits and damage to equipment. In a Hey Rube, most of the lawsuits that follow is usually by some innocent bystander who gets hurt in the scramble."¹⁶⁸

During the show season, circus workers were essentially homeless, living out of a trunk. Many did not keep their money in banks. Instead they bought loose diamonds and kept them around their necks in chamois pouches called "grouch" bags. Diamonds could be quickly transformed into cash when necessary.¹⁶⁹ Workers also wore diamond jewelry for the same purpose. While the Ringling Bros. circus stayed in Adrian, Michigan, in 1892, a hotel

clerk commented, "There's enough diamonds worn by that gang to set up a jewelry store."¹⁷⁰ Even during the off-season, many players were nomads because they worked on the vaudeville circuit, in the rodeo, or in carnivals, or traveled south to work in circuses in the southern United States or Latin America. During his early years with the circus in the 1920s, Emmett Kelly bounced from show to show as a clown and in a trapeze act with his wife, Eva; they often spent their off-seasons apart, each working at a variety of jobs: at police circuses and state fairs, performing manual labor in a glove factory, and working as an industrial painter. Meanwhile, the "Aerial Kellys" continued to polish additional acts, the "iron jaw" act among others, to make themselves more employable as a team.¹⁷¹

The news media and juvenile fiction romanticized the act of running away and joining a circus, but the hiring process was generally more systematic for performers. Such circus folk were born into the business, solicited employment from proprietors by mail, or were discovered by circus agents while they were employed elsewhere. Some acts were hired by big railroad outfits based on their reputation from their work at carnivals, fairs, dog-and-pony shows, and smaller railroad circuses.

Female big-top players, in particular, were often born into the business, which enhanced their caste status. Josie DeMott Robinson, a top bareback rider in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, was born into an illustrious circus family. She knew no other life than the circus, and spent her childhood learning equestrienne acrobatics and living on trains. Some women joined the circus because their husbands were members of a show. Irene Mann's experiences provide a later example of this practice. She became a trick roper after she married Al Mann, in 1928. During the first year of their marriage, Al traveled with the Ringling outfit, while Irene remained at their home in Wisconsin, practicing roping and riding stunts. When Al joined the John Robinson circus in 1930, a manager noticed Irene's picture on Al's trunk and, as Al puts it, said, "We need girls as pretty as her with the show, send for her."¹⁷² Within the month, Irene Mann joined her husband at the circus.

After seeing employment advertisements in entertainment papers like the *New York Clipper* and *Billboard*, many circus players sent solicitation letters to potential employers that described their talents and salary requirements. If interested, proprietors enclosed a contract with their reply, and the hiring process was completed by mail. Some acts were discovered in auxiliary fields. While working as a cattle foreman in Montana, Al Mann became a Wild West rider after a circus performer saw him win a rodeo

contest. Then Cy Compton, who managed the Ringling Bros.' after-show concerts and Wild West shows, wired Mann an offer of employment and free travel to New York City from Lander, Montana, for the opening of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus at Madison Square Garden in March 1923.

The hiring process was also systematic for American Indian acts.¹⁷³ Wild West agents generally hired Native Americans at Indian reservations, after getting approval from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. At the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux shaman, was hired for a season in 1886, when he was twenty-three, by *Waisichus* (white men) working for *Pahuska* (William F. Cody).¹⁷⁴ Standing Bear, an Oglala Sioux chief, was hired at Pine Ridge for Buffalo Bill's Wild West during its European tour from 1902 to 1906 as a translator and entertainer.¹⁷⁵

Still, "running away" was a common way to join the circus, particularly among workingmen. A circus worker until 1917, W. E. "Doc" Van Alstine recalled that his family in Kinderhook, New York, wanted him to become a doctor like his father, a surgeon. Van Alstine had other plans, however: "At an early age, I had a yearning for the show business. School didn't interest me a bit. I hated books. I wasn't a danged bit interested in reading about what somebody else did, or where they went, or what they saw. I wanted to go, do, and see things for myself, and I couldn't think of any better way to satisfy my ambition than to join up with a circus. . . . Come a day, once, when I was a young gaffer in my early teens, I had a chance to run away with the Mighty Yankee Robinson Circus. The lure of sawdust and spangles was much stronger than family ties or the red schoolhouse, so off I goes."¹⁷⁶ Van Alstine worked as a block boy (someone who helped set up and tear down the general admission bleacher, or "blues," seats) for four days before his family dragged him home. He returned to school and studied medicine—hence his later nickname, "Doc." Finally, he persuaded his parents to let him leave, and he ran off to the circus for good. He stayed there for the next sixty years.¹⁷⁷

CONDUCT IN A TRAVELING COMPANY TOWN

The workplace at the transient circus was all-encompassing, cohesive yet stratified. Employees led lives, both on and off the job, that revolved around their work, much like workers living in established industrial company towns such as Pullman, Illinois: they slept, ate, and worked with circus folk. Circus managers structured workers' leisure time by arranging cir-

cus baseball teams and fancy holiday celebrations. The large railroad circus was an early example of welfare capitalism: to quell potential unrest and union activism, circus owners provided food, lodging, and leisure activities for their workers.¹⁷⁸ Managers attempted to keep groups of workingmen racially segregated off the job as a way to build a cohesive (yet paradoxically divided) company town culture. This was not true of the performers' more racially integrated work and leisure culture but was generally true among the workingmen. In 1907 a newspaper in Decatur, Illinois, mentioned a baseball game between a team of black canvasmen, the "Lucky Sevens" and another black team, the "Black Diamonds," who maintained the animal menagerie.¹⁷⁹

To heighten productivity, circus owners imposed strict rules of conduct on their employees that rivaled those of any industrial assembly line. Pinkerton agents monitored workers' behavior—with varying degrees of effectiveness—in addition to unruly spectators.¹⁸⁰ Circus contracts dictated how players dressed off stage, and how (and with whom) they spent their leisure time. A press release from Buffalo Bill's Wild West in 1899 informed the public that "absolute neatness is an imperative" among its employees.¹⁸¹ As a way to maximize efficiency, some circuses prohibited workers from marrying each other during the show season. Fred Bradna became the equestrian director for the Ringling Bros. after the previous director, William E. "Bud" Gorman, was fired for eloping with a ballet girl named Gladys during the 1915 season.¹⁸² During the first decade of the century, Ringling Bros.' work contracts listed fifty-one conduct rules, including the following:

Be cleanly and neat in dress and avoid loud display. . . . Gambling, especially in the cars or near the cars, on or near the show ground, is strictly prohibited. . . . No pet animals, revolvers, intoxicants or inflammables allowed in the sleeping cars. . . . Loud talking, singing, playing upon musical instruments, or disturbing noises in or near the [railroad] cars must stop at 11 P.M. . . . Do not clean teeth at wash-bowls. Cooking is prohibited in the cars. . . . Do not sit "cross-legged" on floats or tableau wagons [in the parade]. . . . Button up coats, etc. . . . Absolutely, do not chew (gum or tobacco) or smoke in parade. . . . Do not make remarks to anyone while in parade or talk to employees who are ahead of you or follow you in parade. . . . Do not nod to friends or acquaintances who may be in the audience. . . . Avoid arguments with other employees. Be agreeable and promote harmony.¹⁸³

Given their focus on self-restraint and efficiency, it is little surprise that the biggest railroad circuses prohibited the consumption of alcohol among employees during the show season. P. T. Barnum, a temperance advocate, was the first railroad proprietor to market his circus successfully as a respectable entertainment, based largely on his enforcement of a dry workplace. Circus owners used the holdback system of pay in part to curtail potential drunkenness—even though instances of alcohol consumption occurred regularly. Contract rules dictated that workers found drinking on or off the job would not receive their holdback pay at the end of the season, and they could be fired, depending upon the circumstances.¹⁸⁴ The Gollmar Brothers organized intramural baseball teams to keep employees physically fit and alert during their leisure time and deter them from drinking and gambling.¹⁸⁵ Elsewhere, welfare capitalists organized employee baseball and bowling teams, picnics, and sing-a-longs, to promote company loyalty across ethnic lines and occupational ranks.¹⁸⁶ Circus managers generally focused their enforcement of temperance rules on manual laborers, even though some performers (not to mention William F. Cody) were alcoholics.¹⁸⁷ Like turn-of-the-century temperance advocates, proprietors looked to alcoholism as a working-class problem.

By contrast, alcohol had flowed freely at the mid-nineteenth-century circus. As a young business manager for William Lake's circus in the 1860s, James A. Bailey kept careful records of the show's weekly saloon expenses.¹⁸⁸ Mid-nineteenth-century circuses did not have to meet tight railroad schedules; in addition, these outfits generally employed a score or two of workers whose jobs often overlapped—in contrast to the multitude employed at the highly specialized turn-of-the-century railroad circus. In the mid-nineteenth century, before the biggest circuses adopted full-time railroad travel, the boundary between work and leisure blurred considerably. The movement of the overland show was determined by natural factors: length of daylight, weather, and seasons. With the advent of the railroad, impresarios placed greater emphasis on individual sobriety and discipline on the job and effectively "Taylorized" the workplace, thus prompting the journalist Charles Theodore Murray to proclaim that "the railroad has civilized the circus man."¹⁸⁹

Proprietors and newspapers both described the railroad circus as a popular-culture counterpart to a modern army. Given its ability to travel quickly and feed and house some 1,200 employees in makeshift quarters, the huge American railroad circus resembled a sprawling military encampment. Buffalo Bill's Wild West programs described the outfit's operations in terms

of preparing for war. Both Colonel William F. Cody and the show's co-owner, Nate Salsbury, were war veterans, qualified to oversee the "manoeuvres of so many troops, horses and guns."¹⁹⁰

In fact, beginning in the 1890s, the U.S. War Department periodically sent army officers to travel with the circus in order to observe how show managers coordinated massive numbers of people and animals. Early in the decade several army officers from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, spent a week with Barnum & Bailey studying the circus's transportation methods as a way to improve the logistics of the army's own artillery service.¹⁹¹ On May 15, 1906, the quartermaster general of the U.S. Army, G. F. Humphrey, wrote to George Starr, general manager of Barnum & Bailey's circus, to inform him that Major I. W. Littell, quartermaster, U.S.A., would accompany the circus from Baltimore to Canal Dover, Ohio, to learn "up to date methods of moving men, animals and baggage."¹⁹² That same day, Henry G. Sharpe, commissary general of the War Department, also wrote to Starr, summarizing the instructions that Captain James Addison Logan Jr. had received from the secretary of war: "[Logan is] to proceed to the points at which you give exhibitions as far as Wheeling, West Virginia, for the purpose of investigating the methods of obtaining supplies and serving food to the members of your company. Any assistance that you can render him in this particular will be deeply appreciated."¹⁹³ Paradoxically, then, the three-ring circus, which was fast becoming a synonym for wholesale disorder, was also a valuable model for day-to-day U.S. military operations.

The specialized division of labor at the railroad circus created the illusion of a huge, living, military machine. The smooth operation of the circus was dependent upon a cooperative workforce, aided by the circus's totalizing culture: its workers ate, slept, worked, and spent their leisure time together in an efficient, tightly knit, yet socially stratified traveling company town. General Leonard A. Wood, who engineered the McKinley administration's policies in Cuba during and after the Spanish-American War, asserted that watching the circus—with its cooperative and efficient division of labor—was an instructive, patriotic act: "No real American can resist the temptation to watch a circus unload, and seeing the erection of the tents."¹⁹⁴ After World War I, Wood noted that the Walter L. Main circus had more than seventy-seven service stars in its flag; four circus workers had been killed in the war and eight veterans had rejoined the show, "[now] better men and more advanced in education and discipline."¹⁹⁵ Echoing turn-of-the-century military officials, Woods observed that the "great American army machine" would benefit by copying the transportation and labor systems of

the "great American circus machine." Woods judged the American circus to be an instructive institution, composed of exemplary patriots and industrious workers.

Despite its machinelike quality, the disciplined circus "army" occasionally rebelled against its highly regimented work environment. Still, the forms of resistance that these workers took cannot be measured by the yardstick of traditional labor activism. Roustabouts were so scattered and marginal to the world of organized unionism that they did not participate in institutionalized forms of resistance. They did not join unions, because their jobs were essentially invisible to the world of organized labor. The American Federation of Labor, the nation's dominant union at the turn of the century, was founded by a cigar-maker, Samuel Gompers, in 1886; its brand of "unions, pure and simple" was for skilled workers only. The AFL excluded unskilled workers, women, and people of color from its ranks, arguing that skilled white male workers were the vanguard of the labor movement and that to include others would only weaken their already precarious position. Although Bill Haywood and Eugene Debs tried to build "one big union" for all industrial workers in the Industrial Workers of the World (created in 1905), the AFL's exclusionary ideology dominated the day.¹⁹⁶ Circus laborers were unskilled and commonly illiterate (many of them signed their paychecks with an "X"), and they moved quickly and anonymously from job to job. The practice of retaining "holdback" pay until the end of the season speaks to the speed with which roustabouts left their jobs. Indeed, the most potent—and commonest—form of resistance for these workers was simply to quit.

Circus workers resisted in other, subtler ways as well. Their tactics occurred in the realm of what the historian D. G. Robin Kelley and the anthropologist James Scott have called "infrapolitics," as part of everyday life at the workplace rather than at the union hall.¹⁹⁷ As a way to relax, circus workingmen often sneakily imbibed alcohol on the job, despite official regulations. When Buffalo Bill's Wild West toured Europe at the turn of the century, Native American artists protested long working hours by taking whiskey breaks.¹⁹⁸ Sideshow workers also created their own strategies of resistance. When people crowded too close or became obnoxious, the Ringling Bros. fat lady Carrie Holt would pretend to sneeze: "That makes 'em move on. I suppose they think my germs must be as much bigger than ordinary germs as I am bigger than ordinary people." Holt and her sideshow comrades broke the monotony of their work by secretly poking fun at the "freaks" in the audience: "When I see a real funny one, I say, kind of careless-like, to Miss Gilmore, the snake charmer who sits next to me, 'I

hope there's an extra platform! That's a tip for her to look for a freak down in the crowd. Or maybe Miss Gilmore says to me, 'Well, Carrie, put on your things and go home. You're going to lose your job.' Then I know there's an awful fat woman in the crowd, and I begin to look for her."¹⁹⁹

Pronounced forms of employee resistance were risky because workers had little recourse for airing their grievances. Employees remained without a union until 1937. At the turn of the century, circus contracts absolved proprietors and railroad companies of any liability for employees who were killed or injured during the show season. If workers were injured on the job or became ill during the season, they received no wages or sick-time benefits while they were unable to work.²⁰⁰ Occasionally, a circus short on cash would "red-light," or strand, its workers without pay or transportation back home.²⁰¹

Although circus workers had little protection, some occasionally walked off the job in protest against low wages and rough working conditions. In May 1903, for example, 150 Barnum & Bailey canvassmen temporarily stopped working because managers would not grant them a raise of \$5 a month.²⁰² The workers protested that their duties had become increasingly difficult; that year, James Bailey replaced all the thousands of big-top seats with heavy iron orchestra seats—each containing a footrest—which made the big top's set up and disassembly, and the train-loading process cumbersome. Managers responded to the canvassmen by replacing them.²⁰³ Showmen generally ignored workers' demands because they were confident that these nonunionized workers would be disorganized and unable to create a collective protest.²⁰⁴ Indeed, circus workers were unable to sustain a widespread strike until 1938, when unionized workers at Ringling Bros. & Barnum & Bailey walked off the job in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in protest against the company's decision to cut wages that season.

Circus press agents pointedly deemphasized instances of employee resistance. During the canvassmen's walkouts in 1903, press agents issued a flurry of releases to newspapers in towns along the show's route, flatly denying labor troubles and bearing headlines like "No Labor Troubles with Barnum & Bailey's Circus," "Circus Employees Did Not Strike: No Truth in Story that Men Went Out Yesterday Morning," and "Why Canvassmen Do Not Strike."²⁰⁵ Proprietors justified delays by stating that the circus had simply become "too big," too "stupendous" to move quickly, or that constant bad weather had caused problems. Moreover, these same articles steadfastly claimed that the workingmen were "quite satisfied" with their jobs.

Showmen mocked workers' dissatisfaction by fabricating pointedly com-

cal instances of resistance in press releases. Press agents for Barnum & Bailey crafted a nationwide "rebellion" among sideshow acts just as the 1903 circus season opened—the same season that canvassmen walked off the job. A series of articles reported that these sideshow workers demanded to be called "prodigies" instead of "freaks." Ostensibly, they had formed a "union" called the Sunday Order of the Protective Order of Prodigies and threatened to strike and destroy circus billboards if their wishes were ignored. Reports of the "freak revolt" were suspiciously riddled with oxymoronic images and puns. For instance, at a committee meeting the armless man wrote the minutes and the fat girl Emma "gave weight to the argument," while the Living Pin Cushion accidentally stabbed himself with a penknife. In 1907 sideshow players attempted to unionize again: the "Glass-Eater is Chewing on the Plan, and [the] Armless Wonder Writes of It."²⁰⁶ Press agents also used clowns to poke fun at workers' activism. In 1909 a newly unionized group of clowns supposedly traveled to Washington to meet with members of Congress about lowering a tariff on clown white. One article observed that the clowns were "unusually interesting and solemn."²⁰⁷

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the term "three-ring circus" is synonymous with chaos in the American lexicon. ("Media circuses" like the white Bronco flight and trial of O. J. Simpson in 1994 or the death of Princess Diana of Wales in 1997 immediately spring to mind.) But as this chapter has shown, the physical operation of the three-ring railroad circus that came to life during the Gilded Age was quite the opposite—even if the audience was so disorderly as to resemble a true "three-ring circus" in today's terminology. The fin-de-siècle railroad circus was a labor show of dazzling proportions, a logistical spectacle of sheer numbers: people, zebras, elephants, yards of canvas, eggs eaten, and so forth. Astonished customers arrived before dawn and left after dark just to take it all in. Showmen publicly emphasized the tremendous cost of their productions as part of their advertising campaigns—an essential feature of their identity as Gilded Age corporations. Profiting from the popular mythology of equal opportunity, circus proprietors marketed themselves as ordinary men who had "made good" through economy, diligence, and abstinence. The elaborate performance of the "army" of labor at the railroad circus visually reinforced these ideals because of its totalizing aura of perpetual industry. Yet, as will be seen in chapter 4, the presence of nearly nude female circus performers made the showmen's claims of decorous entertainment perplexing and problematic.