



Missouri Historical Society



Courtesy of the author

In this daguerreotype portrait taken in 1848, Rice's eyes reveal intelligence and a penchant for mischief; both were crucial to creating clever commentaries on current events.



Wisconsin Circus Woes and the Great Dan Rice

By David Carlyon

Circus is regularly told in tales of sweetness and light, and Wisconsin's celebrated past fills that sentimental bill. In the 1870s, Dan Castello and William C. Coup started a show in Racine before heading east to call on P. T. Barnum, not yet a circus man, to ask for the use of his name to create Barnum & Bailey. Glory—and stories—followed. In the 1880s, the Ringling brothers emerged from Baraboo, and storied glory followed them too. Of course, not all is glorious. Fred Dahlinger Jr. and Stuart Thayer's *Badger State Showmen* gives a taste of the tribulations that attend circuses, as does Milton J. Bates's article, "The Wintermutes' Gigantic Little Circus," which appeared in the Autumn 2003 issue of this magazine. Trouble

As this February 1860 courier for Dan Rice's Great Show attests, his audiences got the usual circus fare of "Educated Mules," "Anecdote Song and Story," and an "Unequaled Troupe," as well as a grand spectacle, "The Magic Ring."



hit especially hard in the nineteenth century. Self-anointed arbiters of morality condemned the circus, accidents on the lot were common, star animals died, corrupt or greedy or biased local officials made life miserable for touring ventures, calamities interrupted travel over terrible roads in pitch-dark night or on the age's unsafe boats, and talking clowns generated controversy, while sex and violence ran through it all. That entire catalogue of calamity landed on another famous circus man during his Badger State tours. A generation before the Ringlings' first exhibition or Barnum entered the world of circus, Wisconsin went the whole hog piling afflictions on the great Dan Rice.

The great who?

Circus fans may take offense at the question but beyond the world of circus, Dan Rice has fallen into obscurity. Possibly the most famous man in 1860-America, he is now virtually unknown. General histories skip him. Scholars of performance confuse him with the blackface performer, T. D. "Jump Jim Crow" Rice. Even circus histories pass along Ricean tall tales, fictions repeated so often they became accepted as fact. To set the record straight, Rice did not use his bandwagon to parade presidential candidate Zachary

Taylor—circuses didn't have "band chariots" in 1848—nor did "on the bandwagon" start with him. He did not invent pink lemonade. The most appealing yarn yokes Dan Rice and Abe Lincoln as pals but it's a fantasy. Intended to boost Rice, these fictions had the opposite effect, shrinking him to fit the emerging stereotype of clown as a sentimental symbol, providing "comic relief" (another stereotype) from daily troubles but otherwise divorced from real life.

The real Dan Rice did not need the boost of sentimental fictions. The same W. C. Coup who enticed Barnum into circus life called Rice "the greatest clown America ever saw [and] the most famous circus performer in America." Born on January 25, 1823, to Elizabeth Crum and Daniel McLaren in Manhattan, when it was still mostly a bucolic island, he headed west by himself when he was barely in his teens. Landing in Pittsburgh, he worked around horses (leading to another tale, that he was a prize-winning jockey) and became friends with locals, including Stephen Foster. He got his start in "the show business" presenting a "Learned Pig." Rising from those porcine roots, he attracted thousands upon thousands of Americans during a fifty-year career as a clown who encompassed song-and-dance, whiteface pratfalls, blackface minstrelsy, and what would today be called stand-up comedy; a "Shaksperian jester" who mixed ribaldry and poetry; and a master showman who produced grand spectacles on the country's stages and introduced some of the age's most remarkable trained animals. Yet, there was more. Refinement is now a self-evident, albeit vague, concept, but it was novel in the 1800s as the emerging middle class sought to situate itself above crude culture. Poets, preachers, and politicians all advocated "aspiration"—as did Rice, who combined a touch of all three. He grew to national favor as he insisted he was no mere clown but the "American Humorist" who "aspired to higher things," in what he insisted was no mere circus but "Dan Rice's Great Show." (His press agent later worked for Barnum & Bailey, which capitalized on Rice's world-renowned title to label itself "The Greatest Show On Earth.") And more: To fully appreciate Rice's reach, it is important to recognize that circus was then primarily adult fare, and performance of all kinds was a public conversation with the audience, a cross between a talk radio and a sporting event. In that boisterous dynamic, Rice became a public figure beyond performance, as his "hits on the times"—political commentary—evolved into legitimate attempts at public office. To call a politician a clown is now a joke; in 1864, Republicans thought differently. Rice campaigned—from the circus ring—for the Pennsylvania State Senate as a Peace Democrat. He lost, but criticizing Republicans, their Civil War policy, and Lincoln, he ran ahead of the national ticket in Pennsylvania. He also flirted with the nomination for Congress in 1866, but eventually turned it down. His campaigns concluded with a brief foray as an early presidential candidate in 1867.



Houghton Library, Harvard

This composite sketch displays many of the roles Dan Rice played as a circus performer. His abilities as a public speaker, clown, and animal trainer helped propel him to the top of his profession.



It was those politics that complicate another Rice legend: that he was a model for Uncle Sam. Although the name “Uncle Sam” emerged in the early nineteenth century, it wasn’t until 1869 that Thomas Nast drew the character that continues to be recognizable. Nast, however, was an ardent Republican who would never have consciously used such a Democratic stalwart as a model. Yet, blend the two costumes Rice wore most often in the ring, clown stripes with stars and the formal wear of a middle-class gentleman, include his renowned top hat and mustacheless goatee, and it’s the Uncle Sam that Nast drew and we know today. Add the fact that the popular, touring Dan Rice was probably seen by more Americans than anyone else of his era was, and he becomes the closest this country has come to an embodiment of Uncle Sam.

Of course, fame does not prevent setbacks, which Wisconsin fed Rice in—as slang of the day put it—lots and gobs and mortal slathers.

It began in 1858, in Kenosha, when 35-year-old Rice brought a circus to the state for the first time. Even as aspiration was becoming the national model, would-be arbiters disagreed about who qualified as “high-minded.” While Rice’s public pitch of “aspiring to something higher” appealed to the multitudes who crowded to hear him, a few regarded the circus as unrefined. His rowdy, populist appeal made him even more suspect, as “decorum” lurched from neutral description to civic, even moral, ideal. One who objected was the editor of the *Kenosha Times*. Judging the “American Humorist” an American disgrace, he published one of the most delicious attacks in Rice’s half-century of public life. On June 17, this small-town dragon of respectability roared that Rice’s show was “a worse evil to the country than pestilence and famine.” Citizens would be doing their duty to God and country if they hung his troupers “by their rascally necks till they were dead, and then pitch them into Lake Michigan.” Rice himself should “swing from the highest tree of them all.” The would-be moral guardian raged on.

This class of characters are a nuisance and a pest . . . constituted of the very dregs of American population. They have neither character, principle or position. They live by false pretences and by appeals to the most vulgar passions of the race. They steal away the very substance of our local prosperity, that they may spend it in debauchery. . . . There is a contamination in their very presence anywhere.

The amusingly excessive venom continued on June 24 and July 1. Behind the attacks lurked frustration. The people ignored the advice for they liked circus and they especially liked Rice. Therefore, it was not surprising that this editor also sneered at the people. He insisted that his opinion was “honestly entertained and frankly expressed”—sincerity as the traditional excuse for rancor—so those “who don’t like it ‘can lump it.’”

This attack was unlikely to have bothered Rice. Circuses regularly drew criticism. Anyway, feuds fueled Rice’s fame. His strength as a performer lay in his skill in addressing public issues, and if those issues included himself, so much the better. From the tiny *Times* of Kenosha to Horace Greeley’s mighty *New York Tribune*, a recent feuding foe, Rice welcomed journalistic tantrums. Grist for his comic mill, they boosted business as people rushed to hear his retorts. His booming voice, winning humor, and wide popularity gave him a reach greater than most antebellum newspapers.

After Kenosha, Rice took his circus to Racine, then to Milwaukee for a June 24–25 stand, and more trouble. A circus lot was a hazardous place. Animals caused injury, wagons tipped, bleachers collapsed, and tents often tumbled. During a performance in Milwaukee, a wild storm knocked the tent down. Cozy nostalgia pictures old-time circus in a small tent seating a few hundred but the era also had mammoth tents holding thousands. Other than a few big city buildings, these huge canvas enclosures, set up and taken down daily, were the largest structures on the American continent. Circus tents and sailing ships, the great canvassed engines of antebellum enterprise, were

equally subject to weather. With both, storms turned strong ropes into flying whips, stout poles into splintered missiles, and stiff canvas into sopping, flopping impediments. Blue skies could become gray, then dark as night, as frightening winds whipped the canvas and trapped people underneath. Sometimes people died. Rice’s Milwaukee blowdown caused no fatalities but the July 10 *New York Clipper*, the national show-business weekly, reported that 500 people were injured.

A third calamity hit Rice that month. His show had made its way west through Wisconsin, then south, with his great white horse, Excelsior. Circus horses of that day fit in three general categories. Most common and cheapest were those in harness, hauling wagons between towns and



Shelburne Museum, VT

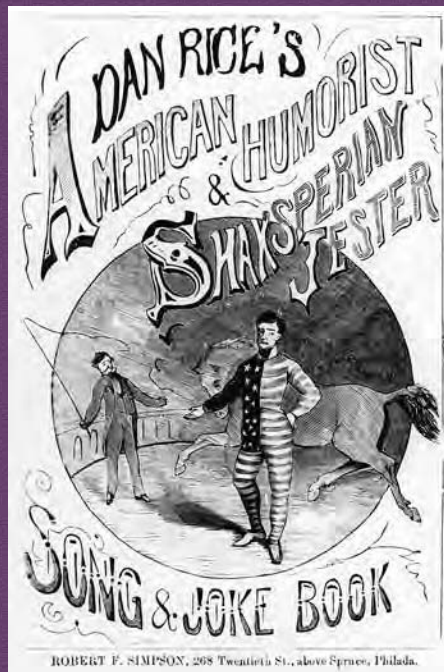
Excelsior, Rice’s prized white horse, was an important attraction in Rice’s shows and earned a prominent place in this advertisement.



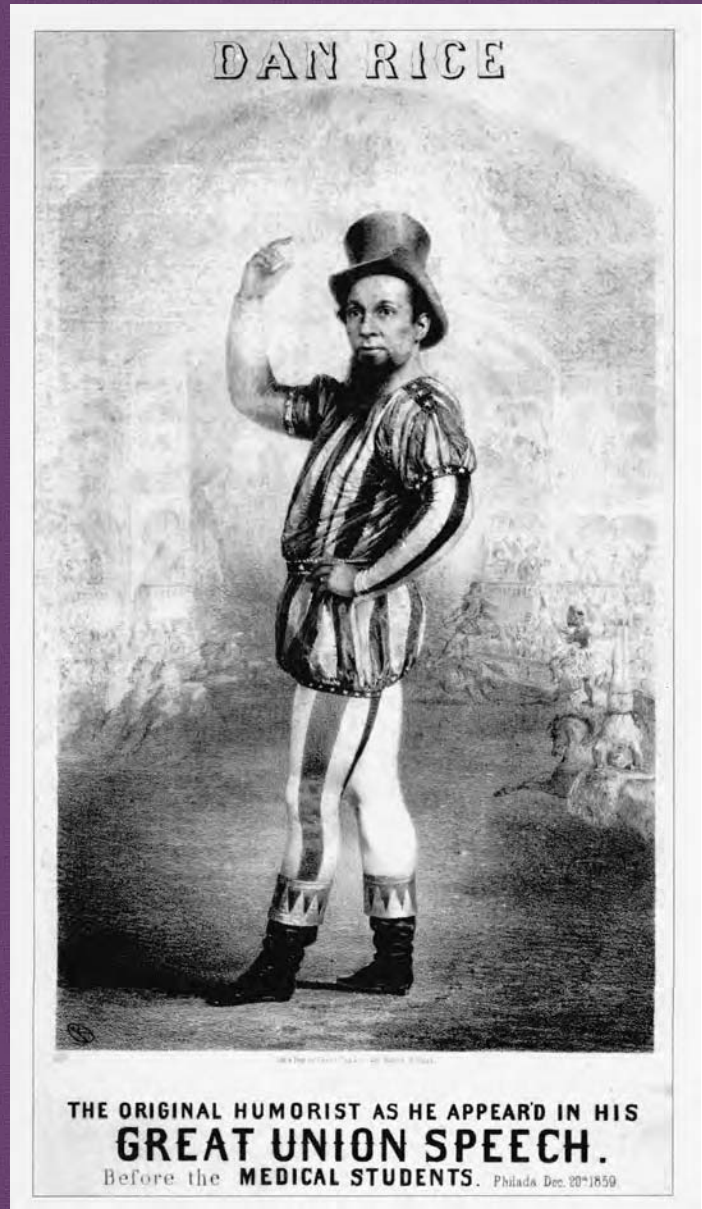
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The resemblance between Dan Rice and “Uncle Sam” was apparent in post-Civil War drawings by Thomas Nast and others, including this World War I era poster. It suggests Rice’s influence on that American icon.

Dan Rice published songsters such as American Humorist & Shaksperian (sic) Jester, published in 1860. Its songs and jokes were vehicles for political and social commentary.



ROBERT F. SIMPSON, 208 Twentieth St., above Spruce, Philada.
General Research Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations



Memoirs of Dan Rice

This stars-&-stripes image was part of Dan Rice’s Civil War campaign intended to prove his Union loyalty. However, in the December 1859 ‘Great Union Speech’ mentioned in the caption, he sympathized with the South and criticized Republicans for encouraging John Brown who was hanged three weeks earlier for attempting to ignite a slave rebellion.



providing the “horse power” to pull up the tent. Next, were the ring horses in riding acts. They were worth more because it took time to train a horse to keep a steady pace around the ring without being distracted by acrobats jumping on its back, not to mention the noisy crowds. Most valuable were the horses trained to perform tricks. At the peak of this equine elite stood Excelsior. In addition to the usual feats such as rearing on signal and bowing, Rice’s horse made an extraordinary entrance. Backstage, he walked on to a platform, putting a front hoof on a small pedestal. Then twelve men lifted the platform and carried it into the ring, Excelsior holding his pose, immobile except for the flick of a tail. In an age when horses were fundamental, from muscle and transportation to amusements like racing and the “one-horse open sleigh,” audiences knew horses and appreciated this remarkable combination of equine aptitude and human training. In another notable feat, Rice’s magnificent steed could walk up stairs and down. With a name meaning “ever upward,” and the ability to climb and stand high, Excelsior literally embodied Rice’s declaration, his pitch that he “aspired to something higher.” The great circus man capi-

talized on that image of refinement in his great animal, presenting him as nearly human, the “horse with a soul.”

But that summer of 1858, Dan lost Excelsior. Newspaper accounts disagreed on whether the horse died in July or August, and on the cause of death. The best clue comes in a July 25, 1858, *Cincinnati Enquirer* account. This paper, which carried a weekly circus column, placed Rice’s show near Wisconsin’s southern border at the end of June, probably around Beloit. During a performance, Excelsior had reached the top of his stairs when a man stood, yelling that he bet \$100 the horse could not jump down. Rice, unfazed by the interruption, retorted that he would not risk the life of so valuable animal on such a small amount, but he would go for \$500. That silenced the man, who sat down. But as Excelsior got halfway down the stairs, the man stood again to wager \$100 that the horse couldn’t jump from there. Rice summoned the swaggering wagerer into the ring. As Excelsior obediently waited midway and the audience buzzed in the summer heat, the two men conferred. Suddenly, Dan turned back to the horse, commanding him to jump. Excelsior did. He landed awkwardly, sparking panic through the stands.



WHi(X3)2795

This 1874 drawing, “The Grand Lay-Out,” presents an idyllic view of the circus as strikingly glamorous and larger than life.



The horse-savvy audience knew that a broken leg meant he would have to be killed. But Excelsior scrambled to his feet. Having won the bet, Rice grandly dismissed his adversary: "You have more money than you know what to do with. I don't want your money." Cheers rang as Rice bowed and the man slunk away. While this account stops there, it seems likely that the fall was worse than it appeared, for sometime in the next few weeks, the great horse died. Dan lost double, both the tremendous appeal of Excelsior's tricks and its embodiment of elevated refinement. It was a major blow to Rice's career.

Rice's next visit to Wisconsin three years later brought more problems. The first was a high license fee, a recurring difficulty. Municipalities usually charged \$10 to allow a traveling amusement to show in town. A circus could always set up outside town limits where local officials had no jurisdiction for a license, but that could be an inconvenient distance for audiences. Then civic authorities held the upper hand and might go as high as \$25. La Crosse charged \$50. As always, Rice fought back. According to the Septem-



Circus World Museum

Although not Rice's "Old Put," this rhinoceros has been identified as one of his many trained animals.

ber 1 *Cincinnati Enquirer*, he lampooned the town council as extortionists. The *New York Clipper* spread its report on the controversy over two pages on August 31, 1861, repeating the



Image ID 23694

Horses of "The Great Wallace Shows" face the formidable task of pulling wagons through flood waters in Bucyrus, Ohio in 1903.



DAN RICE'S GREAT SHOW

SIXTH APPEARANCE OF
M'LE ELLA ZOYARA
In her Unparalleled Scene of Equestration.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON, MARCH 3, 1860

The entertainments will commence with, for the First Time, the Fairy Equestric Ballet, entitled the
Sprites of the Silver Shower!

(As originally performed by the celebrated Levi J. North.) Mr. F. H. Ruston

2. **Select Feats from Our Gymnasium.** Mr. F. A. Jones

Horizontal Bar, La Perche Globe, L'Eclair Paravane, The Thorough-bred, Rebocon and Raehar, managed by Master Fred Barelay, a more difficult Act of Horde Leaping than was ever before attempted by so diminutive a performer. Messrs. Murray & Holland By the Latroped Poney

3. Dan Rice's Feats.
4. The Rebocon and Daring Rider.

MAD'LE ELLA ZOYARA.
Will have the honor of making her Sixth Appearance.
The Original Humorist, DAN RICE, will accompany this act.

HYPERBOLICHOES.

To conclude with the Third Act of the Grand East Indian Spectacle, in Three Acts, entitled the
ELEPHANT OF SIAM
Or, the Fire-King's Vow.

With New Scenery by Mr. Hawthorn, (of the Academy of Music, Winter Garden, and Laura Keane's Theatre, New York, and assistants;) New Costumes by Mrs. Cornwall, and numerous assistants; New Properties and Appointments by Mr. Wheeler and assistants; New Mechanical Effects by Mr. Piper and assistants; New Music, Composed and arranged by Mr. Canham; and the Entire Spectacle produced

UNDER THE SOLE SUPERINTENDENCE OF MR. JOHN DARCIÉ.

Amazons, the Rightful Heir..... Mr. W. H. Page	THEOPHILUS GIRAFFE, Travelling Agent of the Zoological Society, with Song of The Little Fat Gray Man..... Mr. F. J. HEW
Malice, High Priest of Siam..... Mr. C. M. Lewis	Robt. A. Burgess Officer..... Mr. Roman
Chatterbox, Grand Chamberlain..... Mr. Whitaker	Kaberdan, a Trader Priest..... Mr. Madigan
Trunk, Valet de Chambre to the Elephant..... Mr. Julia Ross	Heford, the Fire King..... Mr. T. King
Keon, Officer of the Burmese Guard..... Mr. Murray	Alker, Officer of the Burmese Guard..... Mr. Madigan
Bibi, Attendant on the Elephant..... Mr. Nox	Dinko, a Burmese Slave..... Mr. G. Holland
Rotarom, The Tyrant Outrager of the Throne of Siam..... Fire Slaves, Messrs. Robinson, Fenney, Jones, Reed, Clark and Franklin.	Mr. J. Dutton
Indians, Princess of Siam..... Miss Raymond	Lulu, Wife of Chatterbox..... Mrs. Hackitt
Attendant on Princess..... Miss Wilson	Rose Queen..... Miss Clara Robinson
Zillah, Concubine and Favorite of the Princess..... Miss Annie Lonatide	
The Anonymous Orator by Standeance Gardens, King, Johnson, Whitaker, Snyder, Madigan, Heford, Frost, Davis, Partridge, Cook, White, Hughes, Duff, Stevenson, Parker, Graham, Martin, Fether, Cherry, &c.	
Latroped, Chief of the Guard of Honor, Burmese, &c. by a full Company of Halls.	
The Fairy Queen of the Queen of Siam, Soldiers of the Burmese and Burmese Guards, Attendants on the Elephant, Priests, Devotees, Valets of the Burmese, Burmese, &c. by the Equestric Corps and the Burmese Amateurs.	

SYNOPSIS OF SCENERY, INCIDENTS, &c.

ACT III.—Scene 1.—The Cashmere Shawl Pavilion. The Princess in despair. Woman's wit of Edith. Grand in a fight. The Royal Presence. The Treasure Chest. The Prince alien. His discovery by the Usurper, and dreadful doom. Scene 2. The Forest Jungle and Dungeon Tower. The Prince again saved by the Elephant. The tyrant once more in the ascendant. The Princess in the Tower. Their rescue by the Elephant. Scene 3.—The City of Siam. Triumphal outpour of Amazons and Indians on the back of the Elephant. Grand procession of Horse and Foot. Heavens of the People. Entry of the Amazons Guard, and Military Evolutions by the People's Warriors. The Feast of Horses and Fairy stanzas to the honor of the River Queen, on the bosom of the Lake of Tranquil Delight. Apoteosis of Truth and Love.

Great preparations are being made for the production, for the first time in America, of
A Grand English Steeple Chase,
For which Six Thorough-bred Horses are wanted immediately, in addition to those now training for the performance.

A GRAND EQUESTRIAN FESTIVAL WILL BE GIVEN
On Wednesday Afternoon,
When all the Equestrians, Gymnasts and Acrobats will appear in Elegant and Diversified Entertainments.

To-night, for Positively the Last Time, the **ELEPHANT OF SIAM** will be played entire.

M'LL ELLA ZOYARA TO-NIGHT.

L. S. Steam-Power Job Printing Office, Ledger Buildings, Philada.

Library of Congress

One means of advertising an upcoming circus was to hand out heralds like this one for "Dan Rice's Great Show," dated March 3, 1860.

account from La Crosse's *Tri-Weekly Democrat*. Taking Dan's side, the *Democrat* disputed the accusation that circuses only sucked money out of town with the reminder that Rice's company had spent \$600 locally on clothing, jewelry and supplies. It capped its rebuttal with the time-honored complaint that governing bodies are overbearing: "At this rate it will not be long before a citizen cannot indulge in the luxury of kissing his wife, or wearing a clean shirt, without a license from this soulless board." Nevertheless,

Rice paid up. It was either that or skip the town losing a day's income. "The show must go on" was originally not a tribute to hardy performers but cold, financial fact: no show, no dough.

Traveling accidents hit the showman. Earlier in the summer of Excelsior's death, Rice also lost his "waltzing" camel to a broken neck, snapped when an Indiana bridge collapsed on a trek to the next town. Now, in 1861, Rice lost another animal. After the La Crosse license squabble, the showman loaded his troupe aboard the *Lucerne* for towns upriver. The boat towed a barge carrying his rhinoceros in a cage. Rice's animal acts were some of the century's favorite attractions. In addition to the great, departed Excelsior and the less great, equally departed camel, he presented a tightrope-walking elephant, Lalla Rookh; a highly popular pair of comic mules; and this rhinoceros. Rice had given it the patriotic moniker Old Put, the nickname of a Revolutionary War general, Israel Putnam. The rhinoceros ("rhino" was then slang for money) could not do much. It "spoke," lay down, sat on its haunches, and lumbered around the ring. In a customary circus tactic, the band varied the music to make the creature's movements seem to be variously trotting, running, and dancing. Rice also created a little drama: he yelled "Fire!" and the animal nudged a bell with its horn as if raising an alarm. Despite the limited actions, the mere fact that it could do tricks on command was remarkable, for that made it the first trained rhinoceros since ancient Rome. Those unimpressed by the history were simply curious to see such an unusual creature. Now, as the *Lucerne* steamed upriver, a fast packet boat, the *Key City*, swept downriver, kicking up waves as it rounded a bend. That rocked the barge until it tipped, plunging the cage into the water with the behemoth trapped inside. Men jumped underwater but they couldn't wrestle the door open. Old Put drowned. When Rice estimated the loss at \$20,000, he may have exaggerated—he was a master in the show-business tradition of hyperbole—but it was a heavy loss nonetheless. At least he got publicity out of it when his press agent filled papers with fantastic accounts of a rhinoceros loose on the Wisconsin countryside, trampling crops and chasing campers up trees. The *Clipper*, which reported the episode in its August 31 and September 14 issues, was not amused. "What motive the la [sic] Crosse *Democrat* can have had in misleading its readers, we are at a loss to conceive. We know that Dan Rice is up to such dodges, but an editor of a newspaper is supposed to have some respect for his patrons, be his own reputation good or bad." Eventually the bloated carcass was hauled from the river, raising a horrible stench.

By the time Rice's rhinoceros drowned, the country was well into the Civil War, which fetched him more trouble, though Wisconsin brought him relief for a change. His Peace Democrat pronouncements in the ring were drawing attacks, especially from those with old scores to settle,





Courtesy of the author

Rice, no stranger to self-promotion, had personal stationery that boasted that his circus had "the largest collection of trained & educated animals in the world."

like Horace Greeley, who lapsed into that bad habit of screaming "Treason!" at disagreement during war. So in Janesville in 1862, Rice gave a stirring Fourth of July tribute to honest Abe Lincoln, a speech he later printed in his 1865 songster, *Dan Rice's Songs, Sentiments, Jests, and Stories*. Like the politicians he would join as he ran for office, Rice knew that public displays of patriotism play well in wartime. While he continued criticizing how the war was being run, he de-emphasized sympathy for the South and re-emphasized his support for an undivided Union. Political opponents tried to characterize this shift as proof of disloyalty, but Rice was as patriotic as most of his fellow Democrats in the North. Nevertheless, as he tacked his way through the shifting winds of war, his remarkable ability to connect with audiences wobbled. His great strength was becoming a weakness as the country grew weary of political comment. Gradually, the idea of a performer talking politics began to seem unusual, then outlandish. Beyond that, the growing middle class preferred quiet decorum in performance over the direct address between Rice and his raucous crowds, favoring actors who ignored audiences and circus clowns who focused on children. In a sharp irony of history, Rice was a cultural leader ushering in this new performance fashion, still dominant today, that diminished his stature. Eventually hiding his politics, this broad-shouldered, brawling, bellowing favorite of raucous adults remade himself to seem always and only a jokester, a favorite of the kiddies.

Rice's name still rode high in the nation's consciousness in 1872 but behind the "houp-la"—a circus term—his career was in decline. In June, he steamed up the Mississippi. As he reached Prairie du Chien, above the mouth of the Wisconsin River, his troupe got into a fight. Violence was an everyday occurrence at the circus. Circus troupers were always suspect as outsiders, and each new town's rowdies, tired of bashing the same old

faces, leapt to the attack. Circus battles sometimes dragged over days, and occasionally people died. So a circus outfit had to be a fighting outfit. That was certainly true of Rice's shows, led by the pugnacious clown himself. He was so renowned in battles that even if he hadn't made histories as a clown or circus owner, he could have been included as a fighter. Fights at the circus were so common that they rarely made news. This Wisconsin tussle was an exception because Rice's men fought his ex-wife's circus troupe. Margaret Curran Rice had divorced him a decade earlier, and then led shows capitalizing on his name, presenting "Mrs. Dan Rice's Great Show." Though Dan had sued to stop Maggie's use of his famous title, their break-up was not bitter as both had proceeded to younger spouses. That amity disappointed those who hoped for juicy gossip in this "battle." It turned out to be minor, what the age called small potatoes, and few on the hill.

Sex and violence: Just as fights popped up regularly, so did sex. Circuses displayed women and men in scanty costumes, and whispers of prostitution trailed shows. Behind the scenes, intimate conditions often led to intimacy. That seemed to be the case in 1876 when Rice returned to Prairie du Chien, this time as part of Cook's English & American Circus. He could no longer raise money for his own show, and former employees became fellow employees. That included the riders Lizzie Marcellus and her husband Harry Codona. In 1869, Lizzie had been a "beautiful girl prodigy"



WHi (B82) 1636

Workers for the Sells Brothers and Forepaugh Circus drive stakes to set up a tent in Madison, 1898. Hours of arduous labor made the traveling circus possible.



on Rice's circus. He said she was only eight that year but that was probably publicity fodder. Child performers always appeal to audiences. Whatever her age, she had grown enough in four seasons to marry, though Dan disagreed. Either that or he didn't approve of her choice. In 1873, Dan had been in Canada when news arrived that Lizzie planned to marry Harry. According to a later account, in the April 2, 1882, *Memphis Daily Appeal*, Dan rushed into action, speeding a telegram to prevent the marriage, but to no avail. Subsequent events suggest that, if Dan was dubious about Harry, Harry had his own suspicions of Dan's interest in Lizzie. That made things awkward in the close quarters of that 1876 riverboat taking the circus up the Mississippi between Iowa and Wisconsin stands. Late one night, the volatile mix erupted. Harry pulled a razor on Lizzie and Dan dashed to the rescue. History doesn't say if Harry's suspicions of Dan were accurate but the day after the excitement, according to a July 15 Keokuk, Iowa, *Gate City* report, Dan sped downriver with "an equestrienne." Soon after, Lizzie divorced Harry.

Of course, the ultimate problem for any show was failure. Without Dan and Lizzie, its star performers, Cook's circus folded its tents.

Framing Rice's wagonload of Wisconsin woe are two brighter tales, one about his early days and another that pictures him late in his career, spreading influence that survives to this day. Considering the tall tales that pepper Rice accounts, it is not surprising that the few facts are shot through with fiction.

The first tale relates a supposed visit to Fort Winnebago. In the 1840s, early in his career, Rice performed a solo act of



PH 2987 (3)

In this photograph, ca. 1900, Mabel Hall, who was with the Wintermutes Circus, demonstrates the command circus performers had over large and powerful animals.

comic songs and strongman feats at towns along the upper Mississippi River. He later claimed that this tour extended into a dangerous trek through the then wild west of Wisconsin to the fort near Baraboo. There he performed for the soldiers, including a young lieutenant named Jefferson Davis. Though the future president of the Confederacy was indeed stationed there, this claim is suspect because Rice did not assert it until years later during the Civil War when he was flirting with Southern sympathies. (Similarly, decades after the war, when he was battling lingering whispers of Union disloyalty, tales of his supposed friendship with Lincoln popped up.) As Rice's tales go, this was a smaller stretch than most, for he *had* been in the vicinity in those early days. The March 30, 1844, council minutes of Davenport, Iowa, record a license granted to Dan Rice. Nevertheless, if Jeff Davis laughed at Dan's jokes at Fort Winnebago, no evidence of it has been found.

The crowning event in Rice's eventful Wisconsin career did not take place in Wisconsin, nor did it happen as told. Nevertheless, both location and association recommend it as a Badger State event.

On June 21, 1869, circus history was made—though no one knew it at the time. It happened opposite Prairie du Chien, in McGregor, Iowa, where a German immigrant had a harness shop. Perhaps he called it the "One-Horse Harness Shop," a name this immigrant had used earlier in Wisconsin according to an ad in the June 23, 1855, *Baraboo Republic*. Though "one-horse" is now slang mocking a small place, in nineteenth-century America it was a boast of potency despite scant resources. The spread of that boast was powerfully influenced by Rice's "One-Horse Show," a motto he had adopted in his early, hard-scrabble days and which grew to be nationally famous. This "One-Horse" harness maker, who had anglicized his name from August Rüngeling, had many sons. According to those Ringling brothers decades later, they were transfixed that 1869 day by Dan Rice and his magnificent circus. Inspired, they decided to create their own circus. So goes the story, which they often repeated, and which can be found in the book, *Life Story of the Ringling Brothers*, and in various newspaper interviews including the *Chicago Record-Herald* of April 16, 1911, and the March 26, 1921, *Philadelphia Public Ledger*. Ironically, the details in their description of that particular day suggest it was a different circus, *not* Rice's. Here though, the fictionalizing common to circus serves as a kind of historical evidence. So stirring was Rice's appeal and so great his prominence, that he continued to play on the Ringling brothers' minds for decades as they thought back to their beginnings. They remembered a glorious Dan Rice circus whether his show was there that exact day or not.

In the same way, Dan Rice played on the thoughts of most nineteenth-century Americans, as a shining light in their





Courtesy of the author



John C. Kunzog, 'The One-Horse Show'

Dan's wife, Maggie, sports a fashionable riding habit. Born Margaret Ann Curran, she married Dan around 1840. She was performing by 1841, and presented her first horse act in 1852.

As his career dwindled, Rice switched to a sweeter image, trying to capitalize on the trend of nostalgia in circus marketing.

fondly recalled or imagined days of youth. And so, in the century since Dan Rice died in 1900, his public prominence long past, Wisconsin forgot the troubles he had found within its borders, and remembered—to the limited extent he has been remembered—the glory. ❧

Resources

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More details can be found in Wisconsin's world-renowned treasure, the Parkinson Library at Circus World Museum in Baraboo.

About the Author

David Carlyon has been a forest fire fighter, military policeman, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus clown, New York actor, and assistant professor at the University of Michigan-Flint. A graduate of Michigan (BA), California-Berkeley (JD), and Northwestern (PhD), he wrote *Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You've Never Heard Of*.

