

THE CIRCUS - IN EARLY CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY

By

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The Circus came early to Chautauqua County. Originating in the United States in 1785, it was not until well after the turn of the Century, or about 1820, that small caravans took to the road. Fanning out from their headquarters in New York and Philadelphia, they brought a kind of Oriental dream-world to the inhabitants of the remote countryside, its villages and cities. By early 1830 small troupes were working up into Chautauqua County which previously had known only an itinerate showman with a tame elk or bear, captured, perhaps by that great hunter, Phillip Tome, in the wilds of Pennsylvania. Traveling craftily by night he would exhibit to the curious in barns along the way.

In the midsummer of 1827 there passed through this county from the west - several dust-covered wagons drawn by gaunt horses, urged onward by hardened drivers. It was a caravan returning East to winter and recuperate after a strenuous season in Southwestern Pennsylvania and Ohio. Traveling along the Ridge Road, they grouped at the several towns along the way - Westfield, Fredonia, and Silver-Creek - drawing their canvas around them.

Those who entered found the menagerie rather decrepit - a brown and white camel, a zebra, a poor tired lion, two tigers, and a few lesser animals. This was the first show of its kind to pass through Northern Chautauqua, and possibly the county, but it was a harbinger of the pomp and pageantry that was to follow. Bear in mind, this was in the fall of 1827!

A few years passed, and in 1833, Chautauqua County is finally recognized by the Circus World in the person of Samuel Nichols -- one of the greatest Showmen of the period. The advance agents had done their work well, eye-catching posters blazed forth from barns and fences. Entering the County from the East, Nichols spread his tent in the village square at Silver Creek. This was pure Circus, consolidation with menageries had not yet taken place. A local correspondent reported: "This Show seemed to be well managed, its equipment and trappings bright and new, and its employees gentlemanly and respectful. A beautiful June day brought out a great crowd from the outlying countryside, while at the Silver Creek Wharf a number of schooners were moored, their sailors mingling with the crowd."

For most, this was the first circus they had ever witnessed. Equestrian acts predominated at this one-ring affair; the horses were sleek and well-trained; tumbling and the usual clown acts made up the balance of the program. According to report, two young sailors were so taken with the clown act - that they rushed into the ring with the intention of throwing out an apparently drunken hobo who wanted to ride one of the horses and was having a heated argument with the ring-master. Stalling off the sailors, the hobo gained a horses' back, circled the ring a few times - falling off and under, and finally, after peeling off a few layers of clothes, revealed himself an expert rider. The sailors were glad to lose themselves in the crowd, and shouts of laughter could be heard a mile away.

The celebrated Menagerie and Aviary (caged birds) from the Baltimore Zoological Institute played Fredonia and the County in July 1835.

This aggregation occupied thirty-six wagons drawn by one hundred and twelve grey horses, and included sixty men with fourteen musicians. An elephant and a "Unicorn" (a misnomer for a one-horned Rhinoceros) were featured.

As a Special Attraction, a trainer would enter into a cage with a lion and a Leopard, "and therein place his head within the Lion's mouth." Since no benches were available at these early shows -- tents were pitched so as to form a slight elevation above the ring, and when the time for the great act drew near, the crowd was roped back from the cage and warned to remain quiet "no matter what happened". Attendants armed with long pikes approached and proceeded to goad the poor old Lion, two more leveled guns through the bars. The trainer appeared on the scene with a stained bandage around his neck - the result of a fracas with the Leopard a few days back, and proceeded to go into his act. As he placed his head, with its bloody neck bandage, between the Lion's jaws, the vast audience stood petrified, and a great shout went up the moment he was safe outside. It was reported that this same trainer was severely bitten at a later show, and died as a result.

As the population increased, circuses of greater magnitude spread their canvas in the smaller towns and villages of Chautauqua County. What a wierd procession those early caravans must have made as they moved along the county's narrow roads in the dead of night with their plodding elephants and gilded animal wagons hauled by six or eight horses. Farm boys by the dozen were forcibly restrained by their parents from arising and pursuing - until the shouts of the drivers died away in the distance.

Arriving at the edge of a town, the first group of baggage wagons would proceed directly to the lot, while the second group would form for a grand entry - or parade.

One such show was Raymond and Waring's Immense Menagerie, established in Philadelphia in 1838. Its wood-cut advertisement in an early County paper reads as follows: "On their entrance into town they will be preceded by a gorgeous Roman Chariot drawn by elephants literally covered with gold. Length of chariot, 30 feet; height to canopy, 20 feet; Lions, Tigers, Grizzly Bears, etc. --- 60 men and 100 horses. Exhibiting at Fredonia, Sept. 4, 1846; Jamestown, Sept. 7th. Afternoon performances only!"

The FRONTIER EXPRESS of Fredonia, dated Sept. 8th, 1846, comments thusly on this show: "The Menagerie Show came off in our village on Friday last 'according to the bills' as the saying is. The collection of animals is not as large as we have witnessed. The oriental car is a splendid thing, well worth looking at, and the proprietors are very gentlemanly fellows. The day was warm, but fine. There was the usual stirring up of the monkeys, squalling of birds, growling of lions, sports of the ring, crying of babies, squeaking of elephants, bawling of gingerbread men and tin peddlers, a host of men, boys and children -- and a perfect wilderness of women."

Other shows in the County that season were: Van Amburghs, -- Rockwell and Stone, and Spaulding's North American Circus which advertised: "Doors open at 2 pm and 7½ pm. Featuring its great Leviathan. Double waterproof pavillion seating 4000 persons and illuminated by 350 powerful reflectors, thus making evening performances possible." Admission to these early one-ring circuses cost 25 cents, children half-price.

Most circuses by 1870 had taken to the rails. The Great Eastern Circus and W. W. Coles "Great Exposition" showing in Dunkirk in July, 1874, featured the steam piano, or Calliope. Invented by a Green Mountain boy, Joshua Stoddard, in the 1850's, it was first used by the Hudson River Steamboats and then adopted by the circuses. Its position in the street parade was always at the very end of the line, and it soon became the trademark of all circuses. The Calliope used by the Great Eastern Show cost \$20,000. and was drawn by a team of forty horses.

In the 1880's, competition among the numerous shows was at a white heat; each endeavoring to outdo the other. Allen's Great Eastern Circus, showing in Dunkirk in June 1880, featured - "The Wonderful Electric Light, which makes night as bright as day, and burns under water." No circus day was complete without some exciting incident, and this show provided one when a Gorilla escaped at Jamestown. It gave its pursuers a merry chase, and was finally cornered in the creek, but not without having chewed up several of its captors.

Now came a great day in Jamestown circus history - "When Jumbo came to town." This mammoth elephant, imported by P. T. Barnum from the London Zoological Gardens, and costing \$30,000. (Paid for in six days) became front page news in every paper in the land. On the morning of September 6, 1882, Barnum Bailey and Hutchinson's "Greatest Show on Earth" rolled into Jamestown. Jumbo was in his private car with his keeper in constant attendance. At the crack of dawn, an almost endless procession of farm rigs began streaming into town. The occupants of one wagon were dumped when their

rearing horses upset it. An inebriate crawled beneath a slowly moving train, but by drunkard's luck, escaped injury.

Excursions added to the congestion. The Steamer MOULTON brought 500 passengers down from Chautauqua Lake, including the Board of Supervisors. Schools and factories closed, and a crowd estimated at 12,000 people stood on tiptoe along the parade route, craning their necks and eating peanuts. Many had their pockets picked --- notwithstanding the numerous Pinkerton Detectives hired by Barnum to mingle with the crowd.

As for "Jumbo," his career ended on September 15, 1885, at St. Thomas, Ontario, where he stood his ground against an unexpected freight train. His name lingered on and became a trade term used by advertisers to describe their product as being bigger and better than the average.

The passing years have forced great changes in circus management. Much of the glitter is gone. The great Percheron baggage teams have been replaced by tractors. During the 1920's Ringling Brothers and Barnum's Combined Shows had some 350 horses. Fourteen 8 horse teams; twenty-four 6 horse teams; Fourteen 2 horse teams, and a half-dozen saddle horses for the bosses. Automobile traffic has forced the parade from the streets. Where once, half a dozen or more circuses played this County, now there are only one or two a season, and those play Dunkirk and Jamestown. However, the circus still remains a great attraction and a great crowd puller.
