



The Greatest Show on Earth: The History of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures.

*Highlights Barnum's entertainment career and transition into the circus.

*Includes a bibliography for further reading.

"We bring you the circus — that Pied Piper whose magic tunes lead children of all ages into a tinsel and spun-candied world of reckless beauty and mounting laughter; whirling thrills; of rhythm, excitement and grace; of daring, enflaming and dance; of high-stepping horses and high-flying stars.

But behind all this, the circus is a massive machine whose very life depends on discipline, motion and speed — a mechanized army on wheels that rolls over any obstacle in its path — that meets calamity again and again, but always comes up smiling — a place where disaster and tragedy stalk the Big Top, haunts the backyard, and rides the circus train — where Death is constantly watching for one frayed rope, one weak link, or one trace of fear.

A fierce, primitive fighting force that smashes relentlessly forward against impossible odds: That is the circus — and this is the story of the biggest of the Big Tops — and of the men and women who fight to make it." — Opening remarks from the film *The Greatest Show On Earth!*, a drama set in the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Americans have loved traveling circuses for generations, and none represent the country's love for entertainment quite like the most famous of them all, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. The five brothers who started a circus in Wisconsin, as well as P.T. Barnum, have had their names become synonymous with the circus, so it's only fitting that the manner in which these men entered the business and the merging of their traveling circuses together also make for great stories.

Circus promoters have long been viewed as somewhat shady hucksters, but none could top P.T. Barnum, who used a blend of traditional circus entertainment, freak show exhibits, and outright hoaxes to create "The Greatest Show on Earth". Barnum introduced America to Jumbo the Elephant, one of the most legendary acts in the history of the circus, as well as "exhibits" like Joice Heth, an elderly African American woman Barnum advertised as a 161 year old who nursed George Washington. He also notoriously perpetrated hoaxes with General Tom Thumb and claimed to have a live mermaid, so it's no surprise that Barnum is often apocryphally quoted as saying, "There's a sucker born every minute." While he didn't actually say that, he said something similar: "Nobody ever lost a dollar by underestimating the taste of the American public."

Around the same time that Barnum was operating the Barnum & Bailey's circus, the Ringling Brothers were engaging in more traditional circus activities in Wisconsin. As their traveling circus became better known in the late 1880s, it was advertised as the "Ringling Brothers United Monster Shows, Great Double Circus, Royal European Menagerie, Museum, Caravan, and Congress of Trained Animals". The Ringling Brothers were eventually successful enough that they were able to buy Barnum's circus after Barnum had already died, and they merged the traveling circuses together in 1919.

The Greatest Show on Earth: The History of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus examines the

origins of the famous circuses, the background of the important individuals involved, and their merger into the most famous circus of all. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about “The Greatest Show on Earth” like never before, in no time at all.

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