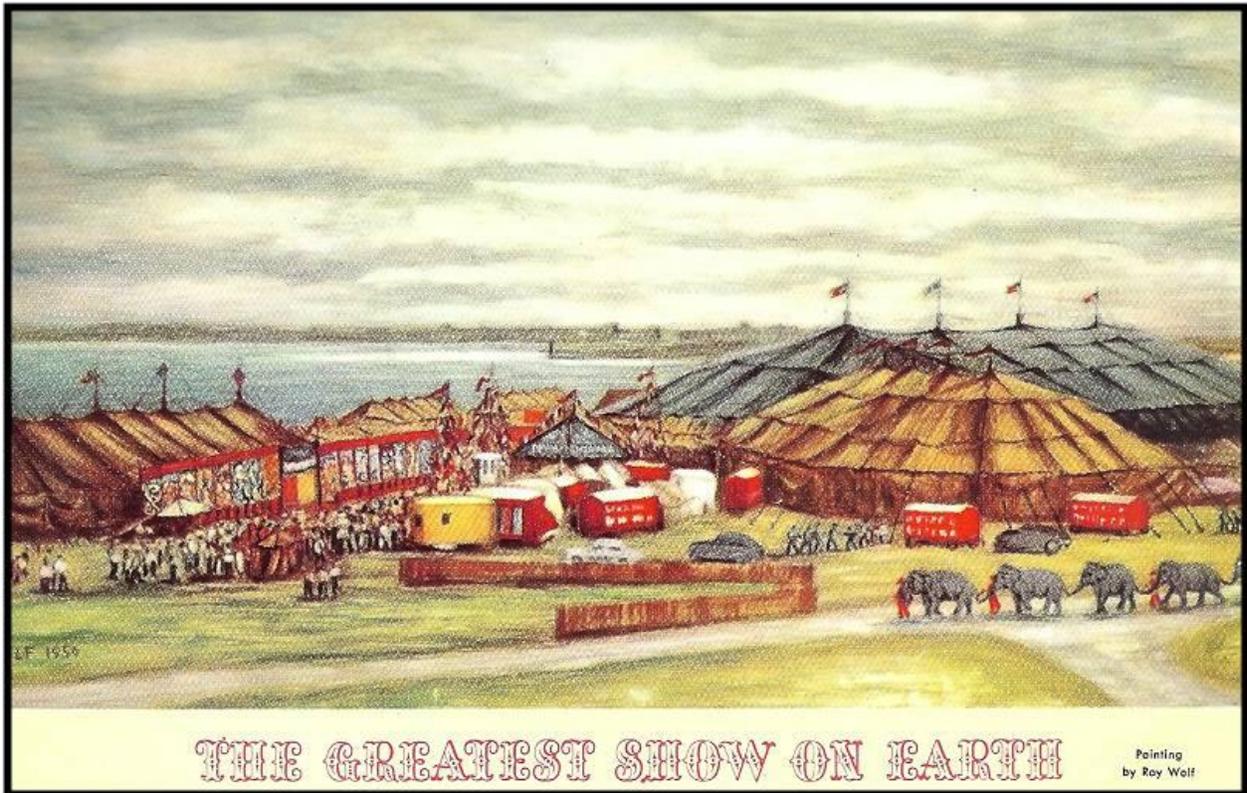




# WEBFOOTER EXTRA

JULY 2015

## THE HISTORY OF THE CIRCUS



(Photo courtesy Steve Kenney)

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# THE STORY OF THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH



Postcard from the Winter Quarters of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

A circus is a company of performers that may include clowns, acrobats, trained animals, trapeze acts, musicians, hoopers, tightrope walkers, jugglers, unicyclists and other object manipulation and stunt-oriented artists. The term 'circus' also describes the performance which has followed various formats through its 150-year modern history. Philip Astley is credited with being the 'father' of the modern circus when he opened the first circus in 1768 in England.

Early circuses were almost exclusively demonstrations of equestrian skills with a few other types of acts to link the horsemanship performances. Performances developed significantly through the next fifty years, with large scale theatrical battle reenactments becoming a significant feature. The 'traditional' format, whereby a ringmaster introduces a varied selection of acts that mostly perform choreographed acts to traditional music, developed in the latter part of 19th century and continued almost universally to be the main style of circus up until the 1970's.



**The Lion Tamer at the Hartford Circus.**

Contemporary circus has been credited with reviving the circus tradition since the 1980's when a number of groups introduced circus based almost solely on human skills and which drew from other performing art skills and styles. As styles of performance have changed since the time of Astley, so too have the types of venues where these circuses have performed. The earliest modern circuses were performed in open air structures with limited covered seating. From the late 18th to late 19th century bespoke circus buildings (often wooden) were built with various types of seating, a center ring and sometimes a stage. The 'traditional' large tents, commonly known as 'Big Tops' were introduced in the mid-19th century as touring circuses superseded static venues. These tents eventually became the most common venue and remain so to the present day. Contemporary circuses perform in a variety of venues including tents, theaters and casinos. Many circus performances are still held in a ring usually 42 ft. in diameter. This dimension was adopted by Philip Astley in the late 18th century as the minimum diameter that enabled an acrobatic horse rider to stand upright on a cantering horse to perform tricks.

In Ancient Rome, the circus was a building for the exhibition of horse and chariot races, equestrian shows, staged battles, gladiatorial combat and displays of (and fights with) trained animals. The circuses of Rome were similar to the ancient Greek hippodromes, although circuses served varying purposes and differed in design and construction, and for events that involved re-enactments of naval battles, the circus was flooded with water. The Roman circus buildings were, however, not circular but rectangular with semi-circular ends.

The lower seats were reserved for persons of rank. There were also various state boxes for the giver of the games and his friends. The circus was the only public spectacle at which men and women were not separated. Some circus historians such as George Speaight have stated "these performances may have taken place in the great arenas that were called 'circuses' by the Romans, but it is a mistake to equate these places, or the entertainments presented there, with the modern circus." Others have argued that the lineage of the circus does go back to the Roman 'circuses' and a chronology of circus related entertainment can be traced from Roman times through medieval and renaissance jesters, minstrels and troubadours to the late 18th century and the time of Astley.



Performing elephants at Hagenbeck-Wallace Shows.

The first circus in the city of Rome was the Circus Maximus, in the valley between the Palatine and Aventine hills. It was constructed during the monarchy and, at first, built completely from wood. After being rebuilt several times, the final version of the Circus Maximus could seat 250,000 people; it was built of stone and measured 400m in length and 90m in width. Next in importance were the Circus Flaminius and the Circus Neronis, from the notoriety which it obtained through the Circensian pleasures of Nero. A fourth circus was constructed by Maxentius; its ruins have helped archaeologists reconstruct the Roman circus.



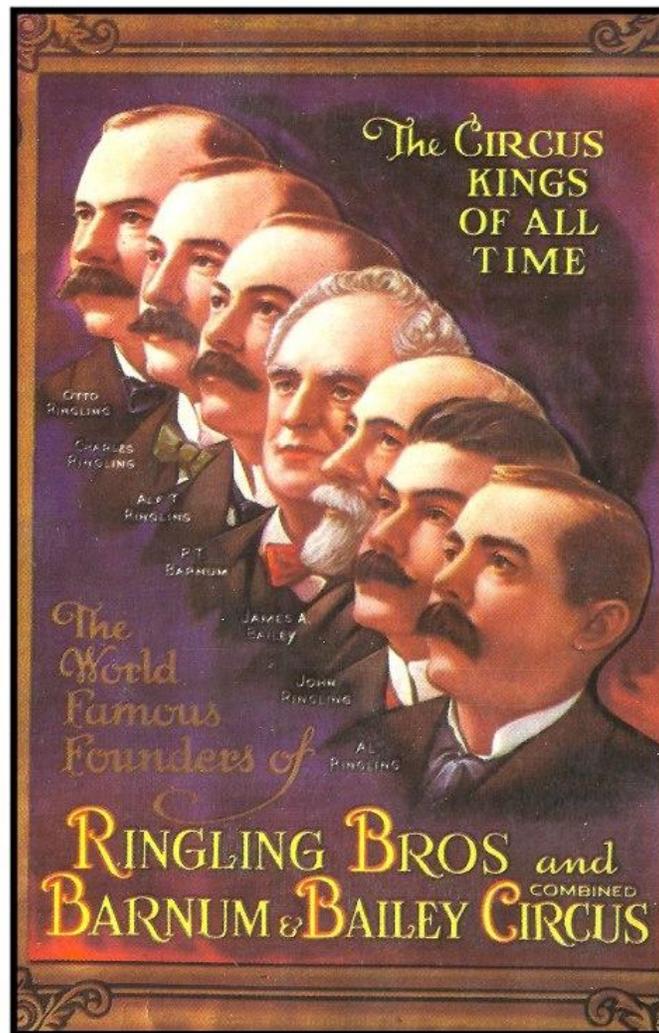
A circus tent and wagon.

For some time after the fall of Rome, large circus buildings fell out of use as centers of mass entertainment. Instead, itinerant performers, animal trainers and showmen travelled between towns throughout Europe, performing at local fairs.

The origin of the modern circus has been attributed to **Philip Astley**, a cavalry officer from England who set up the first modern amphitheater for the display of horse riding tricks in Lambeth, London on April 4, 1768. Astley did not originate trick horse riding, nor was he first to introduce acts such as acrobats and clowns to the English public, but he was the first to create a space where all these acts were brought together to perform a show. Astley referred to the performance arena as a Circle and the building as an amphitheater but these were to later be known as a Circus. Astley was followed by **Andrew Ducrow**, whose feats of horsemanship had much to do with establishing the traditions of the circus, which were perpetuated by Henglers and Sangers celebrated shows in a later generation. In England circuses were often held in purpose built buildings in large cities, such as the **London Hippodrome**, which was built as a combination of the circus, the menagerie and the variety theatre, where wild animals such as lions and elephants from time to time appeared in the ring, and where convulsions of nature such as floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions have been produced with an extraordinary wealth of realistic display. **Joseph Grimaldi**, the first mainstream clown, had his first major role as Little Clown in the pantomime *The Triumph of Mirth; or, Harlequin's Wedding* in 1781.

The Royal Circus opened in London on November 4, 1782 by Charles Dibdin and his partner Charles Hughes. In 1782, Astley established the Amphitheatre Anglais in Paris, the first purpose-built circus in France, followed by 18 other permanent circuses in cities throughout Europe. Astley leased his Parisian circus to the Italian Antonio Franconi in 1793.

The Englishman John Bill Ricketts brought the first modern circus to the United States. He began his theatrical career with Hughes Royal Circus in London in the 1780s, and travelled from England in 1792 to establish his first circus in Philadelphia. The first circus building in the U.S. opened on April 3, 1793 in Philadelphia, where Ricketts gave America's first complete circus performance. George Washington attended a performance there later that season.



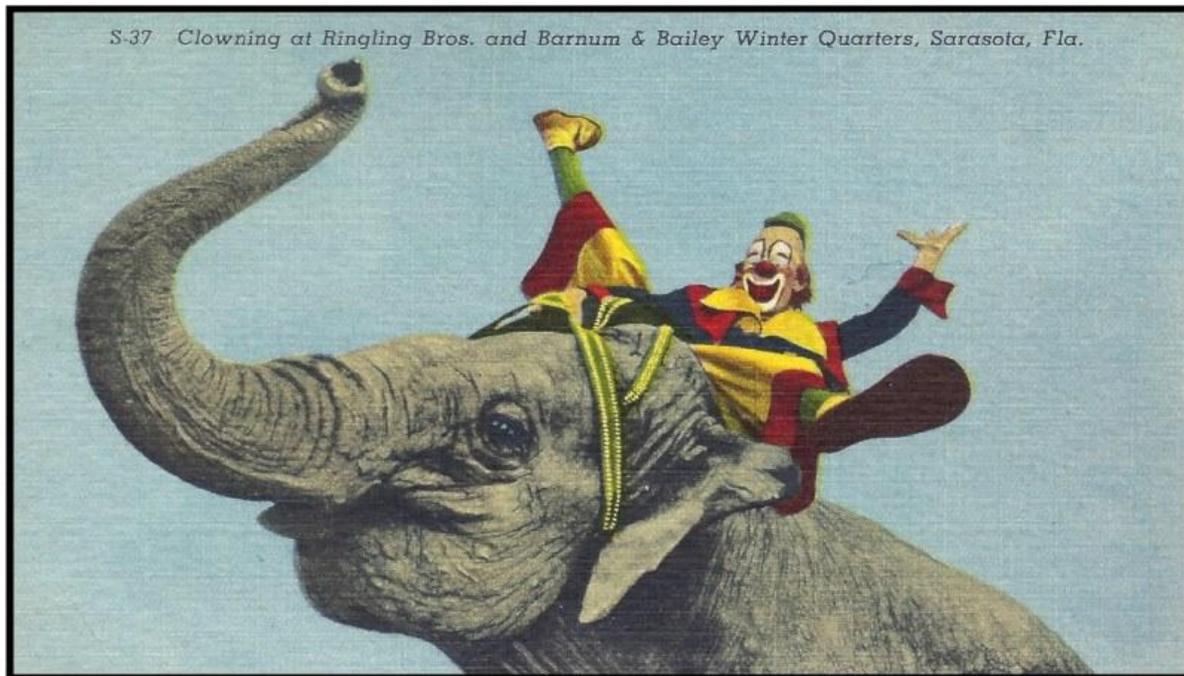
The founders of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus: Otto Ringling, Charles Ringling, Alf Ringling, P.T. Barnum, James A. Bailey, John Ringling and Al Ringling.

(Photo courtesy of Steve Kenney)

In the Americas during the first two decades of the 19th century, the Circus of Pepin and Breschard toured from Canada to Cuba and everywhere in between.

Victor Pépin, a native New Yorker, was the first American to operate a major circus in the United States. Later the establishments of Purdy, Welch & Co., and of van Amburgh gave a wider popularity to the circus in the United States. In 1825 Joshua Purdy Brown was the first circus owner to use a large canvas tent for the circus performance. Circus pioneer Dan Rice was probably the most famous circus and clown pre-Civil War, popularizing such expressions as "The One-Horse Show" and "Hey, Rube!." The American circus was revolutionized by P.T. Barnum and William Cameron Coup, who launched P.T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie & Circus, a travelling combination of animal and human oddities, the exhibition of humans as a freak show or sideshow was thus an American invention. Coup was also the first circus entrepreneur to use circus trains to transport the circus from town to town; a practice that continues today and introduced the first multiple ringed circuses.

Following Barnum's death, his circus merged with that of James Anthony Bailey, and travelled to Europe as the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show On Earth, where it toured from 1897 to 1902, impressing other circus owners with its large scale, its touring techniques (including the tent and circus train), and its combination of circus acts, a zoological exhibition and a freak show. This format was adopted by European circuses at the turn of the 20th century.



The influence of the American circus brought about a considerable change in the character of the modern circus. In arenas too large for speech to be easily audible, the traditional comic dialog of the clown assumed a less prominent place than formerly, while the vastly increased wealth of stage properties relegated to the background the old-fashioned equestrian feats, which were replaced by more ambitious acrobatic performances, and by exhibitions of skill, strength and daring, requiring the employment of immense numbers of performers and often of complicated and expensive machinery.

Over the last two decades or so, the number of circuses with animal acts has diminished due to evolving standards in the treatment of animals. Contemporary circus (originally known as *nouveau cirque*) is a recent performing arts movement that originated in the 1970's in Australia, Canada, France, the West Coast of the United States and the United Kingdom. Contemporary circus combines traditional circus skills and theatrical techniques to convey a story or theme. Compared with the traditional circus, the contemporary genre of circus tends to focus more attention on the overall aesthetic impact, on character and story development, and on the use of lighting design, original music and costume design to convey thematic or narrative content. For aesthetic or economic reasons, contemporary circus productions may sometimes be staged in theaters rather than in large outdoor tents. Music used in the production is often composed exclusively for that production, and aesthetic influences are drawn as much from contemporary culture as from circus history. Animal acts appear less frequently in contemporary circus than in traditional circus.



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