

## **Hippo.....But Not Potamus: The Hippodrome Life of P. T. Barnum**

### **Early Life and Influences:**

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Phineas Taylor “Tale” Barnum was born on July 5, 1810, in the small village of Bethel, Connecticut. Life in Bethel included the importance of practical jokes.....working at a general store where prices were negotiable and where barter was encouraged enabled Barnum to enhance his abilities in these areas.

The Calvinist strictures of his early religion created a life-long theme, resulting in his continuous membership in the Universalist Church.

Leaving the clerking life behind, he began to create private lotteries. To promote the lotteries, he evolved into a skilled speaker and writer.

His lotteries exhibited unique advertisements, with tens of thousands of handbills and circulars printed with: “... striking prefixes, affixes, staring capitals, marks of wonder, pictures, etc.”

His agents produced as much as *\$2,000-a-day* in sales, about \$60,000 in today’s money.

With that success, at age 21, he started his own newspaper, a weekly four-page broadsheet.....his pointed criticisms resulted in three libel prosecutions, the last of which landed him in jail for 60 days!

Upon his release, he orchestrated a parade to acknowledge his dedication to his strongly-held beliefs.

His first significant foray into the world of the exhibition of "curiosities" was the display of Miss Joice Heth, an emaciated, incredibly ancient-appearing black woman, being held forth as being a slave who was a nursemaid to President George Washington, now still alive at 161 years of age!

She sang hymns, and told stories about the great man she had helped raise. She was a convincing, charismatic performer.

However, the newspapers and other guardians of Public Virtue, howled, condemning Barnum for exploiting Joice. He later publicly expressed regret for this exhibition.

At her death, a public autopsy was held, at which some 1,500 people watched at 50 cents each (about \$14.00 dollars in today's money), only to have confirmed that she was, in fact, only about 80 years old.

Barnum was never able to escape the cost to his reputation, with the cost to his pocketbook being minimal.

**The Feejee Mermaid:**

Another promoter brought Barnum a shrunken, blackish thing about three feet long, which was the head and torso of a monkey joined to the lower portion of a large fish.

Barnum's considerable skills as an advertiser resulted in a pent-up demand to see this curious object, presented as a mermaid!

He promised each of three New York City newspapers an exclusive story, complete with a printing block depiction of bare-breasted beauties, but when all three published the exact-same story then they knew they had been hoodwinked.....but Barnum was a steady advertiser, and the FeeJee Mermaid Exhibit would mean new ads each day.

Barnum believed, as he later wrote, that it was still a thing to see, and then judge for one's self.

Charles Sherwood “Charley” Stratton was born on January 4, 1838, but at five months, he stopped growing, attaining only 22 inches in height.

Upon Barnum’s discovery of him, his nationality was changed to English, with the name Tom Thumb, after the hero of an old English folk tale, who sallied forth on a mouse, being only the size of a thumb! And his age was increased from 5 to 11 years.

Tom was witty and very talented, extraordinary clever, in fact, a prodigy who would learn scripts, songs and dance steps, take up mimicry, and be able to contribute spontaneous witticisms to the puns and other wordplay directed toward him.

Barnum paid Tom \$7.00 weekly, later increased to \$25.00 weekly, about \$750.00 in today’s money.

In early 1844, when Tom was only 6 years old, they arrived in Liverpool, beginning performances at The Portico, when the manager of London’s Princess Theatre came to see Tom, offering a three-night run on his stage.

Barnum was in London less than two weeks before he managed to meet the American Envoy to the Court of St. James, Edward Everett, thanks to letters of introduction from, among others, Horace Greeley, the editor of the New-York Times. Having experienced a performance, Everett interceded in person with royal officials to have Tom presented to Queen Victoria.

Within a few days, a regally-uniformed Life Guard appeared with an invitation for an evening audience with the Queen.....who took Tom’s hand and led him around the gallery, showing him the hundreds of paintings on proud display.

A second invitation was arranged so that the future King, three-year-old Albert Edward, could meet him.

Tom, in turn, performed his imitations of famous figures, among them Napoleon (his most famous impersonation), Frederick-The-Great, Cincinnatus, and Sampson.

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Business in London was excellent: Barnum averaged from all sources about \$2,500 per day from March 20<sup>th</sup> through July 20<sup>th</sup>, which adds up to about \$300,000 in four months, against expenses estimated to be only about \$6,000.

While in England, Barnum commissioned a tiny carriage, its deep-blue body 20 inches in height, and only 11 inches in width, with two Shetland ponies pulling it, and with two boys in sky-blue livery coats and red breeches serving as coachman and footman. This conveyance became a Barnum signature!

On a visitation to Stratford-on-Avon, he attempted to purchase Shakespeare's Henley Street house, to ship it back to his New York City museum. Horrified citizens rallied to prevent this by purchasing it !

Also while in England, he purchased a traveling exhibit entitled "The Happy Family," featuring 200 animals and birds, many of them natural enemies, living peaceably together in a single cage, which enhanced the museum for 20 years.

Among Tom's regular patrons in England was the Irishman Arthur Wellesley, the First Duke of Wellington, who had asked Tom what he was so deeply contemplating, to which Tom's instant reply was: "I was thinking of the loss of the Battle Of Waterloo." The Duke was so amused that he told the story wherever he went!

Having conquered England, Barnum, Tom's full-time tutor, and Tom's family, journeyed to France, where in Paris the Court of King Louis-Philippe welcomed him four times. The King had Tom perform his impersonation of Napoleon in his private chambers.

Paris yielded several new purchases for Barnum, visiting the French Industrial Exposition of 1844, of nearly 4,000 varied exhibits. One well-known exhibit was "The Writer" automaton, purchased from the famed magician and illusionist Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin.

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Trips to Belgium followed, and a performance before the Spanish Queen Isabella II.

In summary, the three-year European and British tour was seen by about 5,000,000 people, making Tom and Barnum each about \$350,000, or about \$10,000,000 each in today's money!

But he and Tom, tired of Old World pomp, now wealthy men, returned to America.

There, Barnum, inspired by the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, built a grand house in Fairfield, Connecticut, for about \$4,200,000 in today's money. He named the house "Iranistan," completed in 1848.

### **The Swedish Nightingale:**

Jenny Lind was an angelic soprano who created a sensation in the early 1850's. She possessed a vocal range of nearly three octaves, could perform a rapid and steady trill like a nightingale, could hold a note for a full minute, and could project her voice to the farthest reaches of a large auditorium, very important before the days of electric amplification.

As equally important were her genuine qualities of simplicity, modesty, piety and spirituality. Jenny was a serious purveyor of high-brow culture, when usually theatrical performances were considered morally suspect.

She had conquered England---Queen Victoria had attended 15 of her operas!

Without her permission, things were named after her, such as beds, articles of clothing, cigars, children's dolls, and a magnificent golden-yellow tulip.

In a dozen years she had become the most famous opera singer in the world, having sung 30 operas in 5 languages, for a total of 678 performances.

Barnum pursued her most valiantly, with final negotiations at \$1,000 per performance (about \$28,000 in today's money) for up to 150 concerts, with Barnum paying for the auditorium rentals, travel, advertising, the

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accompanying musicians, lodging, meals and maid service. She insisted that the sum of \$187,500 be deposited in Baring Brothers Bank, in London, which he did.

The Swedish Nightingale's American debut was on September 11, 1850, at Castle Garden, just off The Battery. Five-thousand mostly men paid \$5.00 (about \$140 in today's money) to hear her concert, accompanied by a 60-piece orchestra. In today's money, the gate was about \$700,000!

She donated \$10,000 to New York City charities, which, of course, Barnum heralded to the press.

They toured the country, with 78 of her concerts for profit and 12 for charity. Barnum often picked up the expenses for her benefit concerts. His advertising always proclaimed the limited number of performances, urging immediate attendance.

While on tour, Barnum moonlighted as a temperance lecturer.

Exhaustion set in after 9 months, as well as the realization that she had earned about \$5,300,000 in today's money, with Barnum grossing about \$16,000,000 in today's money.

## **Jumbo The Elephant:**

Jumbo was born in 1860, and was an icon of English performances. By all accounts, he was a gentle giant.

Jumbo weighted 7 tons, and reached nearly 12 feet at the highest point of his back.

In 1882, Barnum acquired Jumbo for the 2021 equivalent of \$300,000. Put on tour, he was a crowd pleaser, with rides for children as a hallmark. In 1885, a freight train hit and killed Jumbo.

Undaunted, Barnum put both the stuffed hide, which weighed about 1,500 pounds, and the skeleton on display.

The year 1841 brought the purchase of what he termed The American Museum, across Broadway from St. Paul's Church. It was dedicated to history, art and artifacts, and performances.

Like its prior owners, it showcased giants, little people, bearded ladies, fat children, stick-like men, albinos, American Indians, Chinese princesses, Siamese twins----a full array of humankind to entertain and enlighten as the public strolled by.

Important to Barnum was The Lecture Room, a large hall in which lectures, dramas, and melodramas were staged. The marketing for these enterprises emphasized the moral quality, and the wholesome natures of the subject matters, presented in a safe, clean environment.

For many years, he charged only a quarter, equivalent to about \$7.00 today, with children at half that, to encourage their educations. There were hundreds of exhibits to view and marvel at.

And, for example, when performing there, General Tom Thumb appeared 4 of 5 times daily, each time to about 1,000 or 1,200 persons, generating about as much as \$42,000 in 2021 money.

Due to fires and the need for additional space, the Museum re-opened on June 17, 1850, after extensive renovations, including red velvet seats and wallpaper. It included America's first aquarium, and wax figures of notables. The advertising emphasized: "No bar, or intoxication drinks sold on the premises!" And, yes, the menagerie included a hippo!

Another discovery, a dwarf he named Commodore Nutt, was starred at the Museum.

Barnum always connected performances at the Museum with country, or even world, tours, such as the three-year tour celebrating the "Fairy Wedding" of Tom Thumb and the dwarf Lavinia Bump on February 10, 1863.

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At Madison Avenue between 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Streets, he constructed a Roman hippodrome in 1881 seating about 10,000, which he named Madison Square Garden. Finally he increased the price of an adult ticket to 50 cents, or about \$14.00.

In its 23 years of operation, the American Museum sold 38,000,000 admission tickets, or about \$30,000,000 in 2021 money.

In its day, the Museum was more popular than Disneyland, Disney World, and the British Museum combined!

### **The Circus:**

The predecessor to the more-famous circus was “P. T. Barnum’s Great Asiatic Caravan, Museum and Menagerie,” established in the Spring of 1851, to travel the country with a tented pavilion large enough to accommodate 15,000!

By 1880, the canvas required would cover three acres, demanded 500 men to move it from place-to-place, and featured, in all, some 400 horses to display and to work. Ninety-five rail cars would be loaded and unloaded in one day.

An example of its popularity: the 1873 season drew about 5,000,000 visitors.

A first, he retained naturalists and kind animal keepers to care for his extensive animal exhibits.

At the end of 1877, the circus became the “Barnum & Bailey,” establishing the first three-ring circus.

In 1881, the circus traveled about 12,000 miles, which was a typical distance.....now immodestly but accurately called “The Greatest Show on Earth!”

In London, at Olympia, Barnum staged “Nero, or the Destruction of Rome” twice daily, featuring an orchestra, a chorus, hundreds of animals, and 1,200 players! 2 ½ million saw it there, before returning to New York.

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After Barnum's death on April 7, 1891, James Bailey ran the circus until his death in 1906. The year 1956 was the last big-top performance of "The Greatest Show on Earth."

I believe that all of our great grandparents, or grandparents, and we, have visited The American Museum, or gone to the circus!

### Humbug:

"Humbug" was the single word most associated with Barnum in his lifetime.

In his 1865 best-selling book, The Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits and Deceivers Generally, in All Ages, he surveyed religion (false religions); business (deceptive advertising); politics (diplomats and candidates); medicine (patent medicine and universal remedies); science (hoaxes involving moon voyages); and travel (spurious narratives).

His defense and explanation of his practices to deceive was that he appealed to popular tastes and interests, from which a quotation: "Nobody ever lost a dollar by underestimating the taste of the American public."

But.....his thought was that humbug was benign, giving his audiences "full equivalent for their money." The deceit was moderate and consensual.

He said and wrote that the public were not offended humbug, but that the public preferred their realities sweetened with some imaginatively-presented foolery!

He said and wrote that he would often hint at the dubiousness of his latest sensation (Washington's Nursemaid and the FeeJee Mermaid), approaching his audience with a knowing wink. Hence, a humbug was never an outright fraud.

Remember, the **vast majority** of his exhibits, performances and lectures were straightforward, and did entertain and educate.

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**Negative and Positive Descriptions:**

Optimistic and industrious-----infamous

Relentless energy-----huckster

Ebullient and joyously alive-----brash

Self-aware-----self-invented

Colorful-----a charlatan

A champion of joy and wonder-----a shameless hypocrite

Sense of humor-----a myth-maker

A genius-----an outrageous hustler

A man of strong convictions-----a master of trickery

Public-spirited-----a shameless self-promoter: he did say: “There’s no such thing as bad publicity.”

Yes, Phineas Taylor Barnum had all of these attributes to some degree, and more!

There is no evidence of any kind, written or spoken, that he said: “There’s a sucker born every minute.” What’s worse, this quotation utterly misrepresents the man he really was.

It should be attributed to a notorious con man named Joseph Bessimer (a.k.a “Paper Collar Joe”).

Barnum, in conclusion, was driven not by a desire to deceive but by an eagerness to thrill and bring pleasure to his audiences!

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### **Life Descriptives:**

A purveyor of the exotic, the curious, and the lucrative

A circus entrepreneur and inventor

Among the richest Americans of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and most important

A best-selling author: his 1855 biography entitled The Life of P. T. Barnum, Written by Himself, exhibited wit, polish, a depth of-self-reflection, and length (400 pages), selling its first edition of 50,000 copies immediately, followed by 110,000 more. And there were future editions of his autobiography in 1869 and in 1889, all best sellers

A temperance advocate and well-known public lecturer on that subject and on his Universalist faith, and on “The Art of Money-Getting”

A civic-minded Republican State Legislator, supporting Abolition; he was a Lincoln man and supported most passionately the proposal to drop the word “white” from the qualifications to vote!

The Mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut, while there a proponent of good and efficient government

A real estate developer whose stipulations anticipated by half a Century those of the “Garden City Movement” in England, and the “City Beautiful Movement” in America, and, as well, the American “New Urbanism Movement” in the 1980’s

The greatest salesman, showman and impresario the world has ever seen

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A philanthropist of importance: significant donations to a hospital, the local medical, scientific and historical societies; the public library; and to hundreds of local charities while on tour

Barnum was an icon of American history, an indispensable force in the creation of our modern world

He was representative of the best and the worst of American mass culture

### **Conclusion:**

Some are quick to condemn historical figures using standards of the present.

One could dismiss Barnum for his worst qualities, even when they were heavily outweighed by his best qualities.

He was a global celebrity:

After Ulysses S. Grant's second term as President, the great general made a two-year tour of the world, promoting the United States. Upon his return, Barnum said to him: "General, I think you are the best-known American living," to which Grant replied:

"By no means. You beat me sky-high, for wherever I went the constant inquiry was---Do you know Barnum?"

**LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, CHILDREN OF ALL AGES, I  
GIVE YOU PHINEAS TAYLOR BARNUM !**

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