



BHC-MSS 0252

Guide to advertisements for Barnum's American Museum taken from New York newspapers

By E. Van Tuyl

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Descriptive Summary

Creator: Bridgeport History Center

Title: Guide to articles and advertisements for Barnum's American Museum taken from New York newspapers

Dates: 1854-1874 [bulk 1861-1866]

Quantity: 16 folders, with multiple clippings

Abstract: The collection contains dozens of newspaper clippings of advertisements for P.T. Barnum's American Museum located in New York City from 1841-1868

Language: English

Repository: Bridgeport History Center

Administrative History [by Meg Rinn]:

The American Museum was located at the corner of Broadway and Ann Street from December 1841 to July 1865 when it was destroyed by a fire. Barnum re-opened at 539-541 Broadway but that building too was destroyed by a fire in March 1868.

Barnum's American Museum was located on Broadway at Ann Street from 1841 to 1865 until it was destroyed by a fire, and then moved to 539-541 Broadway until it too was destroyed by a fire in 1868.

The museum was originally known as Scudder's Museum, which opened in 1810. Managed by John Shudder, Scudder's American Museum featured a number of displays, including seashells, minerals, and taxidermied animals including a bison, along with wax figures. After Scudder died, his heirs took on the museum, but a combination of poor management, and the financial crash of 1837 led the family to sell the collection. Barnum acquired it through a proxy in the museum building's owner, Francis Olmsted. After Barnum acquired everything, he substantially dressed up the exterior, decorating it with flags and banners and dozens of painted plaques featuring wild animals practically overnight. He paid musicians to stand out on the balcony and perform to attract passersby and soon people flocked to the museum. Barnum later expanded the building to include a large theatre, which he called a lecture room since the word "theatre" had unsavory connotations at that time.

Displays in the museum ranged from dioramas of places such as Niagara Falls and the American plains, to wax figures, performers, theatrical performances, artwork, historical artifacts, scientific specimens, inventions, and curiosities. In addition, Barnum displayed live animals, including Beluga whales and hippopotami. Among the exhibits Barnum included what were then called

humbugs, or hoaxes; he encouraged the public to decide whether they were genuine or not, thereby avoiding accusations of falsely claiming authenticity. The Feejee Mermaid is perhaps the best known among Barnum's humbugs, and was an item he rented from Boston showman, Moses Kimball. Barnum's performers included trained bears, and Native Americans who performed songs and dances of their culture, to people he called natural wonders and living curiosities, depending on the advertisement. Notably, he avoided using the word "freak" when publicizing performers with distinctive physical differences, such as giants and little people, albinos, excessively thin or fat people or those with missing or additional limbs. These performers made a good living exhibiting themselves at the American Museum, in concert halls, and on tours through joint companies and later, circuses. Barnum's promotions ensured their success and a substantial income, which gave long-serving veterans of the museum the means to retire in comfort. Some of the best known performers at the museum included Anna Swan Bates, General Goshen, Charles S. Stratton - known as General Tom Thumb, Chang and Eng Bunker - the origin of the term Siamese twins, and M. Lavinia Warren. Barnum also hosted concerts and lectures, as well as contests at the American Museum. These contests included the National Poultry Show, beauty contests, flower shows, and baby shows which awarded prizes for the fattest baby, the handsomest twins, and other categories.

The museum was not, however, the product of Barnum's effort alone. Barnum employed a number of staff to help with the museum in various capacities. Chief among them was John Greenwood Junior, who was raised in Bethel, Connecticut, as Barnum was. Trained as a hatter, Greenwood fulfilled a number of roles at the museum, including treasurer, temporary museum owner from 1851 to 1855, and manager. Other tasks included traveling to find new relics for the museum, and at one time, showing the Prince of Wales himself around the American Museum. Other key personnel included pantomimist-turned-stage manager Charles Kemble Fox, orchestra director W.J. Peterschen, manager-turned-aquaria department manager Dr. Oscar Kohn, and promoter-turned-superintendent Sylvester Bleeker. Barnum's two son-in-laws, Samuel Hurd and David Thompson, also held positions within the museum.

On July 13, 1865, Barnum's American Museum burned to the ground, apparently the work of arsonists, possibly Southern sympathizers who did not like Barnum's vocal opposition to slavery. Performers and employees were able to get out, but most of the animals did not, and those that did were killed because they were running loose on the streets. Thousands upon thousands of objects in the museum were destroyed. Barnum learned of the catastrophe while in Hartford, Connecticut, fulfilling his duties as a State Representative

Barnum's American Museum had a second incarnation at a nearby location, 539-541 Broadway. The content of the museum was similar, and miraculously Barnum's managers had it in operation only a few months after the first museum's demise. But the second one did not last long, as it burned on March , 1868, due to a heating system failure. Barnum did not attempt to re-open a third museum. Instead, he took the advice of his long-time friend Horace Greeley to "go a-fishing" and enjoy the fruits of his labors, as well as spend time with his many grandchildren.

Scope and Content:

The collection consists of 16, 20" x 24" folders containing long strips of newspaper with advertisements taken primarily from the *New York Daily Tribune*, with dates ranging from 1861 to 1874. The articles from the 1850s are taken from the *New York Daily Times*, a related title.

There are advertisements with illustrations or articles describing museum attractions and events. Examples include "Barnum's American Museum – The WHALE STILL LIVES, and is daily delighting thousands of all ages, by the grace and grandeur of his movements, 1861; Moses or Israel in Egypt, Four months in preparation. Immense expenditure. This drama is founded on Ingraham's sacred work, called the Pillar of Fire. Magnificent scenery, costumes and appointments, 1865; Afternoon at 3, Evening at 7 ½ THE TRIUMPHANTLY SUCCESSFUL DRAMA, entitled THE ORANGE GIRL, ITS IMPRESSIVE LANGUAGE, and SENSATIONAL EFFECTS are UNEQUALED IN DRAMATIC HISTORY, 1865.

NOTE: The process of identifying citations for each article is ongoing.

Arrangement notes:

These articles were found clipped and organized by year in separate folders. That order has been maintained.

Administrative information:

Provenance: Assembled collection; items found in the BHC holdings

Preferred Citation:

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Names and Subject Tracings

Personal Names

Barnum, P. T. (Phineas Taylor), 1810-1891

Corporate Names

Barnum's American Museum

New York Daily Tribune

New York Daily Times

Subject headings

Curiosities and wonders

People with disabilities and the performing arts

Animals in the performing arts

Detailed box and folder listing

Box 1

1. Folder 1, New York Daily Tribune, 1861
2. Folder 2, New York Daily Tribune, 1861
3. Folder 3, New York Daily Tribune, 1866, January-March
4. Folder 4, New York Daily Tribune, 1866, January-March
5. Folder 5, New York Daily Tribune, 1863, January-June
6. Folder 6, New York Daily Tribune, 1865, April-May
7. Folder 7, New York Daily Tribune, 1863, January-December
8. Folder 8, New York Daily Tribune, 1864, March-September
9. Folder 9, New York Daily Tribune, 1863, January-December
10. Folder 10, New York Daily Tribune, 1864, April-December
11. Folder 11, New York Daily Tribune, 1864, January-February
12. Folder 12, New York Daily Tribune, 1864, April-December

13. Folder 13, New York Daily Tribune, 1864, June-December
14. Folder 14, New York Daily Times, 1856, July-September
15. Folder 15, New York Daily Tribune, 1865, May, 1874
16. Folder 16, New York Daily Times, 1854