
THE GREAT ENTERTAINER

P.T. BARNUM BROUGHT A GENIUS FOR MARKETING
AND SHOWMANSHIP TO 19TH-CENTURY AMERICA.
HIS TACTICS SEEM STRIKINGLY MODERN.

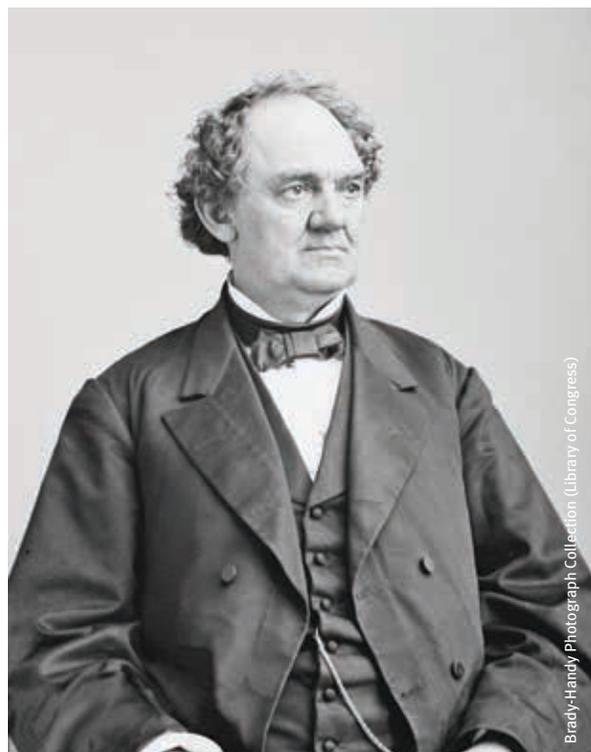
BY DAVID HOLZEL

At the age of 2, Phineas Taylor Barnum received his inheritance. His maternal grandfather told the boy that he was deeding to him a valuable piece of land called Ivy Island. When he reached adulthood, he could take possession of Ivy Island and his fortune would be made. As P.T. grew up in the farming village of Bethel, Connecticut, his parents often referred to him as the richest boy in town.

Born in 1810, P.T. seemed bent on acquiring a fortune. He collected pennies. He sold candy and drinks to soldiers training for the War of 1812. He knew early on that he hated the physical work the family farm demanded and much preferred what he later called “head work,” which involved numbers and sums.

So when at age 10 he was finally given a tour of Ivy Island, P.T. was humiliated. What he found there was not his fortune but a worthless, snake-infested swampland. His grandfather had hoaxed him, and the entire family had been in on the joke from the beginning. The boy was a laughingstock. But the whole experience was just a reflection of the times.

The rural Connecticut of Barnum’s boyhood was physically remote and culturally isolated. The farmers’ Puritan heritage discouraged common entertainments as sinful. Instead, storytelling and



This photograph of P.T. Barnum was taken between 1855 and 1865.

Brady-Handy Photograph Collection (Library of Congress)



Moving Barnum & Bailey’s “Greatest Show on Earth,” with its 12 colossal pavilions, required planning so intricate that the Army viewed Barnum’s circus as a model for moving large numbers of personnel and equipment efficiently.

mendacity flourished in this rough, straitlaced society.

“In the dullness of life in rural Connecticut of the 1820s and ’30s, trickery acted as a form of Yankee entertainment, a harsh but widely practiced method of testing wits,” write Barnum biographers Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III and Peter W. Kunhardt.

Later, when he became a rich and famous showman, P.T. Barnum looked back on his grandfather, who was also his namesake, and called him his greatest inspiration.

“He would go farther, wait longer, work harder and contrive deeper to carry out a practical joke than any[one] else under heaven,” Barnum wrote in his autobiography. “In this one

particular, as well as many others, I am almost sorry to say I am his counterpart.”

Circus master, huckster of monsters and curiosities, inventor of the media event, P.T. Barnum never did mutter, “There’s a sucker born every minute.” For Barnum wasn’t out to sucker the public but to humbug it: to blur the lines between truth, exaggeration and outright deception—and invite a debate over what was real and what was not.

Barnum may be best known today for the circus that bears his name, but that was his last act. Between his visit to Ivy Island and his death in 1891, Barnum harnessed his boundless energy, native organizing skills and a gift for marketing and publicity to make a fortune by entertaining

America. By the time he was done, he had become a recognized brand. He could raise the value of a product simply by lending his name to it.

GEORGE WASHINGTON’S NURSE

Barnum escaped the family farm by going into business. He clerked in and owned a succession of grocery stores. He ran lotteries. To oppose the blue law movement in Connecticut—which denounced alcohol, entertainment and lotteries—Barnum created a forum for his views by founding a newspaper.

He married a tailor, Charity Hallett, and in 1834, the couple moved to New York City. The 24-year-old Barnum found himself in “the epicenter of deception,” according to the Kunhardts.



Joice Heth holding George Washington in an image created by Mark Copeland for the National Fairground Archive.

New York was the third largest city in the world, with a population of 300,000 looking to be entertained.

Not long after, Barnum heard about an elderly African American woman named Joice Heth, who was on public display. A slave, she had a singular claim to fame. She professed to be not only 161 years old but the former nurse of George Washington. Her stories about the Father of the Country were a nostalgic connection to a fast receding revolutionary past.

Barnum purchased Joice Heth and invited New Yorkers to see her. Barnum quickly discovered he had a knack for drawing crowds.

“Joice Heth ... had been exhibited before Barnum even got hold of her,” biographer Neil Harris points out. “The difference was that Barnum made a profit, and that was because of his publicity techniques.”

Barnum planned a campaign that used all available media to promote buzz and curiosity about Heth. Her face appeared on posters and handbills that called her “the most astonishing and interesting curiosity in the world.” Barnum sold illustrated pamphlets about Heth and her personal knowledge of George Washington, and he persuaded newspapers to write about the exhibit.

learning that publicity, whether good or bad, was good for business because it kept people interested. “First he humbugs them,” one of Barnum’s ticket sellers said, “and then they pay to hear him tell how he did it.”

Success followed success. In 1841, Barnum opened the showplace that was really his life’s work: Barnum’s American Museum, on lower Broadway, one-half mile north of the Battery. Five stories tall, the museum featured a variety of entertainers—jugglers, serpent charmers and rope dancers—as well as large animals that were a novelty to American audiences: giraffes, elephants and the first rhino displayed in America.

Barnum sought to attract the city’s emerging middle class, which was wary of what it considered low-class and immoral entertainments. One of these was the theater. Barnum removed the stigma by calling the museum’s theater the “moral lecture room.” He tried to make the plays performed there suitable for families by sanitizing their themes and dialogue. To attract women and children as ticket buyers, he invented the matinee.

TOM THUMB AND JENNY LIND

Nineteenth-century Americans were fascinated by curiosities and freaks, and these were on abundant display

Next, he took her to a new audience—New England. When interest there declined, Barnum wrote an anonymous letter to a Boston newspaper claiming that Heth was an automaton. The ensuing controversy brought crowds back, as people now wanted to determine if the claim was true.

Barnum was always cagey about whether he knew that Joice Heth was not what she claimed to be before he bought her. But he was

at Barnum’s American Museum. Fat children, bearded ladies, giants and dwarfs, albinos and “other wonderful curiosities” fed the public’s vanity that there was a comfortable divide between them and the “Other.”

Charles Stratton was the exception. He was 4 years old and only 25 inches tall when Barnum set eyes on him in 1842. The showman made a quick agreement with the boy’s parents, and the family moved to rooms on the fifth floor of the museum.

Barnum trained his protégé in how to speak, what to say, how to perform. The boy was a natural actor. Barnum renamed him General Tom Thumb, changed his age to 11 and announced that his new attraction was just arrived from Europe—to pique Americans’ curiosity for exotica—and engaged at extraordinary expense.”

Together they made a fortune. “Crowds identified with him, not against him,” Harris writes of Tom Thumb.

In 1844, Barnum took Tom Thumb on tour in Europe. They were gone three years. There were command performances before Queen Victoria of Britain and King Louis Philippe of France. European acclaim sealed Barnum’s reputation as a showman.



Soprano Jenny Lind, the “Swedish Nightingale,” became an angel in the public’s imagination.

He was always Tom Thumb's advance man and promoter. Barnum had a miniature coach made for the general, pulled by tiny ponies with children dressed as liverymen. It was "a rolling, eye-catching advertisement" for General Tom Thumb and P.T. Barnum, the Kunhardts write.

As he approached middle age, Barnum began to want to put his reputation as a practical joker behind him. Increasingly, he desired to be seen as a successful businessman who brought entertainment to uplift the public. In 1850, Jenny Lind, a soprano dubbed the "Swedish Nightingale" who was the toast of Europe, provided an opportunity for Barnum to cement his respectability.

Barnum reached an agreement with Lind without having heard her sing, such was her reputation and Barnum's confidence that an American tour would be an unprecedented success. Lind drove a hard bargain. Barnum offered her \$150,000 for 150 concerts (about \$4.6 million today). The singer insisted he deposit the sum along with other expenses in a London bank up front. Barnum raised the \$187,500 (about \$5.7 million today) by converting everything he owned into cash and taking a loan from a friend.

It was the best investment he ever made. Jenny Lind was every bit as remarkable a singer as her reputation had promised. But Barnum was convinced people would have paid to see Jenny Lind even if her voice was middling. With Barnum behind her, Americans snapped up tickets because of her story—and her celebrity.

She had come up through adversity and had become a national treasure in Sweden. In Barnum's hands she became an angel in the public imagination, kind and philanthropic, beautiful and virginal. "Barnum was presenting not simply a great artist but a friend to humanity," Harris writes.

When her ship docked in New York, tens of thousands were on hand to greet her. It was Jennymania—orchestrated by Barnum.

To increase excitement, Barnum held a ticket auction for the first



Barnum with Charles Stratton, whom he renamed General Tom Thumb. Just 25 inches tall when Barnum met him, the boy turned out to be a natural actor and a popular attraction across the United States and in Europe.

concert. Thousands paid a quarter each just to attend the auction. It was, as historian Daniel Boorstin called it, a "pseudoevent," "the planned happening that occurs primarily for the purpose of being reported," according to Harris.

The tour was even more lucrative than Barnum expected. Lind performed

95 concerts before splitting with Barnum. Together they took in \$700,000, of which Lind received \$176,000 and Barnum more than \$500,000, before expenses. The take was "unprecedented in the history of American entertainment," Harris writes.

Over the next four decades, Barnum maintained his museum, ran unsuccessfully for public office and dabbled in urban planning, which bankrupted him. Then there was the circus, “the Greatest Show on Earth,” which Barnum founded in 1870. It included elements of his museum—the animals and freaks—and its most famous attraction was Jumbo the elephant, whose name came to mean “large in size.” Still a master organizer, Barnum harnessed America’s railroad network to move his circus around the country. It required planning so intricate that the Army viewed Barnum’s circus as a model for moving large numbers of personnel and equipment efficiently.

The circus is Barnum’s most visible legacy. But just as lasting is the lesson he took from his crude, practical joking boyhood—a lesson he developed and refined until it became a blueprint for marketing to a mass audience that is still used today. ●



The most popular attraction of Barnum’s circus was Jumbo the elephant. His name came to mean “large in size.”

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jumbo_and_Matthew_Scott.png

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