P. T. Barnum and the American Museum

He called himself the "Prince of Humbugs." Today, most people remember him for his circus and for a cynical remark ("There's a sucker born every minute") that in fact he never made. It is less well known that P. T. Barnum (1810–91) first made his mark as the proprietor of the American Museum in New York City. There, from 1841 to 1868, he combined freak shows and serious scientific exhibits, entertainment and edification, to produce "rational" amusement for a remarkably diverse audience. Recreating this chapter in the great showman's life, biographer A. H. Saxon describes Barnum's role in shaping an important part of 19th-century American popular culture.

by A. H. Saxon

Could a present-day Manhattanite somehow be transported back to the mid-19th century, he would find little to surprise him in the New York City of that time. Although its teeming boardinghouses and tenements, hotels, pleasure haunts, and thriving businesses were still located mainly in the area from the Battery to just north of City Hall, the inexorable march "uptown" was well under way, with well-to-do citizens erecting their opulent mansions as far north as Union Square at 14th Street, while some visionaries were already predicting the day when every inch of the island would be built upon.

Fueled by ambitious natives pouring in from the countryside and by a never-ending stream of immigrants, the city's population, from 60,000 inhabitants at the turn of the century, had been more than doubling every 20 years and by 1850 stood at slightly over half a million. The "Empire City," as some insisted on calling her, already had the reputation of being a cosmopolis—of being, owing to the large number of foreigners in her midst, the least "American" of American cities.

Commerce was the great engine that drove the city. American entrepreneurship had at last come of age, and huge fortunes were being made overnight by former petty tradesmen, farmers, and ship-captains. The manners of these parvenus or "shoddyites"—with their ludicrous aping of foreign customs, conspicuous consumption, and putting on of what they considered to be aristocratic airs—were amusingly satirized at New York's Park Theatre

in Anna Cora Mowatt's *Fashion* of 1845.

But those in more modest circumstances and the industrious poor who jammed into the city were no less engaged in running after riches. And behind the kaleidoscopic whirl of life in Gotham was a darker, less salubrious aspect: In the back slums of Broadway and the city's notorious "Five Points" district, crime, drunkenness, and prostitution flourished amidst appalling scenes of misery and squalor.

In the spring of 1841 Phineas Taylor Barnum, aged 30 and "about as poor as I should ever wish to be," as he later wrote in his autobiography, was himself an eager participant in this hurried scene.

A civil war divided the nation in 1862, but, as Vanity Fair *observed, it was business as usual at Barnum's American Museum.*

If we are to believe every word of his autobiography, it was not his first scrape with poverty. Born in 1810 in the rural village of Bethel, Connecticut, Barnum later harped upon the "deprivations" of his youth, complaining that he never had any educational "advantages." In fact, he had been no worse off than most of his boyhood companions. At both the Bethel common-school and the private academy in neighboring Danbury, he had received a thorough grounding in mathematics, composition, and the classics of English literature.

Barnum's father, Philo, a tailor, innkeeper, and livery stable owner, died insolvent when his son was 16. But the custom of the "widow's dower" allowed Mrs. Irena Barnum and her five children to keep their house and even a modest amount of personal property. The oldest of her five children, the future showman, enjoyed the further "advantage" of being the pet of one of the village's wealthiest citizens, his maternal grandfather Phineas Taylor, after whom young "Taylor"—as he was usually called by his friends and family—was named.

From his family, and his grandfather in particular—or so he liked to think—Barnum inherited a lifelong love of practical jokes. Phineas Taylor would "go farther, wait longer, work harder and contrive deeper, to carry out a practical joke, than for anything else under heaven," Barnum wrote admiringly in his autobiography, whose original 1855 edition describes many such exploits in hilarious detail. Young "Taylor" was himself often the accomplice in, and sometimes the butt of, his grandfather's elaborate pranks; and to the end of his life he could never resist the opportunity to cause other people temporary embarrassment.

The prankster was never an idler, however. By the time he was in his teens, with the encouragement of his doting grandfather, Barnum was successfully engaged in various business enterprises. After serving as a clerk in a country store, he opened two such establishments of his own in Bethel. At 19, too, he married a "fair, rosy-cheeked, buxom-looking girl" named Charity Hallett, who had traveled up from the coastal town of Fairfield to work for a local tailor.

Business and marriage did not consume all of Barnum's energy. He took an early and keen interest in public affairs, and when letters he wrote attacking religious interference in politics were rejected by the editor of a Danbury newspaper, he established a weekly paper of his own—the first in the history of Bethel—which he defiantly named *The Herald of Freedom*. The fledgling editor's heated opinions and outspokenness landed him in court on several occasions. At the conclusion of one such trial for libel, brought on by his accusing a local dignitary of being a "canting hypocrite" and a "usurer," he was sentenced to 60 days in the Danbury jail.

Eventually, the attractions of tiny Bethel began to pall. So in the fall of 1834, without any firm idea of what he might do there, he moved to New York City. After several months of unemployment and some rather desultory attempts to reestablish himself as a businessman, he "fell" into the profession of showman when he began taking around the country the exhibition known as "Joice Heth."

This extraordinary attraction was in fact a blind, decrepit, hymn-singing slave woman, whom Barnum advertised as being 161 years old and as having once been the "nurse" of the revered George Washington. When Joice died early in the following year (at which time an autopsy revealed she could not have been much above 80), he continued to tour with several other entertainers, including an Italian juggler whom Barnum rechristened "Signor Vivalla" and a young blackface dancer named "Master Diamond."

The showman later confessed that this nomadic period in his life had been fraught with dangers to his moral well-being. "When I consider the kinds of company into which . . . I was thrown, the associations with which I was connected, and the strong temptations to wrong-doing and bad habits which lay in my path," he wrote, "I am astonished as well as grateful that I was not utterly ruined."

Meanwhile, his long-suffering wife Charity, who had remained behind in Bethel or New York while her husband was off on his tours, had given birth to the first two of their four daughters. The showman faced mounting pressure to settle down and establish himself in some "respectable" line of business. From time to time—nearly always disastrously—he tried his hand at some "mercantile" enterprise. But his great opportunity came toward the end of 1841, when he learned the collections at New York's soporific American Museum were up for sale.

Barnum later wrote that he repeatedly visited the Museum as a "thoughtful looker-on" and that he soon became convinced that "only energy, tact, and liberality were needed, to give it life and to put it on a profitable footing." The trouble was, his ill-fated business speculations had nearly exhausted his capital. He therefore wrote to Francis Olmsted, a wealthy merchant who owned the building in which the Museum was housed, and persuaded him to purchase the collections in his own name, allowing Barnum, while leasing the building, to pay for them in installments.

The nucleus of the Museum's collections had been assembled toward the end of the previous century by the Tammany Society and was originally exhibited in City Hall. Since 1795, however, the collections had been owned and managed by a

---

*A. H. **Saxon** has taught and written extensively about theater, circus, popular entertainments, and natural science. Born in Pittsburgh, Pa., he received an A.B. from the University of Pittsburgh, an A.M. from Columbia, and a Ph.D. from Yale. He is the author of, among other books,* The Life & Art of Andrew Ducrow & the Romantic Age of the English Circus *(1978) and editor of* Selected Letters of P. T. Barnum *(1983). This essay is adapted from a chapter in* P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man, *published by Columbia University Press (1989).* *Copyright © 1989 by A. H. Saxon.*

succession of private individuals, the latest of whom, the taxidermist and natural-history enthusiast John Scudder, had died in 1821. Thanks to squabbling among his children and to other turns of fortune (including the financial panic of 1837), the asking price for the collections, which might have been $25,000 a decade earlier, was now only $15,000. Barnum managed to bargain that figure down to $12,000.

Proprietary museums have largely disappeared from the American scene, and few people today would look upon them as likely business opportunities. But in the mid-19th century, before the great public museums and zoological gardens got under way, nearly every city of any size boasted at least one such establishment, and often these were the principal, most popular cultural institutions of their day.

The theater, still held in low regard by many respectable citizens, reached its nadir in 1849 with the bloody Astor Place Riot, the climax in the long rivalry between the brawny American actor Edwin Forrest and the English tragedian William Charles Macready. Opera and ballet, then barely under way in America, were tainted by their theatrical associations. Circuses, which sometimes performed in theaters or buildings of their own when not on the road, were fairly common by this time. But here, too, shady practices and loose behavior on the part of employees—not to mention the coarse jests and indelicate references that figured in many clowns' repertoires—frequently outraged the moral element in communities.

Menageries were more acceptable, since they were patently "educational" and their denizens were commonly referred to in scriptural terms ("the Great Behemoth of Holy Writ," etc.). Exotic animals, brought to these shores and sold by enterprising ship captains, had been exhibited in America since the colonial period. Taken about the countryside individually or in small groups, they were a profitable investment for those who bought them.

Pleasure gardens such as William Niblo's in lower Manhattan, to which the novelist Henry James recalled being taken as a boy, were obviously respectable. Here, on a fine summer's evening, a family party or group of friends might take refreshments served in one of the elegantly decorated boxes or "bowers" that surrounded the garden, stroll along its illuminated pathways, and enjoy the light entertainment presented in the adjacent "saloon" or garden itself.

Waxworks, too, were deemed innocuous family entertainment, provided they did not dwell too luridly on female anatomy or the horrors of the French Revolution. Music of the nonoperatic variety, performed in numerous "concert halls," was eminently respectable; so were "ethiopian" entertainments or minstrel shows, whose greatest period of popularity, however, was to come in the second half of the 19th century.

An appreciation for the fine arts was noticeably on the increase, although here, too, there were as yet no great public institutions to bring together such works. At a time when photography was in its infancy, Americans' curiosity about the Old World and their own nation's remote fastnesses was satisfied by a number of spectacular pictorial entertainments—panoramas, dioramas, etc.—whose huge paintings, often

Giantess Anna Swan, a leading museum draw.

viewed under shifting lighting conditions, with three-dimensional objects in the foreground, special sound effects, and musical accompaniment, were exhibited in specially constructed buildings.

One might as well add that lovers of the arts also had at least one "adult" outlet around this time: tableaux vivants of the "model artists" variety, whose generous display of undraped female charms pointed the way to another cultural development. But striptease and the raucous "girly-show" phase of burlesque were still some years in the future, as was the cleaner, full-fledged vaudeville show.

Americans were hardly starved for amusement at mid-century, and when one adds to the above the numerous other entertainments then available to them—"legerdemain" or magic shows, puppets, balloon ascensions, annual expositions of arts and industries, county fairs, lectures and other visitations sponsored by local lyceum societies, itinerating freaks, and such prodigies as Joice Heth that Barnum and his fellow showmen took around the country—one sees to what extent the old Puritans' influence over such godless goings-on had by now declined.

But of all these entertainments, museums were undoubtedly the most inclusive and least objectionable, combining as they did, rather incongruously, elements of nearly all the above, while at the same time stressing their dedication to "rational" amusement.

Such had been the announced policy of America's first great museum, that of the painter, inventor, and naturalist Charles Willson Peale, whose Philadelphia establishment, from the 1780s on, featured wax figures and a notable collection of the founder's own paintings. It also offered lectures, scientific demonstrations, musical evenings, magic-lantern shows, and a scenic spectacle with changeable effects, which Peale eventually advertised as "moving pictures." As at the present-day Smithsonian Institution, almost everything having to do with man and nature was cheerfully accommodated, from a chip of the coronation chair in Westminster Abbey to the tattooed head of a New Zealand chieftain and a living cow with five legs and two tails.

Peale sometimes expressed impatience with sports of nature and weird acquisitions, but their inclusion in earlier "cabinets of curiosities" was a well-established practice by the time he founded his Philadelphia museum, and neither he nor later museum proprietors dared disappoint their patrons.

The American Museum continued the tradition of catering to such expectations—not without a frequently humorous note—and under Barnum's direction exhibited such quaint objects as the preserved hand and arm of the pirate Tom Trouble, a hat made out of broom splints by a lunatic, and (a traditional Connecticut specialty) a wooden nutmeg.

But the bulk of the Museum's collections was decidedly of a more legitimate nature and possessed, as Barnum often boasted, considerable scientific and cultural value, even if scholarly visitors did complain about the inadequate labeling and lack of systematic display they sometimes found in their favorite areas. For the American Museum aspired to be—and probably was under Barnum's management—the largest and most comprehensive establishment of its kind in America.

Unfortunately, no complete catalogue of its eclectic holdings was ever compiled, and the various guidebooks that were published give but a faint indication of the extent of its contents. Still, some idea of the "million wonders" Barnum was himself trumpeting in 1864, when the Museum was at its most congested, may be gleaned from a guidebook published around that time. There was, to begin with, the usual profusion of skeletons and stuffed animals. A collection of wax figures—some, like the one of Queen Victoria, notoriously bad—was on display, as were paintings, statues, and daguerreotypes of Barnum and his famous dwarf Tom Thumb. Elsewhere were Roman, Oriental, and American Indian artifacts; trick mirrors, optical instruments, and a large magnet; collections of insects and butterflies, minerals and crystals, shells and corals, and horns. A separate room was devoted to 194 "cosmoramas," in effect peepshows, through whose apertures visitors raptly gazed at famous scenes and

buildings around the world.

All this was but the beginning, however. Continuing another tradition established by Peale, the American Museum had its menagerie of living animals. They were so numerous and at times so large, in fact, that one cannot help wondering how Barnum found space to fit them all in, let alone get them to the Museum's upper stories, where most of them were kept. Besides the usual lions, tigers, bears, ostriches, and primates, the museum boasted the first hippopotamus seen in America, a rhinoceros, the delicate giraffe or "camelopard" as it was still sometimes called, and the entire "California Menagerie" of the legendary "Grizzly" Adams.

Entirely new at Barnum's establishment was the first public aquarium in America. The idea for this project had come to the showman while he was on a trip to England, where he had seen a similar display at London's Regent's Park zoo. Procuring glass tanks and two able assistants from the same institution, in 1857 he inaugurated an elegant exhibit of "Ocean and River Gardens" at the American Museum. By the early 1860s a large collection of native and exotic fishes was on display, as were sharks, porpoises, and "sea flowers" or anemones. To keep his "Aquarial Gardens" supplied, he regularly fitted out sailing expeditions to the tropics that returned laden with angel, porcupine, and peacock fish, and a variety of other brilliantly colored specimens. (The young Albert S. Bickmore, who had studied with Harvard's famed Louis Agassiz and was later to found the American Museum of Natural History, was on board the vessel that visited Bermuda in 1862.)

Even more remarkable was the expedition Barnum himself made to the mouth of the St. Lawrence River in 1861 to supervise the capture of beluga whales. Transported to New York in a special railway car, the first two of these beautiful creatures were exhibited in a brick and cement tank in the Museum's basement. When they died after a short time, Barnum promptly set about procuring additional specimens, which were now housed on the second floor in a plate-glass tank measuring 24 feet on each side. To supply them and his other exhibits with fresh salt water, pipes were laid from the Museum to New York Bay, and a steam engine was set up at dockside to pump the water. The showman also exhibited his white whales in Boston, and when rumors began circulating that they were only porpoises, Professor Agassiz himself showed up to vouch for their authenticity.

Although Barnum sometimes spoke disparagingly about his knowledge of natural history and told his friends that he didn't know a clam from a codfish, he had the reputation of being a great zoologist among his contemporaries, many of whom addressed queries to him and sent him specimens to identify. Many of his animals, like his beluga whales and his genuine white elephant of later circus fame, were of the greatest rarity or the first of their kind to be exhibited in America. Others, like the four giraffes he bragged about in an 1873 letter to Spencer F. Baird, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, were difficult to transport under the best of circumstances. When these animals died, they were quickly replaced and their hides and skeletons given to scientific institutions, which often entered into fierce competition for them.

For half a century Barnum was actively involved with and made important contributions to the study of natural history. Yet today, predictably, he is remembered almost exclusively for such patent frauds as his Little Woolly Horse and the notorious Fejee Mermaid—those "skyrockets" or "advertisements," as Barnum liked to explain, by which he attracted attention to the bona fide objects he had to offer. At times even he was genuinely puzzled and in danger of being taken advantage of.

In the 1880s, in the midst of a spate of sightings of sea serpents and lake monsters (including the perennial "Champ" of Lake Champlain fame), he issued a standing offer of $20,000 to anyone who could capture a specimen and deliver it to him "in a fit state for stuffing and mounting." There seemed to be no reasonable doubt of the creatures' existence, he stated in his announcement, so many "intelligent and respectable" people had reported seeing them. The reward went unclaimed, needless to say, although several such monsters

The Lucasi family of albinos.

were manufactured around this time. In the early 1880s, too, the showman entered into correspondence with one J. D. Willman of Vancouver, British Columbia, who had the notion he might succeed in capturing a living mammoth.

And indeed, why should there not have been great woolly mammoths shaking the earth of the Canadian wilderness? Had not Charles Willson Peale, who at the turn of the century excavated the first nearly complete skeleton of a "mammoth"—more accurately, mastodon—for years cherished the belief that this "Great Incognitum" still lived?

The idea that species might become extinct, that breaks could occur in the "Great Chain of Being" linking God to the lowliest of his creations, had only recently gained acceptance in the scientific community, and was still vigorously opposed by many outside it. For that matter, were not new species like *Gorilla gorilla*, whose existence had been reported but generally doubted until the explorer Paul du Chaillu showed up in London with his specimens in 1861, being discovered all the time?

Even more unsettling than the notion of species becoming extinct, to many of Barnum's contemporaries, was the idea that they might be subject to a process of gradual change. It was left to Alfred Wallace and Charles Darwin to formulate the theory of natural selection. But even before the publication of the latter's controversial *Origin of Species* in 1859, sufficient evidence had accumulated to convince many scientists that evolution occurred, although its mechanism was then but dimly perceived. The immense geologic record of the earth itself was at last being read, and soon the race would commence for fossil remains far more ancient and unsettling than Peale's mastodon.

To those with an interest in natural history—and this included nearly everyone in 19th-century Europe and America—it was an exciting, if confusing, age. Barnum, who supplied as best he could legitimate examples of the subject, was not above exploiting his patrons' ignorance and credulity from time to time. This he certainly did with the Fejee Mermaid and Little Woolly Horse, not to mention a tantalizing procession of unicorns, frogs with human hands, phoenixes, and similar curiosities manufactured for him by the ingenious Japanese, who even then seem to have had a good idea of what would appeal to the American market.

Equally challenging to spectators were his exhibits in the "missing-link" and "descent-of-man" categories. There may have been some excuse, in the 1840s, for touting "Mlle. Fanny," his celebrated orang-utan, as "the connecting link between man and brute." But the succession of "What Is Its?" he exhibited from the same period onward were out-and-out frauds. The most famous of these was the cone-headed Negro William Henry Johnson, known to generations of Americans as "Zip," who continued at his strange vocation until his death in 1926, when he was variously reported as being anywhere from 63 to 84 years old. "Is it man? Is it monkey? Or is it both?" queries one bill dating from 1861, describing "Zip" or one of his predecessors.

In a pamphlet published the previous year, the speech of this curiosity's "keeper" is even given. He had been captured, according to this account, by a party of adventurers in quest of a gorilla and had only recently been taught to walk upon his feet. After pointing out a number of interesting physical traits—"the ears are set

back about an inch too far for humanity," etc.—the speaker concluded with the announcement that he had been examined "by some of the most scientific men we have, and pronounced by them to be a connecting link between the wild African native and the brute creation."

It was no accident that the advent of this particular "What Is It?" coincided so closely with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, whose original English edition had sold out on the first day of issue the previous November. The diarist George Templeton Strong, who was then, like many of his contemporaries, immersed in reading and privately arguing with the work, stopped by the Museum on two consecutive days in early March 1860 to view the "What Is It?" On his first visit he thought the keeper's story "probably bosh" and the "What Is It?" itself "clearly an idiotic negro dwarf." But its anatomical details, he conceded, were "fearfully simian, and he's a great fact for Darwin."

Aside from exhibits that can most charitably be termed "ethnographic," there was always a floating population of human abnormalities or freaks to be seen at the American Museum, generally on a platform in one of the saloons, but, in the case of more choice specimens like General Tom Thumb, sometimes on the stage of the Lecture Room. There was a formidable assortment of giants and giantesses (their heights nearly always exaggerated, of course), including Barnum's sensational "Nova Scotia Giantess," Anna Swan, who in time married the irascible Captain Martin Bates, another giant, and went off to an Ohio farm in the hope of settling down to a "normal" life.

At the opposite end of the spectrum were Isaac Sprague, the 50-pound "Living Skeleton," and the "Living Phantom," R. O. Wickware, "whose body is so thin that it is almost transparent, whose limbs, like walking canes, are only about an inch thick, and yet who enjoys a hearty meal, and can wrestle successfully with men of robust constitution and powerful physical development."

There was always a pleasing variety of little people—"dwarfs," as Barnum and his contemporaries usually referred to them, but which spectators today, since they were perfectly proportioned, would more likely term "midgets." And what more interesting entertainer could one wish for than the armless wonder S. K. G. Nellis, who played the accordion and the cello with his toes and could also expertly manage a bow and arrow, hitting a quarter held up by any visitor intrepid enough to hazard the experiment?

Equally interesting were those individuals possessing abnormal pigmentation or none at all. The albino family of Rudolph Lucasie—husband, wife, and son, whose marmoreal likenesses are immortalized in a Currier and Ives print—was the best-known example. At one time Barnum also featured two Negro girls, "Pure White, with White Wool and Pink Eyes," alongside their black mother and baby sister.

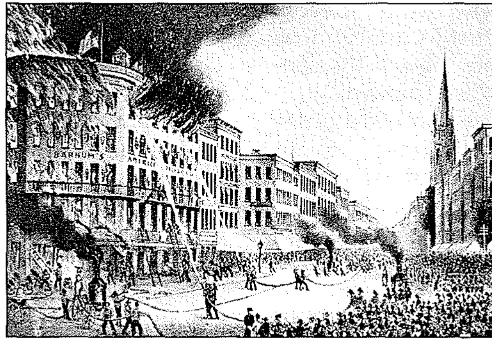
Freaks and ethnographic curiosities were by no means the only living hominids to be seen at the American Museum. The halls and saloons were populated by a variety of industrious individuals, for the most part concessionaires, who offered their wares and services at small additional charge. There were Bohemian glassblowers and phrenologists like Professor Livingston, who was advertised to examine his customers and produce correct charts of them in less than 10 minutes. During the first few years of Barnum's management visitors might purchase multiple silhouettes of themselves made by an individual using an outlining apparatus known as the physiognotrace; in later years daguerreotypists and photographers took over this function. Further entertainment might be had in a rifle and pistol gallery in the Museum's basement, while those in need of nourishment could refresh themselves in an oyster saloon.

Finally, there was the Lecture Room. By Barnum's own admission a "narrow, ill-contrived and uncomfortable" place when he took over the Museum, this feature had been common to all museums since the days of Peale. And originally such rooms had been just that: places in which lectures and scientific demonstrations were given. As time went on, however, their educational goals were subverted by less rigorous entertainment—magic-lantern shows, exhibitions of juggling, ventril-

oquism and legerdemain, dancing and musical numbers, comic skits, etc.—until their programs were barely distinguishable from those of variety halls.

From this, once their auditoriums and stage facilities had been suitably improved, it was only a short step to full-scale dramatic entertainments, rivaling or even excelling those of neighboring theaters—but always under their earlier designation of "lecture room" or "hall," thereby ensuring the continuing approbation of spectators who would never dare think of entering a "theatre" but who had no qualms whatever about taking themselves and their families to such entertainments as Barnum and his contemporary, Moses Kimball, proprietor of the Boston Museum, presented on their stages.

So much has been made in the past of this subterfuge, of the supposed hypocrisy of Barnum, Kimball, and their fellow museum proprietors, that one tends to overlook the genuine service they rendered to the American stage. During the first half of the 19th century theaters were hardly the decorous places to which we are accustomed today. Spectators, particularly those in the upper galleries, were given to demonstrating their disapproval of actors and playwrights in no uncertain terms; drunkenness was rife in the front of the house and, to a somewhat lesser extent, on the other side of the footlights as well; prostitutes openly solicited in corridors and boxes. Unless he were hopelessly addicted to the drama or determined to see some great itinerating "star," a respectable person thought twice about going to the theater. He thought even harder before exposing his wife or sweetheart to these conditions. Children were almost never taken there.



Barnum's first American Museum burned to the ground on July 13, 1865.

But all this was gradually to change during the second half of the century, thanks largely to the determined efforts of Barnum and a handful of other managers. They made theater into something it had rarely been before: a place of family entertainment, where men and women, adults and children, could intermingle safe in the knowledge that no indelicacies would assault their senses either onstage or off. In addition to such sterling temperance and abolitionist dramas as *The Drunkard*, *Ten Nights in A Barroom*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (the last in an adaptation even Mrs. Stowe had difficulty following), the Lecture Room regularly regaled its audiences with domestic and romantic melodramas and with plays based on biblical subjects.

From Barnum's acquisition of the American Museum at the end of 1841 until its destruction by fire 23 and a half years later, nearly 38 million admission tickets were sold; close to a million additional tickets were dispensed at his second museum uptown during the two and a half years it was in existence. Many of these were bought by repeat customers, of course, but the record is nevertheless remarkable, especially when one considers that the total population of the United States in 1865 was only around 35 million. Indeed, calculations reveal that the first American Museum, during its years under Barnum's management, actually sold more tickets in proportion to the population than did Disneyland during its first 23 and a half years in operation.

Nor did the American Museum ever cater to any particular "class" of spectator. Barnum once claimed, rather unconvincingly, that he had "often grieved that the taste of the million was not elevated." With no financial support for his museum other than what he took in at the door, he had been "obliged to popularize it," and while he had indeed offered his visitors a "million" bona fide curiosities, "millions of persons were only induced to see them because, at the same time, they could see

whales, giants, dwarfs, Albinoes, dog shows, et cetera." It was all an undigested hodgepodge, of course, and in later years the showman was sometimes apologetic about the Museum's lack of system and some of the methods he had employed to lure its patrons.

Yet among these same customers, rubbing elbows with farmers fresh in from the countryside, tradesmen, apprentices and laborers, and "respectable" citizens with their families in tow, were famous scientists like Louis Agassiz and Joseph Henry of the Smithsonian Institution, authors like Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, eminent statesmen, religious leaders, and ambassadors from abroad, and even, in 1860, the visiting Prince of Wales.

In an age when public-supported cultural institutions were still the exception rather than the general rule, Barnum's museum filled a definite need in American society. And, if it did not always strive to elevate their taste, at least it offered its visitors wholesome entertainment. From sunrise until 10 P.M., seven days a week, its untold wonders summoned the democratic multitude. It was one of the greatest, most universally popular institutions of its day. And all this—museum, menagerie, lecture room and freaks—for what was even then the bargain price of 25 cents.

Barnum's first American Museum burned to the ground on July 13, 1865. Unruffled, the showman immediately set to work to assemble a new collection and less than two months later opened his second American Museum farther up Broadway, between Spring and Prince streets. When this second American Museum burned during the night of March 2–3, 1868, he decided to take his friend Horace Greeley's advice to "go a-fishing" and announced his "retirement" from museum management. But his interest in the business did not die. Besides offering advice and lending his support to newer institutions like the Smithsonian, the American Museum of Natural History, and eventually even the Smithsonian's national zoo, he paid for and endowed the Barnum Museum of Natural History, which continues to this day as a center for the study of the biological sciences on the campus of Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts.

As the century drew to its close, the old showman had sense enough to realize that proprietary museums of the type he had owned had nearly run their course. The great public institutions were at last coming into their own, and they were infinitely better organized, more specialized and "scientific," than his museums had ever been. If these successors were not half so entertaining—if they contained no fat ladies, "What Is Its?" or wooden nutmegs—why, such "curiosities" could still be accommodated in the museum or "sideshow" department of a traveling circus.

And so they were, beginning in 1871, when "P. T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie, and Circus" (the ordering of the words was deliberate) first took to the road. The showman's connection with what came to be called "The Greatest Show on Earth" is a story in itself, and even there—despite his advanced age, the sniping of fierce rivals, and the perverse delight of latter-day critics in pointing out what he did *not* do in this field—his contributions were considerable.

As indeed they were in nearly every entertainment he touched. Aside from his acknowledged mastery of publicity, his almost intuitive grasp of human nature, and his skill in exploiting public opinion, Barnum, for over half a century, not only expanded but in large part defined the notion of popular entertainment in America. Like Walt Disney's in a later day, his view of such entertainments was that they should be eminently wholesome, family-oriented, "educational" and occasionally even didactic, but above all amusing. By the 1880s, when he had achieved almost mythic status, the showman's more notorious frauds and hoaxes had long been forgiven, and the "Prince of Humbugs" had been metamorphosed into "The Children's Friend" and "The World's Greatest Showman." In posters advertising his circus around this time, he was sometimes proclaimed "The Sun of the Amusement World." For one who let light into so many lives, that title will serve as well as any.