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*The Glory Days
Of the Circus*

"The Circus in America" by Richard W. Flint, in *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* (Summer 1983), Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

As an Iowa farm boy during the 1870s, novelist Hamlin Garland regarded the wonders of a traveling circus as the equivalent of "the visions of the Apocalypse." To most Americans today, the circus is largely a relic of "simpler times."

In ancient Rome, a "circus" was an arena where gladiators fought. The first modern circus was staged in 1768 when Philip Astley, a former English cavalryman, incorporated jugglers and acrobats into his trick riding exhibitions outside London. Twenty-five years passed before John Bill Ricketts opened the first American circus, reports Flint, a Smithsonian researcher and president of the Circus Historical Society.

Bad roads and the sparse population of frontier America limited early circuses to performances in existing arenas in the East until Somers, New York, promoter J. Purdy Brown took the first show on the road with a collapsible tent in 1825.

The golden age of the circus opened with the development of a nationwide network of railroads beginning in the mid-19th century.



Posters were part of the spectacle of the 19th-century circus. This 1899 broadside touts a top circus of the day, which folded four years later.

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Traveling by rail allowed touring circuses to bypass the smallest towns and to transport a vast array of props, trained animals, and human performers. (Rail travel had its drawbacks: Jumbo the African Elephant was tragically killed by a locomotive in 1885. An undaunted P. T. Barnum promptly put Jumbo's skeleton on display.) The Sells Brothers Circus, though by no means the largest, employed 500 men and women and logged 13,852 miles on its 1895 tour. Mark Twain's Huck Finn described the circus of this era as "the splendorous sight that ever was."

The great circuses began to disappear with the advent of radio, the cinema, and other competitors for Americans' entertainment dollars early in the 20th century. The Great Depression killed off many of the survivors. The tent show became a rarity. In 1956, the merged Ringling Brothers-Barnum & Bailey Circus folded its Big Top for the last time, and its famed clowns, trapeze artists, and animal acts have since kept to indoor arenas like those in which the first American circuses played.

Head Start's 'Charmed Life'

"The Charmed Life of Head Start" by Peter Skerry, in *The Public Interest* (Fall 1983), 20th & Northampton Sts., Easton, Pa. 18042.

Head Start is that miracle of miracles, a Great Society program that both conservatives and liberals hail as a success. Skerry, a Harvard researcher, explains why.

Born in 1965 as part of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, Head Start aimed to boost the intelligence quotients (I.Q.'s) of poor children through special pre-school education. The results have been, in Skerry's words, "positive but far from overwhelming." Students show short-term gains in I.Q. that seem to fade once they enter public schools.

Besides classes, the program provides hot meals and medical and dental care to some 400,000 preschoolers, as well as job and educational opportunities to their parents. The \$1.05 billion in federal funds that is slated to go to 8,728 Head Start centers in fiscal 1984 will be matched by \$250 million in local donations and volunteer support.

Though the centers are heavily subsidized by Washington, control is in the hands of the community. A typical center has 56 students, as well as a supervisor (and often an "education specialist") who answers to a parents' committee; each center sets its own curriculum and hires its own staff. Teacher salaries are low (\$7,200 to start), and little attempt is made to achieve racial balance at the local level. (Nationally, about half of Head Start students are black, 25 percent white, 15 percent Hispanic.) Unlike most federal social programs, and unlike today's public schools, Head Start centers are free of cumbersome bureaucracy—they are "not just another federal program," but community institutions.

To Skerry, local control and flexibility are the virtues that spur local involvement. Parents *choose* to enroll their children and many volunteer their services as well. Twenty-nine percent of Head Start's paid staff are parents of past or current students. Liberals call this "community participation," Skerry notes, while conservatives call it "self-help."