

Sells Floto Circus, ca. 1920s, half sheet, Erie Litho. & Ptg. Co.

The giant clown poster has been widely copied by circuses ever since the Strobridge Lithographic Company designed it for Barnum & Bailey in 1917. This one, done for the Sells Floto Circus by the Erie Lithographic and Printing Company, is almost identical to Strobridge's 1923 version for Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey. The dark blue background that Erie has added sets off the clown's red and white costume dramatically.

Presenting . . . The Circus! Materials From the Heiser-Alban Collection

"The circus is coming to town!" From the 1870s to the 1930s, this cry heralded one of the most exciting events of the year. For many people, the circus offered the only vivid contact with the world outside their own town, and even for residents of large cities it was an important event. The circus, and its companion the wild west show, provided standardized mass entertainment that crossed economic, ethnic, and regional boundaries throughout America. Its vigorous images have become clichés that still linger; from the Indian with feathered war bonnet and horse to the snarling, bloodthirsty gorilla, from "white elephant" and "Siamese twins" to "the show must go on," the influence of the early American circus pervades our culture today. Circus history makes a fascinating study, and HMRC is fortunate to have acquired the Heiser-Alban Collection of Circus Historical Materials. Houstonian Joseph M. Heiser, Jr., has collected circus materials for almost eighty years. In 1984, he donated his collection to the Houston Public Library. The various materials in the Heiser-Alban Collection give a good picture of the circuses that passed through the Houston area and what they offered.

The outdoor tent circus followed the seasons in its tour across the country, usually passing through Texas in the fall. Circus routes did not automatically include Houston before the first decade of this century. The Ringling Bros. circus and that of Barnum & Bailey played Houston in alternate years until their final merger in 1919, after which the combined show came to Houston each year. By the 1930s, Houston was large enough to rate a two-day stand. Smaller circuses played in Houston also, and the Gulf Coast area boasted one locally based circus entrepreneur. George Washington Christy operated a number of different shows, at times headquartered in Beaumont or Galveston, between 1908 and his retirement in the 1930s. The most famous of his shows was the Christy Brothers Circus, in existence from 1919 to 1930, with winter quarters in South Houston. Christy later went into real estate and was mayor of South Houston for many years.

The circus in its heyday was a self-sufficient travelling world. The larger circuses toured the country in special trains of up to a hundred cars, carrying over a thousand people and dozens of cages of animals, as well as tents, costumes, and equipment. In keeping with its massive size, the circus

provided many forms of entertainment. The circus historically derived from a combination of equestrian shows and travelling menageries, both popular amusements in the early nineteenth century, and the circus continued to emphasize horsemanship and exotic animals through the 1920s. Haute école paces, liberty acts with trained groups of riderless horses, a varied exhibition of riding and driving skills, bareback riding, and a portion of the program devoted solely to races, all fascinated an audience that used horses daily. The menagerie tent contained rarities not found even in the few zoos of the period.

Also important in the main show were acrobats and aerialists, who demonstrated peak athletic skills to amaze the spectators as Olympic gymnasts do today. Clowns performed elaborate slapstick comedy routines. The grand spectacle was a pageant lasting up to half an hour, with a plot drawn from a historical, Biblical, mythological, or fairy tale source. The cast included professional actors in principal roles, a company of ballet girls, the entire crew of the show as extras, and as many animals as possible. Thrill show stunts, often done on bicycles or primitive automobiles, stood everyone's hair on end.

The circus included many attractions besides the main show and the menagerie tent. In addition to freaks, the side shows might provide educational novelties such as national sports events shown on the kinoscope, a forerunner of true moving pictures (Ringling, 1897), or scale models of each type of vessel in the Navy, done with government cooperation (Barnum & Bailey, 1904). An aftershow featured wild west acts. The free street parade whetted the appetite for marvels to come. To watch the trains unload and the tents go up was a free show in itself. The process was so efficient that the German army adopted the train-loading techniques they saw on Barnum & Bailey's European tour of 1898-1902. The circus offered something for everyone.

The Heiser-Alban Collection shows us the circus mainly through its advertising materials. The collection contains over eight hundred different posters, dating from the 1890s to the present, and several hundred *date sheets* (non-pictorial posters). Most are from performances in Texas, many in the Houston region. The collection also contains brochures and handbills, window cards, programs, and substantial files of newspaper clippings. These advertising materials tell us how the circus presented itself and what appealed to the audiences of the time.

Advertising in advance was the key to a circus's success. The circus moved too quickly to rely on word-of-mouth or repeat business. Instead, it saturated every town on its route with the most eye-catching materials it could devise. One to four advance cars travelled about fourteen days ahead of the rest of the circus, carrying all the advertising and a small army of billposters, bannermen,

lithographers, programmers, pastemakers, and press agents. Circus advertising, known as *paper*, came in many forms. The advance agents were equipped with colorful lithographed posters in standard sizes. One *sheet*, about 28" x 42", was the basic unit of size. Lithographs were also printed in half-sheet size, 21" x 28", and in half- or one-sheet *streamers*, 14" x 42" or 21" x 56" respectively. Two-sheet lithographs were the largest size printed on one piece of paper; anything larger would be pasted together. Lithographs could be as big as a circus's ambitions. The Buffalo Bill Wild West Show once commissioned a 168-sheet design, with a finished size of about 9 by 143 feet. The largest in the Heiser-Alban Collection is a nine-sheet. For each stop, *date tags* giving the date, location, and times of the show, were pasted to the lower edge of the lithographs. Then the agents pasted the lithographs onto every available wall, fence, store window, and barn side, or onto temporary hoardings. A large circus might post 5000 to 8000 sheets for a one-day stand, in locations up to a hundred miles distant. Property owners who permitted paper to be put up were paid in free passes to the circus. *Window cards* of various sizes went inside smaller store windows. Window cards usually had the same designs as that season's lithographs, backed with cardboard and sometimes freestanding. The agents also passed out hand-held paper: illustrated booklets in either magazine or newspaper format called *couriers*, and single-sheet handbills, usually about 10" x 23", called *heralds*.

From the 1870s to the 1890s, a number of important circuses jockeyed for preeminence. Their rivalry over particular routes escalated into billing wars. Advance agents raced to fill the towns with their paper first. Late-arriving agents pasted lithographs on top of, or simply removed, the opposition's paper. Fistfights broke out between rival groups of billposters. The Ringling Brothers began to challenge larger, long-established shows by successfully battling the Sells Bros. Circus all across Texas in 1894. By the early 1900s, the competitive element diminished in a series of takeovers. The Ringlings purchased the combined Adam Forepaugh-Sells Bros. Circus from Barnum & Bailey in 1906, and went on to buy Barnum & Bailey in toto the following year. Other circuses still toured, but they were overshadowed by the Ringling holdings. When John Ringling, the last brother, bought the American Circus Company with its five shows in 1929, he became the unchallenged circus king. Circus advertising in the mid-twentieth century decreased in quality, quantity, and importance, however, as other forms of entertainment took the place the circus had filled.

The lithograph was the most eye-catching and beautiful type of circus paper. Circus posters are called lithographs regardless of the printing process actually used. That process might be lithography on stone or metal, engraving with wood or metal plates, or woodcuts. Each color, sometimes as

many as ten, was printed separately to produce a rich and complex illustration. The lithographers, who were proud to be known as Show Printers, apparently saw themselves as artisans rather than as artists. Signed circus lithographs begin to appear only in the 1940s. The fine artwork of earlier years is anonymous, although the lithograph company's trademark is prominent.

Of course, the lithographs were not art for art's sake. The formalized folk-art posters of the turn of the century, the playful posters of the twenties, and the hard-edged or intricately pointillist posters of the thirties were all designed to make the circus seem as irresistible as possible. Since the excitement of the live circus was not easy to duplicate in a picture, however colorful, drama became far more important than realism in the circus lithograph. Thus, a lion or tiger is always about to spring. A moving horse has all four feet off the ground, and the lovely bareback rider balances en pointe. Many designs show an act in various stages so that the number of performers involved is doubled or tripled. Illustrations of animals in their native habitats are often wildly inaccurate. The lithographs might illustrate a specific individual act, but often they showed standard circus acts or themes. To portray the idea of the circus's excitement was more important than to show realistic scenes from a particular performance.

Producing lithographs in the necessary volume for circuses was costly. Each show used many designs in any season, and hundreds of thousands of sheets. Circuses and printers kept the design of new lithographs to a minimum in several ways. A circus used its designs for several years in a row. The lithographers could shorten the design process by basing their new design on one or more older lithographs, either from their own files or from those put out by another company. Even a partially borrowed design was expensive, however, so small circuses relied heavily on stock paper. These were lithographs of standard acts or animals with a blank space left for the circus name to be printed in when ordered. Some stock paper also had a blank space for the performer's name. Old, surplus stock paper was available at reduced prices. This makes many circus lithographs difficult to date, as the design may predate the poster's use by as much as ten or twenty years. Cole Bros. stock paper presents special confusion. The Cole Brothers Circus ran from 1906 until its owner died suddenly, early in the 1910 season. The Erie Lithograph and Printing Company was left with large amounts of surplus paper preprinted with the Cole Bros. title. At various times in subsequent decades, more than half a dozen short-lived shows adopted the name Cole Bros. because they could buy the paper at a bargain price.

In the 1930s and 1940s, circus fans could often acquire older lithographs simply by asking the printing companies for extras that were wasting storage

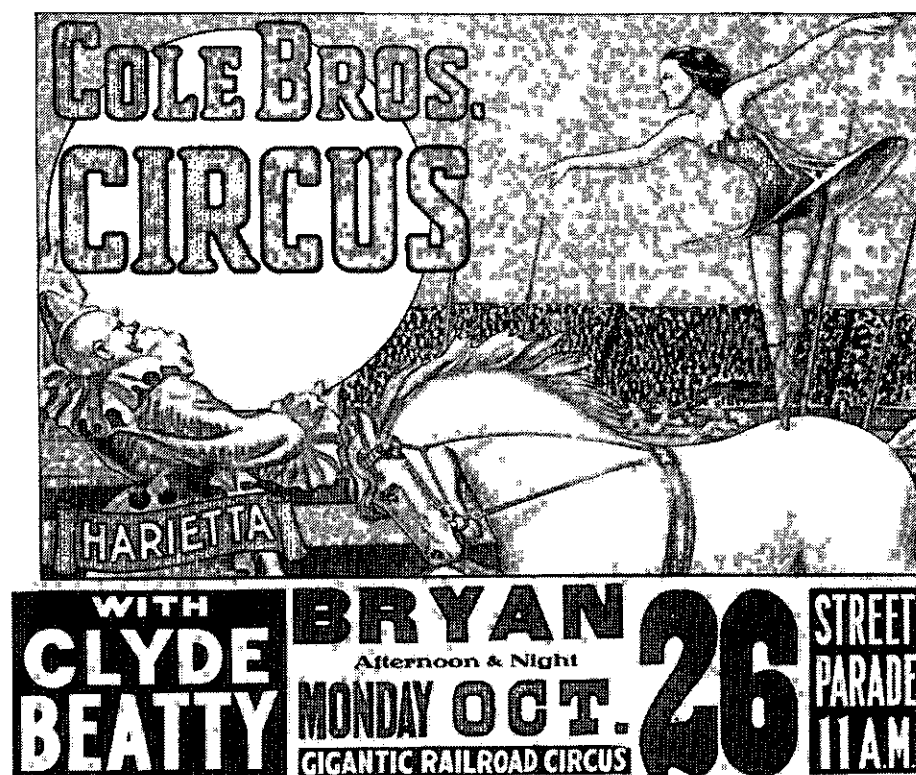
space. They could also obtain whatever posters were still in good condition after the circus had left town. Unfortunately for today's young enthusiasts, the beautiful lithographs of the 1870s to the 1930s are rarer and more expensive every year. Circus paper, whether it be lithographs, window cards, couriers, or heralds, is probably the most popular circus collectible. Circus buffs are also interested in non-advertising materials, such as route cards or route books, circus letterheads, or various business documents. All of these items and more are represented in the Heiser-Alban Collection. Another major portion of the collection deals with Mr. Heiser's activities as a circus fan. He belongs to such organizations as the Circus Fans of America, the Circus Historical Society, and the Circus Model Builders. The collection includes records of local meetings and of yearly conventions, as well as long runs of the magazines published by each organization. Mr. Heiser made a major contribution to documenting circus history with his many behind-the-scenes photographs of performers in the 1930s and 1940s. Much of his work has been featured in *The White Tops*, the magazine of the Circus Fans of America. He donated most of the photographs, which are not of specifically local interest, to the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin. This museum holds one of the best collections in the country for the serious circus researcher. Also important are the complex of museums at Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's winter headquarters in Sarasota, Florida, and the San Antonio Public Library's Harry Hertzberg Collection, which specializes in nineteenth century paper and artifacts.

While naturally smaller than circus museum holdings, the Houston Public Library's Heiser-Alban Collection is an extensive one. It is an important source of information on a colorful and significant form of entertainment in Houston's metropolitan region, and on the activities of local circus fans. The following pictures offer a glimpse of past wonders through the items in the Heiser-Alban Collection of Circus Historical Materials.

Nancy Hadley
Assistant Editor

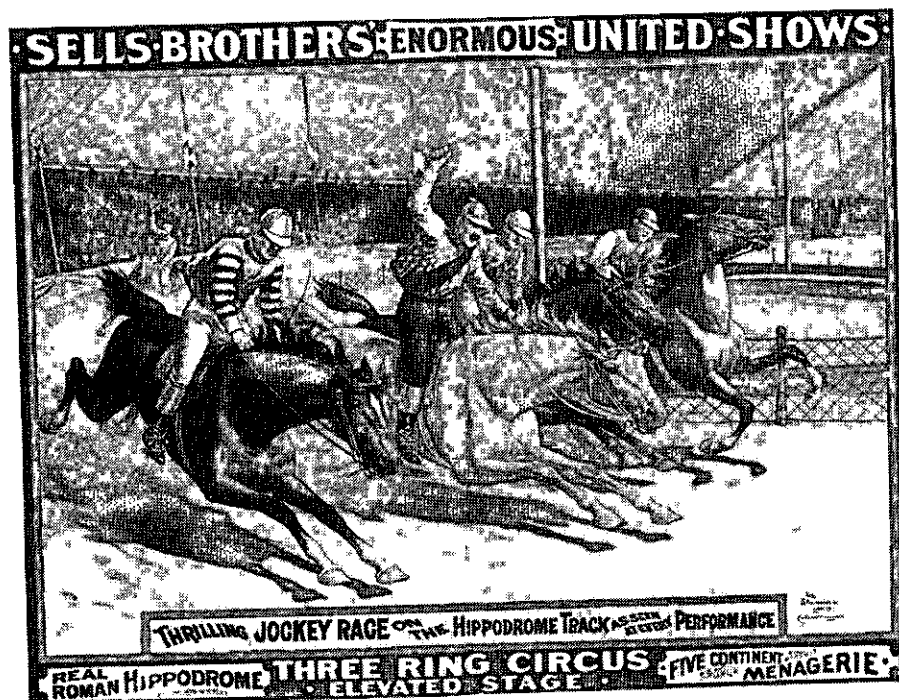


Cole Bros. Circus, 1936, one sheet, Erie Litho. & Ptg. Co.
 Lovely bareback riders are a favorite theme in circus lithographs. The date tags on these two show that they were used for Cole's 1936 season, although the one on this page was designed and used at least a year before. The equestrienne wears pale blue ornamented with pink rosebuds, against a golden-brown background. The delicate colors compliment the swirling grace of the design.

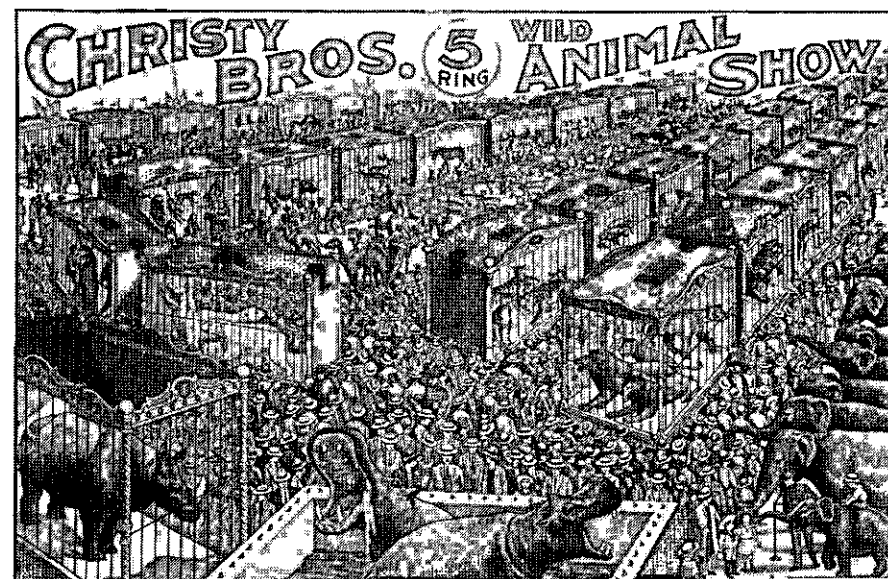


Cole Bros. Circus, 1936, one sheet, Nal. Ptg. & Eng. Co.

The same theme is equally lovely when treated in a totally different style. Sharply stylized lines, vivid coloring, and a striking composition make this one of the most sophisticated lithographs in the Heiser-Alban Collection. Harietta's dress and the Cole Brothers title are bright red-orange, in contrast to the muted aqua background, the white horse and clown, and the cream paper hoop he holds for her to jump through.

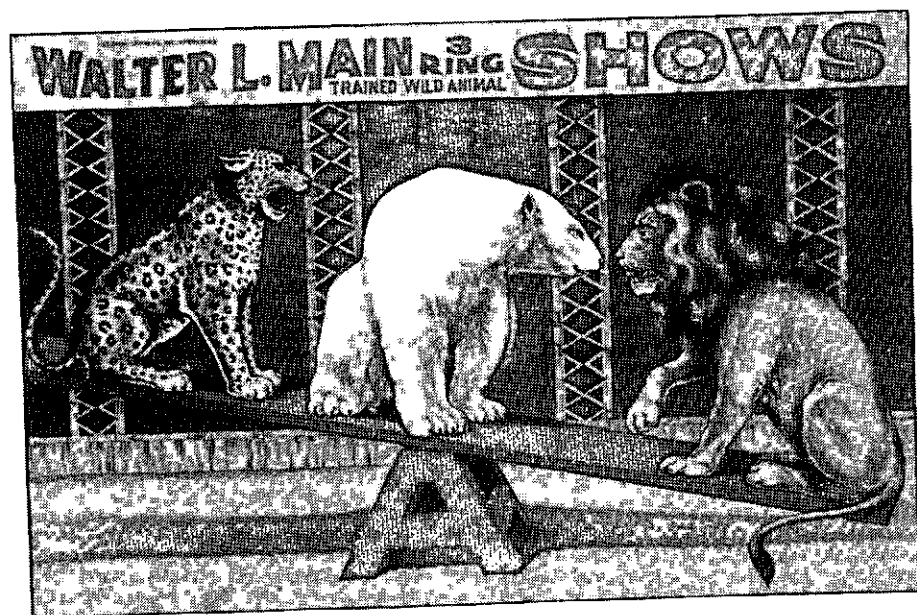


Sells Bros. Circus, ca. 1888, one sheet, Strobridge Litho. Co.
 The oldest poster in the collection, this Sells Bros. lithograph gives a clear view of the big top during the racing program that closed the show. The Sells Bros. Circus ranked third throughout the 1880s, just after those run by Barnum and Bailey and by Adam Forepaugh, and commissioned some of Strobridge's finest work. The captions at the bottom margin advertise the features of the large railroad circuses of the day: the hippodrome track for racing, three performance rings, and elevated stage for the spectacle, and a varied menagerie in a separate tent.



Christy Bros. Circus, ca. 1927, one sheet, Riverside Printing Co.

The menagerie was open before and between the shows, to stroll through at leisure. This lithograph shows a fairly typical arrangement of the menagerie, with the dangerous and rare animals in their travelling wagon cages, the more docile in fenced enclosures in the center, and a line of elephants at one side. Christy Brothers, operating out of Texas, was one of the few important circuses of the twenties not owned by either the Ringling interests or by the American Circus Company.



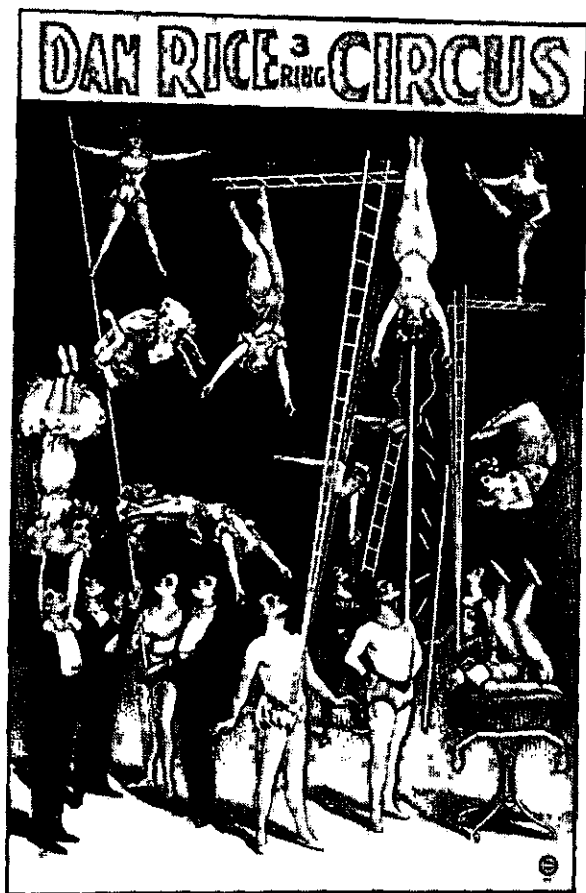
Walter L. Main Circus, n.d., one sheet, Riverside.

Early circuses often performed their wild animal acts in a cage in the center of the menagerie tent, only later moving into the big top as part of the main performance. Mixed cat and bear acts are considered to be among the most difficult and dangerous to handle. Although bears on circus posters are often depicted as friendly and amusing, the polar bear in this lithograph clearly shows his antagonism to the snarling cats. The lithograph was a stock sheet, with the title printed later in the blank space left at the top.



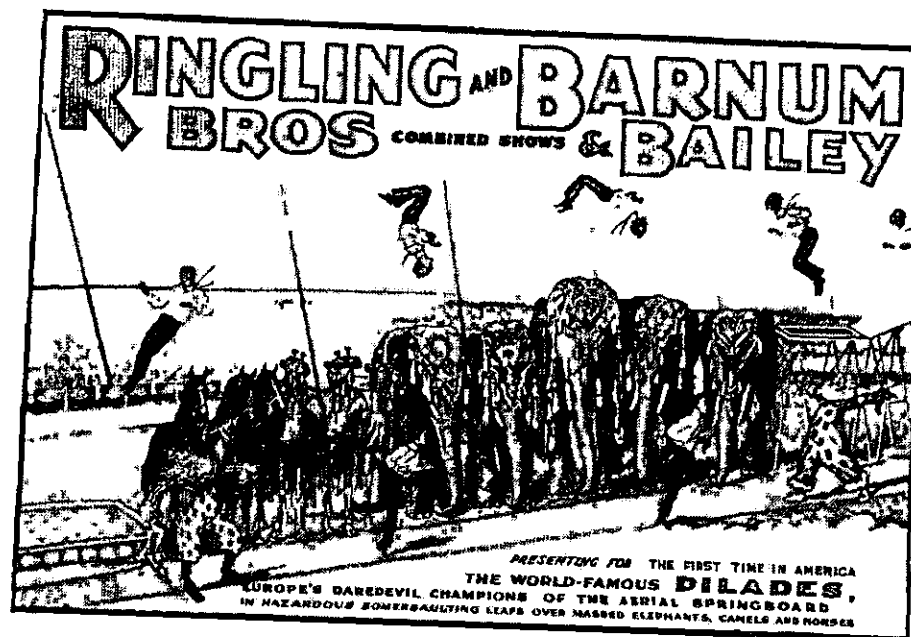
BUFFALO STADIUM
SHOW GROUNDS
3 DAYS HOUSTON TWICE DAILY
SUNDAY 3 P. M. 8:15 P. M.
MONDAY AFTERNOON and NIGHT
TUESDAY AFTERNOON and NIGHT
OCT. 5 | OCT. 6 | OCT. 7

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1941, half sheet, artist: G. H. Gargantua the gorilla was one of the most billed animal stars of all time, perhaps rivaled only by P. T. Barnum's Jumbo. Very few gorillas had appeared in this country before Ringling displayed Gargantua in the 1938 season, and none had long survived the rigors of touring the country. Gargantua had an innovative air conditioned cage to keep him healthy, and travelled with the circus through the 1949 season. This 1941 lithograph shows him with his new mate, M'Toto. The stylized design in brilliant hues of red, orange, and yellow, was part of the circus's "new look" that season.



Dan Rice Circus, n.d., one sheet, Riverside.

A variety of acrobatic and aerial acts form a vital part of every circus performance. Most of the acrobats in this stock lithograph are performing perch acts, balanced on poles supported by other performers. The cluttered design, the distortions of perspective and anatomy, and the virtually identical faces in this lithograph are typical of many stock sheets in the early decades of the century. Although they lack the beauty and elegance of many commissioned designs and say nothing about the specific performance they advertise, stock sheets still portray the interest and excitement of the circus.



PRESENTING FOR THE FIRST TIME IN AMERICA
THE WORLD-FAMOUS **PILADES**,
EUROPE'S DAREDEVIL CHAMPIONS OF THE AERIAL SPRINGBOARD,
IN HAZARDOUS SOMERSAULTING LEAPS OVER MASSES OF ELEPHANTS, CAMELS AND HORSES

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1939, one sheet, Strobridge.

With the Pilades, Ringling reintroduced a popular nineteenth century act, the leaps. In the traditional manner, the troupe leaps from an elevated springboard and somersaults over the backs of elephants, camels, and horses. In 1938 and 1939, Ringling returned to Strobridge for some of their lithography after nearly a decade with other companies. Strobridge produced a number of unusually fine designs, including this one. The coloring is subtle and intricate, and details such as the animals' trappings are executed with stunning richness.



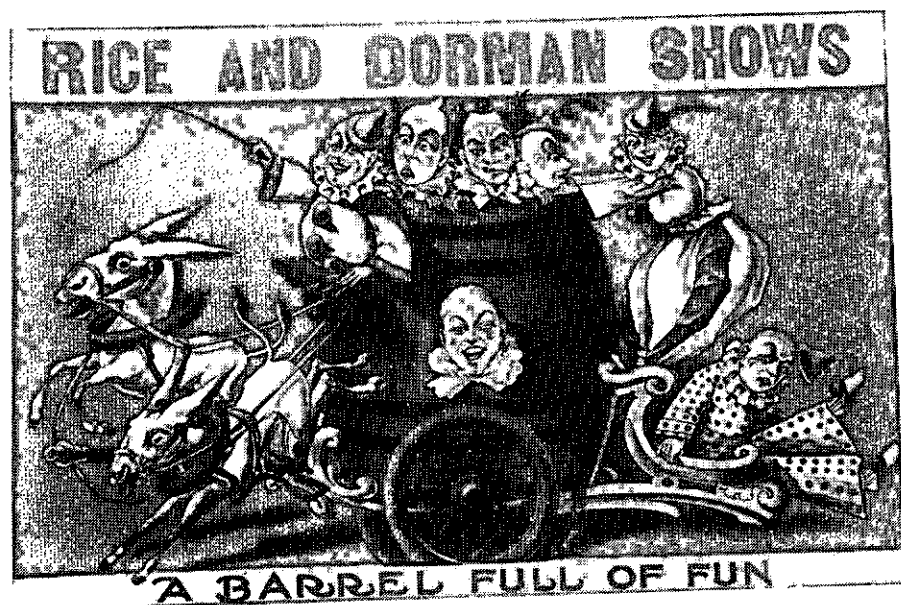
Wheeler & Almond Circus, n.d., one sheet, Eric.

Another stock sheet, this lithograph shows a group of aerialists in an iron jaw act, hanging high in the air by their teeth. Audiences were especially amazed when difficult and dangerous acts were performed by women. As in this picture, costumes were designed to give an air of apparent fragility. The fluttering costumes are in delicate pastels on a rich turquoise background. In the heyday of the circus, several male performers are known to have posed as women in order to increase the popular appeal of their acts.



Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1898, half sheet, Strobridge.

Foreign performers particularly attracted the public, also. Many circus stars have come from longtime circus families in Europe or other parts of the world. Prior to World War I, Japanese and Chinese performers were apparently quite popular. They are generally shown wearing a costume derived from those of their countries, as seen in this Barnum and Bailey lithograph. The Japanese wire artist wears a robe of rich blue, green, and gold design and carries a red and pink parasol. The colors are muted, and as finely done as always in this era of Strobridge's greatest work.



Rice and Dorman Circus, n.d., one sheet, Riverside.

This stock sheet is an especially vivid expression of the fun of the circus. The Heiser-Alban Collection also includes the same design with the title of Haag Bros. Circus. The clowns ride in a green barrel on a bright red background, with accents of yellow and blue to complete the color scheme. Each wears his own unique design in the traditional whiteface style of makeup. A clown's face is an individual and jealously guarded creation. In 1950, the International Circus Clown Club was established to register each member's face, meticulously painted onto an eggshell as a permanent record.



Eldridge & Bentum Circus, n.d., one sheet, Erie.

Clowns of all types are an essential circus feature. In the early wagon show era, the clown was a standup comedian, delivering witty lines and singing comic songs. As the size of the show and its audience grew, clowns turned to pantomime exclusively. This stock lithograph shows a variety of clowns: in whiteface, in various costumes, using props, and with a trained pig. Clown costumes and types have changed considerably over the years.



Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1936, half sheet, Eric.

One of the best-known and popular of clown posters is this Ringling lithograph. The clowns in their multicolored costumes seem both to invite the spectator to see the marvels in the big top, and to say goodbye when the magic of circus day is over.

Juan D
Anahu
Univer:

Revis
interpre
cherishe
the cycle
McKink
while th
Some int
Adolph
John
during t
subjects
probabl
Rose. At
of April
the Herc

Now
Houston
Entrepre
The volu
which in

In a m
simply o
Bradbur
Mexican
the Virgi
Spanish
inspired
in the r
comman
jurisdicti