



# The Showmen's Culture: Life, Labor, and Negotiated Loyalty among Traveling Entertainment Workers in the Gilded Age

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This article explores the formation of a “showmen’s culture” among circus employees in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, a cultural identity which had the effect of diffusing labor conflicts in this developing industry. The showmen’s culture created an affective bond between employees of all levels, from manual laborers, to middle managers, to company owners. This article links cultural history and labor history and provides an example of how workers outside traditional manual-labor industries coped with the challenges of industrialization, and how proprietors used the same cultural identity to their own advantage.

In the early twentieth century, *Cosmopolitan* magazine published several articles describing the behind-the-scenes operations of the modern circus. Describing the process of transporting and setting up a big top tent, one reporter in 1902 described the “perfect precision of movement of everyone concerned with the program. The performance moves with a machine-like regularity, which is obtained only by rigidly enforced discipline.”<sup>1</sup> Another journalist observing workers setting up a circus lot wrote, “I say it seems chaotic and altogether unreasonable, yet it is the systematic perfection of system in which all things are made to come together at a moment and in proper order. It is only a perfectly trained, though a quite noisily working, human machine.”<sup>2</sup> Still other spectators continued the industrial metaphors, writing that the circus moved “like clock-work,” and describing how the “exact, mathematical running of the business” made it similar to a factory, a

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<sup>1</sup> Whiting Allen, “The Organization of a Modern Circus,” *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Aug. 1902.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Theodore Murray, “On the Road with the ‘Big Show’,” *Cosmopolitan* magazine, June 1900.

“circus plant.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to the performances in the circus's three rings, circus audiences were thoroughly captivated by the industrialized labor happening behind the scenes.

In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, traveling amusements such as circuses, blackface minstrel shows, and Wild West shows were the most popular forms of entertainment in America.<sup>4</sup> The evolution of transportation technologies, particularly the railroad, meant that traveling shows could cover more territory in one touring season than had ever been possible before. Regional tours became national tours with the expansion of the railroad, giving eastern and western, urban and rural patrons access to the same entertainments, and amusement proprietors access to a national consumer base. The railroad also increased a troupe's carrying capacity, leading entertainment entrepreneurs to invest in larger performance tents and more elaborate sets, props, and rigging, necessitating an increase in the number of employees required to keep a show on the road. To best execute the arduous task of moving a big show, proprietors of traveling amusements fashioned their shows into modern business enterprises with the goal of increasing efficiency through expanding managerial oversight. In some ways, this resembled a mobile version of Pullman's company town. Analysis of the experiences of manual laborers employed in the amusement industry provides a unique perspective on conflicts between employers and employees during the Gilded Age rise of industrial capitalism, illuminating the role of culture and identity in shaping labor relations.

Although manual laborers' lived experience of life on the road with a circus was, in actuality, vastly different from that of their higher-ups, amusement workers of all ranks developed a common identity as “showmen,” which had the effect of mitigating potential class conflict. Linking identity with industry, rather than ethnic or class background, diffused both labor and racial conflicts and provided benefits of varying degrees to both employer and employee. For employees, what I term the “showmen's culture” provided camaraderie in incredibly difficult working conditions by creating shared traditions, while for company owners the showmen's culture was a way to participate in the late nineteenth-century trend of more paternalistic, welfare-

<sup>3</sup> “The Circus Colossal,” clipping, n.d., Townsend Walsh Papers, MWEZ + n.c. 4032, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library (hereafter BRTC, NYPL).

<sup>4</sup> Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Robert M. Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America 1830–1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

oriented management practices to maintain peace between capital and labor.<sup>5</sup> To display their benevolence to their fellow showmen, management made some concessions to laborers, such as permitting some of the workers' more violent and rowdy traditions. High-ranking managers also joined fraternal organizations and benefit societies alongside laborers, projecting a sense of solidarity and, in some cases, providing financial support for workers in need. For those higher-ups, these actions benefited the workplace by helping maintain employee morale and diffusing potential class tension, as well as furthering proprietors' goal of developing reputations as purveyors of "respectable" entertainment.

Traveling amusements reached their heyday during a period of rapid industrialization and owners of such shows adapted elements of modern labor management techniques to fit the unique contours of show business. Circuses were typically the largest traveling amusements in the late nineteenth century. It took an enormous number of people to set up and tear down these massive spectacles quickly and efficiently. For example, in 1895, the Ringling Brothers circus employed 775 people, only about a hundred of whom were performers.<sup>6</sup> The rest were involved in erecting, managing, and staffing the temporary city that was the circus lot. The lot included everything from cook tents, to blacksmith shops, to dressing rooms. Each evening employees tore down the tented city and loaded it back on the company train, repeating this process almost daily throughout the approximately 150-day touring season. With multiple teams of advertising agents on the road, several trains, and a show lot of up to ten acres, proprietors could not personally oversee all their employees at once and relied heavily on a managerial hierarchy to keep the shows moving on schedule.<sup>7</sup> To manage their affairs, Gilded Age traveling amusement owners embraced the new philosophy of scientific management, also known as Taylorism after industrial organizer Frederick Winslow Taylor. To increase speed and efficiency, traveling amusement owners and managers used aspects of Taylorism, most significantly the development of a managerial hierarchy, the division of labor, and timed tasks. Beyond scientific management's

<sup>5</sup> For work on welfare capitalism see Gerald Zahavi, "Negotiated Loyalty: Welfare Capitalism and the Shoeworkers of Endicott Johnson, 1920–1940," *Journal of American History*, 71, 3 (Dec. 1983), 602–20; Rick Halpern, "The Iron Fist and the Velvet Glove: Welfare Capitalism in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1921–1933," *Journal of American Studies*, 26, 2 (1992), 159–83; Lisa M. Fine, "'Our Big Factory Family': Masculinity and Paternalism at the Reo Motor Car Company of Lansing, Michigan," *Labor History*, 34, 2–3 (1993), 274–91; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Jerry Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2005), 72.

<sup>7</sup> Davis, 3.

potential for increasing profits, some also believed that it would have a positive effect on employee–manager relationships. As historian Jackson Lears described it, “submission to the impartial arbitration of science, [Taylor] insisted, would render old conflicts obsolete.” However, this was not the case in practice.<sup>8</sup>

Managers’ adoption of Taylorism meant that amusement workers were subject to many of the same de-skilling and dehumanizing elements that led workers in industries such as steel, the railroads, or meatpacking to unionize in the late nineteenth century. The labor movement even impacted the traditional theater industry, where workers founded several unions specifically for stagehands, eventually combining to form the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) in 1893. Unlike in these other industries, there was no large drive for unionization in traveling amusements. This was due to the development of the showmen’s culture that diffused potential labor conflicts and resulted in what labor historians describe as a “negotiated loyalty” between labor and management.<sup>9</sup> Due to the stigmatized reputation of show business at the start of the Gilded Age, participants at all levels of the amusement industry, from the owners down, developed a common identity as showmen. Both manual laborers and company owners described themselves using this term. Living in mobile company towns, employees of all levels developed shared traditions, language, and pastimes. Those in the amusement business shared a sense of being outside the traditional boundaries of industrial capitalism, leading them to turn to one another for community and support. Rather than class consciousness or group identities based on racial or ethnic backgrounds, amusement workers developed a sense of community and loyalty based on their industry, which had the unique feature of including company owners and managers alongside workingmen. This occupational culture cut across class boundaries and reshaped the relationship between management and worker.<sup>10</sup>

The popular-culture industry is often left out of scholarly conversations on labor in the Gilded Age, and existing studies that do focus on labor in the entertainment industry tend to begin their analysis in the 1920s with the rise of the Hollywood studio system, falsely giving the impression that

<sup>8</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 261. <sup>9</sup> Zahavi.

<sup>10</sup> Historians who have analyzed the ways in which ethnic identity shaped working-class culture include Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Herbert Gutman, “Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815–1919,” *American Historical Review*, 78, 3 (1973), 531–88; Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

entertainment did not become big business until the proliferation of film and recorded media.<sup>11</sup> Even within the relatively small body of work on nineteenth-century traveling amusements or circus history, the emphasis is primarily on the content of the shows.<sup>12</sup> Few explore the behind-the-scenes workings of this industry, and those which do tend to focus on charismatic company owners such as the “Prince of Humbugs,” P. T. Barnum.<sup>13</sup> Taking entertainment labor seriously not only fills a gap in the historical record, but also provides a case study of worker culture that demonstrates how industrialization affected “nontraditional” industries and how managers approached the complex balancing act of avoiding labor conflict while transitioning workers to a new rhythm of life. Amusement workers had to adhere to a new time-bound industrial work ethic. The frequent comparisons of amusement workers to machines indicates that there was a dehumanizing element of the new force of industrial work practices. Steam power, the same force that amusement proprietors harnessed to create a national audience for their products, also had detrimental effects on workers’ minds and bodies as they struggled to find comfort in difficult and dangerous living conditions. And yet, some workers found the experience of life on the road, or at least elements of it, fulfilling, laying the foundation for the showmen’s culture. Through

<sup>11</sup> For work on the Hollywood studio system see Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); Brian R. Jacobson, *Studios before the System: Architecture, Technology, and the Emergence of Cinematic Space* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907–1915* (New York: Scribner, 1990); Philip John Davis and Morgan Iwan, eds., *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics, and Society in the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Work on the thematic content of traveling amusement includes Davis; Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2007); LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006); Wilton Eckley, *The American Circus* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1984); Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Toll.

<sup>13</sup> Works that emphasize traveling amusement labor include Davis; Sarah J. Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets & Business: A History of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986); Toll; Warren. For work on circus owners see Apps; James W. Cook, ed., *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader: Nothing Else Like It in the Universe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981); Kasson; Philip B. Kunhardt, *P. T. Barnum: America’s Greatest Showman* (New York: Knopf, 1995); Warren.

avenues such as poetry, slang and in-group lingo, and rowdy traditions, the men who worked on traveling amusements expressed that they were not merely laborers but *showmen*, a label they wore with pride.

Amusement workers fondly recalled traditions from life on the road in their memoirs at the same time as they also expressed disgust for their living conditions. A major source of information on the inner workings of traveling amusements is route books. Traveling amusement companies created and published route books, which functioned as a souvenir and travel diary for each touring season. Although the precise information in each route book differs from year to year and from company to company, almost all include a full employee roster as well as a daily diary of noteworthy events that occurred on the road. At various times, route books also included attendance figures, information about the weather, calculations of miles traveled, photographs, and articles or poetry written by company members. Route books were given or sold to company members and sometimes other fans and collectors. Studying route books provides an insight into larger trends in the industry, as well as a record of what daily life was like on the road with a traveling amusement.

These books often contain comic poetry and nostalgic anecdotes that present the showmen's life as an enjoyable one, and many of these sentiments are echoed in amusement workers' writings elsewhere. But route books were company publications, and therefore some of the information may be censored or skewed to give a favorable representation of the business, indicating that showmen's culture was at the same time both authentic and contrived, therefore fitting for the "humbug" industry of traveling amusements. Route books as well as memoirs contain evidence of workers' conflicted feelings about life on the road. They published articles describing top-level managers and workingmen going fishing together in harmony, and on the next page detailed the brutal dismemberment of an unfortunate employee due to management's inattentiveness. Show business was at times incredibly difficult and dangerous for workingmen; however, the presentation of showmen's culture as a unifying force in company-sponsored publications such as route books covered up some of the more egregious capitalist abuses of amusement workers. This allowed amusement owners to continue the expansion of the entertainment industry without attracting too much negative attention. Instead, amusement owners garnered positive attention for creating a happy workplace family despite the obviously industrialized labor that spectators also loved to comment on. Showmen's culture was a benefit for laborers in terms of community, identity, and morale, but it was also a weapon that proprietors wielded to combat would-be critics from both inside and outside their companies.

As veteran circus man Bert Chipman described in his 1933 autobiography, “The majority of people are of the opinion that workingmen on a [traveling amusement] are just rough-necks, but in many cases they are mistaken, for we have seen men from all walks of life working as roustabouts.”<sup>14</sup> It is somewhat difficult to verify this statement, as traveling amusements’ employment records contain scant details about the men they hired aside from name and payment received. In some cases men were listed in records by nicknames rather than legal names and some shows referred to workingmen by number, rather than name, further anonymizing them.<sup>15</sup> David W. Watt, ticket seller and company treasurer for the Great Forepaugh Show, described payday, noting that “every working man had a number as well as his name and as they would step up to the wagon, every man knew his number and [management] would call his name and number” to get paid.<sup>16</sup> As with the machine metaphors noted previously, this practice indicates that from the perspective of management, amusement laborers were not seen as individuals.

By the turn of the century, many traveling amusements hired both black and white laborers. This was a departure from the early nineteenth century. In the earlier years of the amusement business the few people of color working with traveling shows were most often performers in racialized and exoticized roles. Few white-owned companies employed any black laborers until the 1880s, and even then employment patterns were sporadic. As historian Janet Davis noted, in the 1880s the Sells Bros. large railroad circus employed many African Americans; however, once James Bailey acquired the show in 1896, he reversed this policy. By the first decades of the twentieth century, route books for Barnum & Bailey’s show do note the presence of a “colored crew”; however, as this phrase indicates, black laborers were most often segregated, assigned the most menial positions within traveling companies, and paid less than white employees in similar jobs.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, some black employees found the experience of being on the road with a traveling amusement liberating to a certain extent. Traveling amusements by their very nature allowed individuals to see parts of the country they may never have had a chance to visit otherwise. African American circus roustabout W. E. “Doc” Van Alstine described this, stating, “At an early age I had a yearning for the show business ... I wanted to go, do, and

<sup>14</sup> “Roustabout” was a general term typically referring to a manual laborer with a traveling amusement. Bert J. Chipman, *Hey Rube*, ed. Harry B. Chipman (Hollywood, CA: Hollywood Print Shop, 1933), 135.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, 68.

<sup>16</sup> David W. Watt, “Side Lights on the Circus Business: Part One,” *Bandwagon*, 45, 3 (June 1998), 18–31, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, 71; Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1903–4, Box 47, Folder 12, McCaddon Collection, Princeton University Library (hereafter MC, PUL).

see things for myself, and I couldn't think of any better way to satisfy my ambition than to join up with a circus."<sup>18</sup> Black musician W. C. Handy wrote that when he first teamed up with Mahara's Minstrels the salary was merely "six dollars a week plus 'cakes,'" but this was more than enough because "there would be a chance to travel."<sup>19</sup> For black employees, traveling with an amusement company eliminated some of the difficulties of navigating increasingly strict segregation in public accommodations at the turn of the twentieth century. Still, this travel was not without its difficulties, and black amusement employees were not immune from racially motivated violence and discrimination, as will be discussed. However, the lure of travel, sometimes to places as far as Australia, was a motivating factor for some employees of color. American Indian employees with Wild West shows also found the promise of travel appealing. This was an opportunity to leave the heavily restricted reservations in the American West and travel not just throughout the United States, but also abroad. Many of the Indians who traveled to Europe with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show took day trips throughout the continent independently during down time, and some chose to remain in Europe when the show returned to the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Amusement companies recognized that travel was a big draw for all employees. The standard employment contract for the 1910 season of the Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. show contained a clause requiring the employee to swear "that I recognize personal advantages in this employment, which is solicited by me, because of extensive travel and opportunity for profitable intercourse."<sup>21</sup> This "profitable intercourse" consisted of salaried work for a predetermined period of time as well as room and board. Workers' salaries reflected their status in the show's hierarchy, with division bosses earning considerably more than common laborers. For example, in 1910 the Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. circus paid the superintendent of the props department \$711.66 for the season, while the average salary of other employees in this department was just \$177.15.<sup>22</sup>

The records of the Forepaugh & Sells Bros. show from this year show that for manual laborers, salaries ranged from five dollars to fifty-five dollars a month; however, most, a full 72 percent, earned a salary of just fifteen

<sup>18</sup> W. E. "Doc" Van Alstine, "Circus Days and Circus Ways," 1940, Federal Writers' Project: Folklore Project, manuscript/mixed material, at [www.loc.gov/item/wpalhoo1954](http://www.loc.gov/item/wpalhoo1954).

<sup>19</sup> W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 44.

<sup>20</sup> Warren, 371. American Indians were employed with Buffalo Bill's Wild West almost exclusively as performers rather than laborers, leading to their absence in much of this chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Employment contract for Ed Ames, canvasman, 1910, Box 2, Folder 12, Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Collection, Circus World Museum (hereafter CWM).

<sup>22</sup> Time Book, 1910, Vol. 6, Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Collection, CWM.



dollars monthly. Only one man with the show, E. D. Hill in the Animal department, had a lower salary, listed at five dollars a month. Just 11 percent of all men earned over twenty dollars monthly. Standard pay for both bosses and laborers differed across departments, hinting at managements' opinions of the relative value of different jobs.<sup>23</sup> Of those surveyed, the two departments with the highest average salary were props and ushers, two of the smallest departments. These two jobs were not wholly manual labor positions. While these men would have been required to assist in loading and setup for the big show, prop men were also responsible for repairs, a task requiring some artistic skill, and ushering was a front-of-house job, requiring face time with customers. The small number of employees in these departments also hints at the exclusivity or higher status of these jobs.

Travel opportunities and a steady salary were not always enough of a draw to keep men with a company for an entire performing season. Maintaining a steady labor force was a constant problem for show owners and managers. The payment records of the Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Circus for 1910 show that most laborers stayed on board for less than half of the thirty-week touring season. Some 25 percent of contracted laborers remained employed for just three weeks or less. Among the departments that were entirely manual labor, such as canvas and trappings, the turnover rate was even higher, with the percentages of men working less than three weeks sitting at 50 percent and 47 percent respectively. These employment records do also include several pages of designated "short-term" workers who were not included in the statistics above. These men, it seems, were purposefully hired for just one or two days to complete a specific task and did not travel with the show. The special designation of these day laborers indicates that those other canvasmen and railroad men listed elsewhere in the payroll book had been expected to stay on for a longer term, although in reality some stayed just barely longer than the day laborers. Only 18 percent of workers remained employed the entire length of the touring season. To incentivize staying on board, it was standard practice for many show owners to hold back a portion of an employee's pay until the end of the season.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> These figures are based on the Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Time Book for 1910. The departments analyzed were nonperforming, nonmanagement jobs. As listed in the time book, these departments are: Animal Men, Bag Stock, Canvas, Elephants, Lights, Porters, Props, Ring Stock, Side Show (Non-performers), Train, Trappings, and Ushers.

<sup>24</sup> Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Time Book, 1910. The precise calculations for this "held-back" pay is difficult to ascertain from records. Although most men did receive some extra payment at the end of the season, the formula the treasurer used to calculate this amount is unknown as no clear pattern emerges from the data.

This retention problem stems from the difficult labor and living conditions for amusement workers. Popular culture then and now is rife with tales of young men and boys “running off to join the circus,” and for some, this origin story was true. Circus impresario James A. Bailey’s entrance into the amusement world fits this narrative, as he reportedly escaped from an abusive household at thirteen years old and took on a position with the advance department of Robinson and Lake’s Circus.<sup>25</sup> This trope of “running off” romanticizes and obscures many of the challenges amusement laborers faced. Living on the road with a traveling amusement, workers faced difficult living conditions, dangerous labor, and a high likelihood of violent encounters.

During the show season, a good night’s sleep was difficult to come by. With a dramatic flourish, one Ringling Bros. employee from their wagon show days wrote, “Sleep was the dragon which pursued me with a relentless and irresistible power. It was like a vampire that took the zest and vitality out of my very life sources, and I went about almost as one walking in a dream.”<sup>26</sup> This challenge was even more acute for men traveling with railroad shows, where workers were expected to sleep aboard train cars en route to the next destination, rather than check in to local hotels. David Watt described life on the road as “surely hard show business,” writing that “the workingmen got but little sleep,” as they rolled from town to town.<sup>27</sup>

Time was of the essence for railroad shows. There was little to no flexibility for big shows as they kept their tight loading and unloading schedules, meaning that early mornings were mandatory for laborers, regardless of whether they got any sleep on the cramped, moving train. Laborers’ sleeping cars were often overcrowded. As Davis notes, “in 1895 some three hundred Barnum & Bailey laborers occupied three sleeping cars that were each designed to hold fifty to sixty people, or half the number of people actually sleeping there.”<sup>28</sup> During a rare overnight stop in Cleveland in 1901, members of the Ringling Brothers circus were so uncomfortable in their sleeper cars, due to high heat, that they abandoned the cars entirely. The route book author describing the episode noted that “to sleep in the cars was an utter impossibility.”<sup>29</sup> Conditions on the trains were so crowded that stories of animals perishing due to overheating in the cramped conditions appear across the years in several companies’ route books.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> A. H. Saxon, “New Light on the Life of James A. Bailey,” *Bandwagon*, Dec. 1996, 4–9.

<sup>26</sup> Apps, *Ringlingville, USA*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Watt, “Side Lights on the Circus Business,” 21.

<sup>28</sup> Davis, *The Circus Age*, 64.

<sup>29</sup> Ringling Bros. Route Book, 1901, Box 47, Folder 23, MC, PUL

<sup>30</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1888, Box 47, Folder 3, MC, PUL; Apps, 102.

Bad weather was also a constant trouble for traveling shows. When trains were delayed due to weather or accident, managers pushed forward, attempting to stay on schedule, whether that meant cutting into laborers' rest time or not. This also meant that laborers often worked outdoors in cold, wet, and stormy situations. A workingman on the road with the Ringling Bros. circus recalled an incident in which he was driving a wagon team in the middle of a storm with Al Ringling, and

an old razor back sitting beside him says to Al, as he had seen an old farmer coming out of his house and going into the barn to do chores. "Look at that rube." Al turns to the man and says, "You call him a rube. Well he is going into a nice dry barn and back to a dry house to eat and we are both soaking wet. We are the rubes."<sup>31</sup>

Rain and mud slowed down travel and required workers to labor even harder than normal, occasionally having to completely dismantle wagons when they became stuck.<sup>32</sup> In 1902, the Ringling circus found one lot so muddy that their wagons sank, requiring the strength of twenty-four horses to pull them out.<sup>33</sup> In an interview, one Wild West employee recalled that

a Wild West show in bad weather, its hell ... Because when it's raining and snowing and the lot is all nothing but mud, why you're riding a buckin' horse there or anything, and you happen to fall in the mud and roll around, why by the time you got to the back end you wouldn't know your outfit.<sup>34</sup>

As this implies, poor weather not only made laborer uncomfortable and more strenuous, but also increased the likelihood of workplace accidents.

Lack of sleep and stormy weather only increased the already dangerous working conditions with a traveling show. Circus route books are rife with stories of death or injury on the road. Railroad accidents were common. Barnum & Bailey route books from the 1880s record several incidents of train cars "jumping the tracks." In 1883, near Steubenville, Ohio, the route book author noted that a "flat car containing the Lion, tiger, and rhinoceros cages jumped the track throwing one of the cages into the ditch."<sup>35</sup> On 31 August 1888, on the way to Marshalltown, Iowa, "a disarranged switch throws three of the flat cars of the fourth section off the track," once again damaging several of the circus's exotic-animal cages.<sup>36</sup> Other shows reported incidents including fires on board the train, men accidentally stepping off of train cars and injuring themselves, train cars "telescoped" in a major crash,

<sup>31</sup> Apps, 21.

<sup>32</sup> William Cameron Coup, *Sawdust & Spangles: Stories & Secrets of the Circus* (Washington, DC: Paul A. Ruddell, 1901), 26.

<sup>33</sup> Apps, 103.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets & Business*, 37.

<sup>35</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1883, Box 47, Folder 1, MC PUL.

<sup>36</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1888.

and a crash so bad it killed all of the show's horses on board.<sup>37</sup> The 1879 route book for Cooper and Bailey's circus had an entire section titled "Accidents and Incidents." Among the events listed were the death of James Cassim, writing that "after the show – he was going to the car. Crossing the tracks he stepped out of the way of one train only to be caught and crushed to death by another." Another incident concerned roustabout George Sholters, who broke both legs while loading a train car.<sup>38</sup> Working on a traveling amusement was not easy work. Amusement laborers had to contend with dangerous and uncomfortable working conditions and long hours, and repeatedly perform strenuous physical tasks. And yet many workers returned season after season, becoming "lifers."

Many men found the community of life on the road with a big show a satisfying experience due to the bonds they formed with one another and the unique culture they developed as showmen. A significant aspect of life with a traveling amusement was that workers were constantly in close proximity to one another, contributing to the camaraderie that many amusement laborers described. The author of the Barnum & Bailey route book from 1891 wrote,

When persons are brought together onboard ship for a long journey, by the time they have reached their destination they have only discovered the good qualities of their fellow-passengers, and even while their hearts may be filled with gladness at reaching the end of their voyage in safety, a feeling of regret at parting from new friends will, nevertheless, intrude itself. There is very little difference between them and those of the circus. Brought together in the Spring, we travel together "rain or shine," for six months, grow to like each other amazingly, to really know and understand each other so well, that by the time the season is over and the canvas packed away for its last run, many of us honestly and sincerely regret to separate.<sup>39</sup>

In some ways, creating a unique workplace culture was, as Thomas Higbie described in his study of hobo workers, a means of survival, physically and socially, in difficult working conditions.<sup>40</sup> Although amusement workers were indeed organized hierarchically, there existed a sense of community and solidarity among amusement laborers at different levels within the company that provided a means to cope with the challenges of show life. In

<sup>37</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1884, Box 47, Folder 1, MC, PUL; Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1885, Box 47, Folder 1, MC, PUL; Ringling Bros. Route Book, 1892, Box 47, Folder 23, MC, PUL.

<sup>38</sup> Cooper, Bailey & Co's Great London Circus, Sanger's British Menagerie, International Allied Shows Route Book, 1879, Box 46, MC, PUL.

<sup>39</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1891, Box 47, MC, PUL.

<sup>40</sup> Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880–1930* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2003), 176.

the early days of traveling amusements, workers were stigmatized as immoral and dangerous, and in some ways this stereotype persists today in the trope of the shady “carny.” As part of the project of professionalizing and legitimizing traveling amusements, owners worked hard to change the public perception of their employees as rowdy deviants, including clauses in workers’ contracts that required sobriety and “respectable” conduct. To some extent the workers seem to have accepted bosses’ limitations on their actions as route books contain a scarce few mentions of firings due to alcohol or profanity use; however, amusement workers did resist some of the moralizing impulses of their employers, maintaining many of the rough-and-tumble elements of their earlier reputation, particularly when it came to engaging in violent activity. At the same time, amusement workers were not without a softer side, and, by the turn of the twentieth century, workers formed several fraternal organizations, some that included both laborers and managers, for showmen to take care of their own.

Amusement workers’ awareness of their status as outsiders contributed to their forming closer bonds with one another. Both the historical disparagement of theatre performers as well as Americans’ general distrust of transient people meant that amusement workers were doubly stigmatized. This stigmatization applied to all who were on the road with the show: laborers, performers, and management alike. This contributed to the lack of major conflicts between workers and management; most of the issues that arose on the road were between amusement workers and local townfolk and law enforcement. Amusement workers defined themselves as against the “townies” in the various locations in which they exhibited. The language used in route books to describe local citizens illustrates workers’ often hostile feelings toward their patrons. The Ringling’s 1906 book described visitors as “frog-eyed Rubes and guttersnipes of humanity, who had double rows of teeth and felt very much inclined to bite.”<sup>41</sup> Others referred to them as “yokels” and “hoodlums”<sup>42</sup> Traveling amusement employees of all ranks identified as “show people” and to some extent this common group affiliation mitigated what may have been class antagonism between laborer and owner and instead directed it toward locals.

Company route books are full of references to fights between amusement laborers and townies. One circus “oldtimer” wrote that when he first started working in show business, canvassmen were hired “as much for their ability to fight as to work.”<sup>43</sup> In many locations, harassing members of

<sup>41</sup> Ringling Bros. Route Book, 1906, Box 47, Folder 17, MC, PUL.

<sup>42</sup> Van Alstine, “Circus Days and Circus Ways”; Ringling Bros. Route Book, 1901.

<sup>43</sup> Chipman, *Hey Rube*, 15.

traveling amusement companies appears to have been a local pastime. W. C. Coup wrote that in many towns,

“Fighting was in the air,” and as may be imagined, the showmen received their full share of it. It was no infrequent occurrence ... as a consequence showmen went armed, prepared to hold their own against any odds. Not once a month, or even once a week, but almost daily, would these fights occur.<sup>44</sup>

Although this was perhaps a slight exaggeration, route books do confirm that fights were common. In 1882, as the Barnum & Bailey circus passed through Troy, New York, their herd of elephants was “stampeded by a gang of Trojan roughs” eager to cause trouble, causing the elephants to scatter and leaving circus employees to spend their evening tracking down the beasts, of which they found all but one.<sup>45</sup> Several years later, in 1893, when the Barnum & Bailey show was back in Troy, the locals chose a different group to pester. This time “some town toughs congregated around the ballet girls’ car, and began passing insulting remarks and otherwise annoying the girls.”<sup>46</sup> This example of repeated incidents in one locale was not uncommon. From the route books, it is clear that showmen knew which towns had a history of causing trouble and took measures to prepare themselves upon their return. The people of Toledo, Ohio maintained a grudge against Barnum & Bailey employee Jack Sutton for several years. In 1884 as the show entered the town, Sutton received an anonymous letter reading, “Be on your guard for we will do you up before you get to the cars. Yours, not forgetting last year.”<sup>47</sup> Although the threat never materialized, the author of the route book reporting on the incident noted that both Sutton and his workmates were prepared to tackle any incoming attack.

For workers of color, threats of racially motivated violence were also an ever-present reality, particularly as companies moved throughout the South. W. C. Coup noted that regardless of where employees came from, “circus men were universally regarded as ‘Yankees’” and looked at with great suspicion in the South.<sup>48</sup> In his memoir, Bert Chipman described an incident when, as the circus was loading up the train in “a small southern town,” black cookhouse employee “Campfire Bill” was approached by two white men, one being the town’s sheriff, who, using a racial slur, threatened his life saying, “Hey, I ain’t killed myself a [black person] for a couple of days and here is a pretty good chance to start.” The Barnum & Bailey route books from the 1880s and 1890s recount similar incidents of townspeople looking to harm black

<sup>44</sup> Coup, *Sawdust & Spangles*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1882, Box 47, Folder 1, MC, PUL.

<sup>46</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1893, Box 47, Folder 6, MC, PUL.

<sup>47</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1884.

<sup>48</sup> Coup, 6.

showmen for sport, often with no legal repercussions, as was all too common in the Jim Crow South. W. C. Handy wrote that when he traveled with the all-black Mahara's Minstrels, this danger existed not just in towns where the company stopped, but even in locations where the show's rail cars were just passing through. Handy described the group's preparations for passing through Orange, Texas, writing that among some of the young men in the town, "their conception of wild, he-man fun was to riddle our car with bullets as it sped through their town. Our strategy was to extinguish the lights and lie quietly on the floor. Fortunately none of our company ever got killed during these assaults."<sup>49</sup> Handy also recounted that the minstrel troupe's car was eventually outfitted with a secret compartment in the floor where men could hide from local law enforcement or lynch mobs if necessary.<sup>50</sup>

The frequency of violence against amusement folk led to the amusement laborers' best-known tradition: the "Hey Rube." This phrase was a rallying cry. When a member of an amusement company was in trouble, he yelled the phrase "Hey Rube!" and others came rushing in, prepared to defend their compatriot. References to "Hey Rube" appear in route books, memoirs, and pieces of journalism. It was even the title of showman Bert Chipman's 1933 autobiography.<sup>51</sup> In fact, so common was this expression that some used it as a noun. As "Doc" Van Alstine described it, "a 'Hey Rube' was a fight between the circus folks and the town yokels."<sup>52</sup> This shows an awareness of a group identity. Showmen describe the "Hey Rube" as evidence of workers' loyalty to one another as they immediately responded to any threat against one of their own. In fact, Chipman noted that failure to participate in a row against locals might leave one "branded a coward and disgraced forever in circus ratings."<sup>53</sup> In a business where employees slept and ate next to one another for months on end, there was pressure to conform to group standards to avoid this ostracism.

Amusement workers' experiences with local justice systems in the aftermath of "Hey Rubes" may also have contributed to their sense of community. Van Alstine wrote that in nearly all the fights he witnessed "the town folks [came] out second best physically, although the circus usually lost out financially. Lawsuits always followed a Hey Rube, and circus people had no chance for a square deal in a prejudiced small-town court."<sup>54</sup> Route books recount that in the aftermath of fights with locals, amusement workers were often arrested and required to pay a heavy fine, regardless of who began the fight. In some cases, there were also incidents of amusement laborers' arrests for minor

<sup>49</sup> Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 44.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>51</sup> Chipman.

<sup>52</sup> Van Alstine, "Circus Days and Circus Ways."

<sup>53</sup> Chipman.

<sup>54</sup> Van Alstine.

crimes. The Barnum & Bailey route book from 1890 recounts that in Anniston, Alabama “vigilant police arrest[ed] two of our canvassmen for using profane language.”<sup>55</sup> The bias of law enforcement on the side of the locals, and feelings of being unjustly targeted for minor offenses, only strengthened showmen’s feelings of being outsiders.<sup>56</sup>

“Hey Rube” is just one example of amusement workers’ creation of a unique culture. Use of specialized slang was another common way in which amusement laborers expressed their group identity. Both memoirs and scholarly analyses of the amusement world often include slang glossaries to aid readers unfamiliar with the language. A poem in the 1890 Barnum & Bailey route book titled “Boss Hostler’s Story” playfully depicted the showmen’s language. The poem described an average day on the road with the circus in a manner nearly unintelligible to outsiders:

The “peck cabs” are all pretty “quisby”,  
But the “dones” are “rum” on the “mash”,  
As they flit in from the kitchen,  
A “steering” the biscuits and hash ...  
The “annex” is always “wide open”,  
But the “good old days” have gone by;  
“Nixey weeden”, “stag his nibs”, and “HEY RUBE!”,  
No longer the “side showmen” cry.<sup>57</sup>

Printed in the company’s route book, a publication sold and distributed to the show’s own employees as mementos of the season, this poem was meant as an in-group joke. The poet uses coded language, understood only by this small group, to articulate a sense of belonging. To an outsider, the heavy use of slang is amusing; however, the true meaning of the poem is obscured. Written in 1890, around the time in which the railroad show was coming into its heyday, the author mourns the “good old days” gone by, likely referring to the days when amusements traveled solely by wagon. His assertion that “no longer the ‘side showmen’ cry” certain phrases was a bit premature, as sources into the early twentieth century note the continued use of “Hey Rube” and other amusement worker slang. Still, this piece indicates that the author appreciated and enjoyed the sense of camaraderie that this shared language created. Excluded from and denigrated by mainstream society, amusement laborers formed a group identity based on shared experiences.

Route books contained many examples of inside jokes, nostalgic poems, and anecdotes about amusing or sweet incidents on the road. The Ringling Brothers’ 1892 book featured an article about Bismarck the dog who

<sup>55</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1890, Box 47, Folder 3, MC, PUL.

<sup>56</sup> Van Alstine.

<sup>57</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1890.



became the unofficial guardian of the stake and chain wagon. The book claimed that “there is not a mother’s son with the show but would yell ‘Hey Rube!’ to defend him, and Bismarck, to the best of his ability, would fight for all the circus men.”<sup>58</sup> Another book noted that when the show played in Chicago, a retired employee “came in to-day and shook hands with all his old-time friends.”<sup>59</sup> Poems like the “Boss Hostler’s Story” above show up in route books with surprising frequency. Most of these poems are about average workingmen, not performers, owners, or other amusement-related subjects. The 1896 Buffalo Bill route book contained no less than three poems, including an anonymous one which the route book author claimed to have found on a scrap of paper on the ground “which expressed the opinion of the working man on a two days stand”:

Give us back the one-day stand,  
 Even if the mud is two feet deep,  
 Where we have a run of 100 miles,  
 And plenty of time to sleep.  
 Where we get in town at 6 o’clock  
 And are early on the ground  
 We have our work all done by noon,  
 And can quit this “dubbing” around.<sup>60</sup>

Another poem in this same route book described, in detail, the life of a bill poster written by a “brother paste.” The poem urged these “comrades in paste” to be proud of their careers, and described the close relationship between these showmen:

Brothers in paste don’t get sad at your fate.  
 You can think for yourselves, and though you may hate  
 The ass who turns up his aesthetic nose,  
 Like you, in the end, he “turns up his toes.”  
 And when we get through with paste, bucket and flour,  
 Care and work laid aside, and it comes the last hour;  
 We’ll each drop a tear for the other who’s gone,  
 And let the world go on with laughing and scorn.<sup>61</sup>

The time and thought that company members put into these poems, as well as the route book authors’ efforts to compile stories that aged showmen might someday look back on with fondness, illustrate that despite extreme hardships, those workers who stuck around found a community under the big top.

<sup>58</sup> Ringling Bros. Route Book, 1892.

<sup>59</sup> Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Route Book, 1896, Box 46, Folder 6, MC, PUL.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

The showmen's culture was a male one, shaped by Gilded Age views on masculinity. Women in traveling amusements were either performers or worked in roles that were traditionally considered "women's work," such as seamstresses and cooks. Janet Davis noted that "male circus workers as a whole were more liminal than female employees. Women were commonly born into the business as members of established family troupes, while transient men filled the laboring ranks at the canvas city."<sup>62</sup> These men, who did not come to the show as part of a family unit, sought out the companionship of other male workers. Even the term "showman" indicates that women were considered outsiders in the culture of traveling amusements. These male amusement laborers formed a community with others of their sex and engaged in masculine-coded behaviors such as rowdiness and violence.

Due to the sense of a growing "crisis of manhood" at the turn of the twentieth century, managers tended to permit many of these pastimes despite portraying their establishments in the press as the epitome of refinement. While the messages of safety and gentility were designed to appeal to female patrons and those bringing children to the circus, in their efforts to grow the audience as large as possible, management realized that the rugged behavior of laborers was its own draw for middle-class male patrons. During the Gilded Age, many Americans expressed anxiety that modern industrial life was feminizing the workforce and that men needed to reembrace the "strenuous life." Historians such as Janet Davis and John Kasson have described how the content of traveling amusements reflected these anxieties, with many performances such as strongman acts and lion tamers glorifying the muscular male body and promoting wildness as a desirable masculine value.<sup>63</sup> Davis argued that "proprietors promoted their exhibitions as sites of athletic Euroamerican manliness," and this extended beyond the sawdust ring. Amusement laborers also embodied athleticism as they performed difficult acts of manual labor in front of an audience, pounding in stakes, hoisting heavy tent poles, and wrangling horses. Furthermore, "workingmen's labor was also exciting to watch because it was just as dangerous as the athletic stunts under the big top." The idea of a primitive, wild masculinity also helps explain why proprietors permitted the continuation of traditions such as the "Hey Rube." The circus and other traveling amusements were liminal spaces where traditional social roles went topsy-turvy and middle-class male audiences could immerse themselves in the wild masculinity of amusement laborers for a day. If this were part of the draw of amusements, as Davis

<sup>62</sup> Davis, *The Circus Age*, 143.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.; John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

and Kasson persuasively argue, then it was in proprietors' best interest to look the other way when it came to the "Hey Rube" and other such activities which, as demonstrated above, also had the effect of creating a strong bond among employees.

Amusement proprietors continued to foster the showmen's culture by investing in their employees' masculine identities. This was in line with other managerial practices of the time. As Thomas Winter notes in his study of the YMCA, gender, and class relations at the turn of the twentieth century, there was a belief among the privileged that true "manliness" was antithetical to labor unrest, and "building the right standards of manhood would subdue the destructive impulses of a potentially restive working class."<sup>64</sup> Amusement owners encouraged employees to participate in athletic activities such as baseball and other sports as a more respectable means of expressing their masculine physical energy. Company route books contain many examples of these strenuous pastimes. The 1896 route book for Buffalo Bill's Wild West notes that on 28 June, in the afternoon, there was a "game of baseball between the Candy Butchers and Cook. Betting was lively, and in favor of the Candy Butchers, who came out ahead by a score of 16 to 11."<sup>65</sup> In many cases, owners and top managers participated in these activities. During the same season for the Buffalo Bill show, company members formed the Fu-Kort Fishing Club, whose membership included Fred Hutchinson, longtime Bailey associate, as well as manager Joseph T. McCaddon. Sponsoring these activities was a way for proprietors and managers to keep employees busy and engaged in a "healthy" masculine activity during their limited downtime, as well as to portray themselves as a friend to the worker. In cultivating an attitude that amusement workers were all working toward a common ideal of pursuing athletic manliness, owners "framed 'manhood' in terms of interdependence between workers and company officials."<sup>66</sup>

In this way, amusement proprietors were engaging in a form of the "welfare capitalism" that came to characterize some industrial corporations in the first decades of the twentieth century. In this system, company owners "sought to cast the relations between employer and worker within a cultural framework of benevolent, manly paternalism in which employer-patriarchs not only provided work, but also looked after the moral well-being of their employees and built up workers' manhood."<sup>67</sup> This paternalism becomes particularly evident when examining the ways in which owners wrote about their companies in public advertisements, and the clues in route books that hint at owners'

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Winter, *Making Men, Making Class: The YMCA and Workingmen, 1877–1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>65</sup> Buffalo Bill's Wild West Route Book, 1896. <sup>66</sup> Winter, 71.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

manipulation of these company-sanctioned records. One Bailey obituary claimed that "one of his good qualities was that his employees were all his friends."<sup>68</sup> Al Ringling also wrote that

Mr. Bailey realized that friendship, trust, and gratitude for an employer form a great part of the latter's capital in dealing with employes [*sic*]. His subordinates soon recognized that in him they had a father who shielded them from want in times of misfortune and this knowledge tended to inspire a certain esprit du corps [*sic*] among his army of workers which gave to his business organization a unity, harmony and general excellence which is seldom observed among any large body of workmen. His men took a great pride in manifesting to him their eagerness to carry out his desires in the minutest details. Such a condition can not help but make a man's business successful.<sup>69</sup>

Ringling's statement was published in an obituary, and therefore he had an incentive to portray Bailey in the most positive light possible; however, regardless of whether this is truly how Bailey related to employees or not, Ringling's quote acknowledges that this familial feeling would have had a benefit for Bailey in a business sense. Articles about minstrel show impresario J. H. Haverly contain similar statements, writing that he aimed to "cultivate a feeling of 'brotherhood'" amongst his employees.<sup>70</sup>

Some statements from workers corroborate these sentiments; however, the degree to which amusement proprietors coerced these messages is unclear. The 1888 Barnum & Bailey route book was dedicated to James Bailey. In a sycophantic manner, the author writes that "to dedicate to [Bailey] so small a work is of course a mere trifle, but it serves to show how the heart feels and will be an evidence of how James A. Bailey is esteemed, respected and loved by every member of the Barnum and Bailey show."<sup>71</sup> This same author acknowledged that readers of the route book included his "associates and the [amusement] profession in general," and therefore one can assume that the author considered the impact of his wording carefully in order not to talk poorly of his boss. Barnum & Bailey's 1896 route book opened with a note acknowledging that management oversaw the contents of the book: "The instructions from the management relative to this publication were that I should, as near as possible, give correct data of all that has occurred with this great exhibition."<sup>72</sup> This shows that management played an active role in determining how the company was perceived by those both inside and outside the profession. Rather than providing proof for how employees felt about their bosses, these sources are stronger evidence that

<sup>68</sup> "James A. Bailey Dead," *New York Dramatic News*, 21 April 1906, clipping, T-CLP James Bailey, BRTC, NYPL.

<sup>69</sup> "Great Showman Is Dead," 1906, T-CLP James Bailey, BRTC, NYPL.

<sup>70</sup> "The Good Old Days of Haverly," *New York Times*, 12 Oct. 1917.

<sup>71</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1888.

<sup>72</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1896, Box 47, MC, PUL.

company owners were interested in portraying their shows as peaceful, paternalist workplaces.

In Liz Cohen's classic study of labor history, she notes that from a workers' perspective, when it came to welfare capitalism, "managers' actions proved less convincing than their rhetoric."<sup>73</sup> Passively allowing violent traditions and sponsoring a fishing club could hardly make up entirely for the often harrowing experience of living and working on a traveling amusement. There were some minor incidents in which amusement laborers did rally together for changes in the workplace, as in 1896 when employees of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show boycotted the cook tent to demand better food.<sup>74</sup> These cases of collective action were generally limited to demands for better living conditions and other quality-of-life issues – understandable given that amusement workers spent approximately eight months living under management's thumb with little opportunity to find alternative accommodations; however, strikes due to wages were rare. The Gilded Age saw a robust labor movement with many unionization efforts, including the creation of several unions for stagehands in the traditional theatre industry; however, traveling amusement laborers did not unionize.<sup>75</sup> The seasonality of amusement work may have contributed to this lack of formal organization. Unlike theatre in New York or Chicago, where although shows ran for indeterminate periods of time, stagehands had opportunities to find work in their profession throughout the entire year, traveling amusements had a predetermined end date each year, putting nearly all its laborers out of a job for months. When the traveling season ended, a small number of men were hired on to tend animals or work on equipment in the shows' winter quarters, but in many cases laborers simply disappeared from the historical record. Some likely returned to families, while others may have taken on other temporary work waiting for the show to reopen the following spring. Some returned for another season. Those who did return formed what Higbie described as a "tenuous ethic of mutuality."<sup>76</sup> Showmen, both owners and laborers, participated in the clubs and social activities mentioned above and put forth efforts to take care of one another. This was a step toward welfare capitalism, wherein business owners attempted to quell potential labor conflicts through a series of non-legislative workplace reforms such as education and social programs.<sup>77</sup>

The most substantial way in which show owners supported employees was thorough joining fraternal organizations meant to aid ailing showmen. Those

<sup>73</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 184.

<sup>74</sup> Buffalo Bill's Wild West Route Book, 1896.

<sup>75</sup> "Timeline," International Association of Theatrical Stage Employees, at [www.iatse.net/timeline](http://www.iatse.net/timeline).

<sup>76</sup> Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 200.

<sup>77</sup> Andrea Tone, *The Business of Benevolence: Industrial Paternalism in Progressive America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

who had a lasting career in amusement labor, the “lifers,” formed exclusive fraternal organizations to take care of their own. In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, those in the traveling amusement industry founded several organizations, including the Showmen’s League of America, the Circus Saints and Sinners Club, and the Benevolent Order of American Tigers. The founders of the Benevolent Order of American Tigers came from the middling ranks of the show business, including assistant superintendents, a head waiter, an “in charge” of feed, and a sideshow lecturer.<sup>78</sup> The primary purpose of these groups was to take care of employees who aged out of the business and to raise money for special grave plots for their members. When four circus veterans noticed an upsetting trend in the classified sections of entertainment newspapers where ill and aging showmen out of work begged for charity, they established the Circus Saints and Sinners Club. One of their main goals was to establish “a home to which the old and indigent trouper can wend his tottering way and spend the few remaining years of his life, not in an elaborate manner, but with other old people who talk his language.”<sup>79</sup> “Troupers” here referred to both managers and common amusement laborers. This again demonstrates that amusement men did view themselves as having a unique culture, that their shared experiences on the road created a language and culture which outsiders could not understand. This cultural affiliation was so strong that, as this newsletter notes, some desired to spend their final years among show people.

These organizations provided valuable support for showmen but fell short of changing the dangerous working conditions, or legally requiring owners to provide compensation in the case of accidents. Amusement laborers took great physical risks when they agreed to work for a traveling show and contracts were explicit about this. For example, for the 1901 season of the Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. circus, an employee had to verify that he “accepts and assumes the increased hazard of railway travel and circus service and hereby exempts and releases [the company] from all liability for injuries, accidents, sickness and damages of whatever nature.”<sup>80</sup> This contract also required the worker to “renounce his rights as ‘passenger’ while traveling on any railway line.” This was likely so that amusement impresarios might elicit better deals from railroad agents if they could offer protection from risk for the railway company. While this was beneficial for both the amusement and the railroad company, releasing them from liability, it was to the detriment of the laborer. Here the worker assumed all risk. For laborers, fraternal orders were a method of protection in this changing economy, providing support in difficult times,

<sup>78</sup> Barnum & Bailey Route Book, 1905, Box 47, MC, PUL.

<sup>79</sup> Chipman, *Hey Rube*, 154. <sup>80</sup> Employment contract for Ed Ames.

while for employers, participating in these organizations gave them the appearance of maintaining a familial relationship and providing aid to employees during times of need, without providing more comprehensive benefits or protections in their contracts.

To grow the amusement industry, show business impresarios needed men willing to perform hard labor. Maintaining this labor force was a difficult task, given the challenging living and working conditions on a big show. The showmen's culture was a means of making the industry more attractive to potential employees. This was a benefit to amusement proprietors who needed the "spectacular labor," as Janet Davis described it, of amusement workers to keep their businesses operating. Audiences rushed to circus grounds early in the morning to catch a glimpse of the impressive, machine-like process of erecting the tented city on the show grounds. This performative labor furthered the growth of the commercial entertainment industry by providing the work necessary to get shows onto the rails, allowing them to expand their reach and grow their audience, while also helping to clean up the reputation of traveling amusements. Many commentators, including show business impresarios and laborers alike, depicted amusement companies as familial rather than antagonistic. Show owners publicly touted the morality and respectability of their workingmen, while at the same time turning a blind eye to their laborers' behind-the-scenes activities, passively permitting unsavory traditions such as the "Hey Rube" to persist, even allowing mentions of it in the published company route books. Amusement laborers' participation in group tradition, as well as their feelings of marginalization due to their status as *showmen* rather than their economic class, meant that in many cases where laborers might have turned against management they instead felt a duty to their fellow showmen, despite how radically different their position on the corporate ladder may have been. Therefore it was in show business impresarios' interest to permit workers to continue social practices that strengthened affective bonds among colleagues to deter unrest, maintaining a public image of corporate peace. Although negative stereotypes of "carny" culture still exist today, the process of negotiated loyalty through which amusement laborers developed the showmen's culture was a significant part of growing the traveling amusement industry, which in turn fertilized the ground from which the commercial entertainment industry in the United States blossomed.

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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