

What's Happening

I N T H E U S A ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

VOL 24, NO 7 MARCH 2017

Ringling Bros. Closes Its Circus

For 146 years the Ringling Bros. Circus has been traveling to towns across America. However, for some years things have been changing. Operating costs continue to rise and fewer people attend the shows. Finally in January the owners announced that they must close the business.

The history of the circus goes back to England in the mid-1700s. A man who owned horses hired trick riders to show their talents and amaze visitors. They did it in circular area called a circus. Later it became known as the ring, and the business itself became the circus.

In America the circus evolved in the 1800s. First someone used a tent. Then a few others began putting exotic animals on display. In 1871 P.T. Barnum started a traveling show. He had various acts and put animals on exhibit. Not long after that the circus began traveling by special trains. They also added a second and third ring so that they could entertain more guests in each town.

In 1884 five brothers named Ringling began performing in Wisconsin. They were jugglers, clowns, musicians, dancers and singers. They formed their first circus in a partnership with the small John Robinson Circus. They had a traveling wagon and a rented horse. Soon they added a trick horse and a bear to their acts. After Mr. Robinson died, two other two brothers joined the operation. After that they began using the name that became famous: Ringling Bros.

Two circuses, Barnum & Bailey and the Ringling Bros., dominated the circus world in America. They did not want to compete with each other, so they agreed to go different places. The Ringling Bros. visited many small towns and out-of-the-way places. The arrival of the circus train in a town became an event in itself. People watched enthusiastically as performers and exotic animals came off the train.

Ringling Bros. began to buy up smaller circuses. Then in 1907 it bought the other large circus, Barnum & Bailey. By 1910 Ringling Bros. employed more than 1,000 people. Its 92 train cars carried 335 horses,

26 elephants, 16 camels and other animals. During World War I audiences for the two circuses shrank, so in 1919 Ringling Bros. merged with Barnum & Bailey and formed "The Greatest Show on Earth." By the 1930s the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus was perhaps the largest and most famous circus in the world.

Attitudes about animals in circuses have changed over the last 50 years. The circus used to be a rare opportunity to see and learn about wild animals.

Then people began to understand that wild animals belong in their native habitats. Animal rights became a political movement too. In 1970 the U.S.

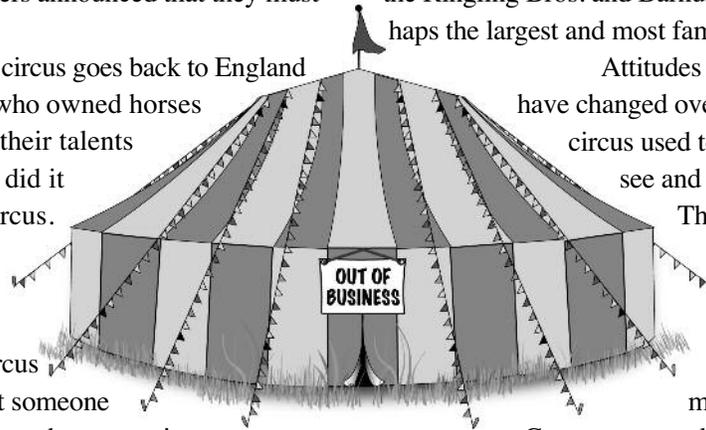
Congress passed the Animal Welfare Act.

That law led to standards for the treatment of warm-blooded animals, including by circuses.

Animals rights groups have investigated circuses. They have found that animals travel and perform for 48 weeks per year. Elephants, bears and large cats travel in confined spaces in railcars, trailers and trucks. Often their cages are filthy, and the animals do not get proper medical attention. Training methods include severe punishment with whips and electric prods. Trainers also use bullhooks, long tools with a sharp steel point and hook that can wound elephants.

Ringling Bros. did try to adapt to modern times. In recent years the circus hired its first African American ringmaster, and then its first female ringmaster too. It added acts like motorbike daredevils and ice skaters. The crucial change took place in May 2016 when, after legal battles with animal rights groups, it removed elephants from the circus. They always had been the most popular act, and ticket sales fell dramatically.

Americans have lost interest in the old-fashioned circus. Many cities and states have banned circuses with animals, or at least ban their exotic animals. Now people also can see many circuses that do not use animals at all. The Ringling Bros. Circus was once the "Greatest Show on Earth," but no longer. After its last show in May, the circus will leave town for good.



What's Happening

I N T H E U S A ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

VOL 24, NO 7 MARCH 2017

Ringling Bros. Closes Its Circus

For 146 years the Ringling Bros. Circus has traveled across America. However, for some years things have been changing. Its costs continue to rise and fewer people attend the shows. Finally in January the owners announced that they must close the business.

The history of the circus goes back to England in the mid-1700s. A man with horses hired trick riders to show their talents and amaze visitors. They did it in a circular area called a circus. Later that area became the ring, and the business became the circus.

In America the circus evolved in the 1800s. First someone used a tent, and others displayed exotic animals. In 1871 P.T. Barnum started a traveling show. He had various acts and put animals on exhibit. Soon the circus began traveling by special trains. They also added a second and third ring.

In 1884 five brothers named Ringling began performing in Wisconsin. They were jugglers, clowns, musicians, dancers and singers. They formed their first circus in a partnership with a small circus. Soon they added a trick horse and a bear to their acts. After the partner died, they began using the name that became famous: Ringling Bros.

Two circuses, Barnum & Bailey and the Ringling Bros., dominated the circus world in America. The Ringling Bros. became popular by visiting many small towns and out-of-the-way places. The arrival of the circus train became an event in itself. People watched as performers and exotic animals came off the train.

Ringling Bros. began to buy up smaller circuses. Then in 1907 it bought Barnum & Bailey. By 1910 Ringling Bros. employed more than 1,000

people. The two circuses used 92 train cars to carry 335 horses, 26 elephants, 16 camels and other animals. Audiences shrank during World War I, so in 1919 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey formed one circus. By the 1930s their "The Greatest Show on Earth" was perhaps the best in the world.

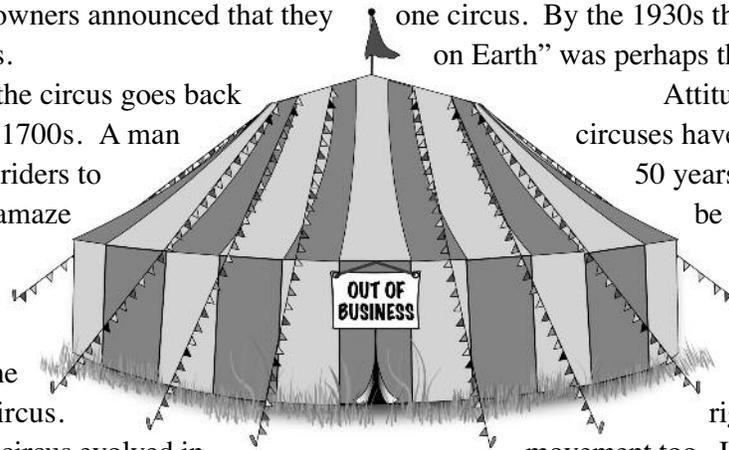
Attitudes about animals in circuses have changed over the last 50 years. The circus used to be a rare opportunity to see wild animals. Then people learned that wild animals belong in their native habitats. Animal rights became a political movement too. In 1970 a law in the U.S.

set standards for the treatment animals by circuses.

Animals rights groups investigated circuses. They found that animals travel in confined spaces in railcars and trucks. Often their cages are filthy, and the animals lack proper medical attention. Trainers punish animals with whips and electric prods. They also use bullhooks, long tools with a sharp steel point and hook that can wound elephants.

Ringling Bros. did try to adapt to modern times. In recent years the circus hired its first African American and female ringmasters. It added acts like motorbike daredevils and ice skaters. The big change came in May 2016. After legal battles with animal rights groups, it removed elephants from the circus. That is when ticket sales fell dramatically.

Americans have lost interest in the old-fashioned circus. Many cities and states now ban circuses with exotic animals. Now people also can see circuses without any animals at all. The Ringling Bros. Circus was once the "Greatest Show on Earth," but no longer. After its last show in May, the circus will leave town for good.



Background Information

An estimated 10 million people go to see the Ringling Bros. Circus each year. Currently the circus employs about 500 people.

When Ringling Bros. ended its elephant act in May 2016, it sent the remaining 11 elephants to live on a 200-acre Center for Elephant Conservation in Polk City, Florida. The owners had established it in 1995.

Ringling Bros. says that it will find suitable homes for its other animals. They include lions, tigers, camels, donkeys, alpacas, kangaroos and llamas.

In 1882 P.T. Barnum introduced an Asian elephant named Jumbo.

Around the world countries and cities have imposed various bans. Some ban any circus that uses animals, while others ban those with wild animals. Some have banned the use of bullhooks. That effectively makes it impossible for circuses to use elephants.

In the U.S. there are bans of some sort in 27 states. Many cities, including Oakland and Los Angeles, have banned bullhooks. In 2016 Rhode Island became the first state to ban them. California's statewide ban takes effect in 2018.

In the wild elephants have a natural territory covering up to 2,300 square miles.

Circus elephants often have to wear shackles that may be only five feet long. Many suffer broken legs and go lame from having to stand for long hours on hard surfaces.

There are a number of circuses without animals. Perhaps the most famous of them is Cirque du Soleil. Such circuses feature acrobatics, trapeze artists, dance, magic, music, costumes, comedy, juggling and bicycle tricks.

The 1966 movie "Born Free" made an impact on animal rights. The film tells of a couple who raised an abandoned lion cub and then set it free in Kenya.

The animal rights group PETA celebrated the announcement by Ringling Bros. The president of the Humane Society of U.S. said: "I applaud their decision to move away from an institution grounded on inherently inhumane wild animal acts."

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- Describe some of the things that you would expect to see at a circus.

Comprehension:

- Trace how the shift in attitudes toward circus animals happened.

Beyond the Text:

- Give some examples that show the differences between positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement in shaping the behavior of animals or humans.
- Explain how you have learned about wild animals. Describe one that you find especially interesting, and describe its native habitat.
- Why do you suppose that zoos do not generally receive the same criticism that circuses have?

Vocabulary (*advanced article only)

Article-specific: exotic; native habitat; political; welfare; standards; warm-blooded*; confined; severe*; electric prod; to wound; daredevil

High-use: circular; to evolve; various; on exhibit; to dominate; to compete*; to shrink; to merge*; attitude; to investigate; method; to adapt; to ban

Sources

National Public Radio "The Two-way" January 15, 2017

Rolling Stone January 15, 2017

Los Angeles Times January 14, 2017

New York Times January 14, 2017

Mother Jones Nov./Dec. 2011

Humane Society of the United States

www.humanesociety.org

Wisconsin Historical Society www.wisconsinhistory.org

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

www.peta.org

Circopedia www.circopedia.org

Common Core Curricular Standards

Reading — Grades 5–12

Quote accurately from text

Cite textual evidence

Draw inferences

Determine central ideas

Analyze structure of text

Interpret words and phrases