

# The Death-Defying Saga of the American Circus: Barnum, Bailey, and Ringling

## The Early Days of the American Circus

The American circus traces its roots back to the early 19th century, when traveling shows began to offer a variety of entertainment, including acrobats, jugglers, clowns, and animal acts. One of the most famous of these early shows was P.T. Barnum's American Museum, which opened in New York City in 1841. Barnum was a master showman, and he quickly became known for his outlandish promotions and larger-than-life personality.

In 1871, James Anthony Bailey joined forces with Barnum to create the Barnum & Bailey Circus. Bailey was a skilled equestrian and animal trainer, and he helped to bring a new level of excitement to the circus. The Barnum & Bailey Circus quickly became one of the most popular attractions in the world, and it toured extensively throughout the United States and Europe.



## Battle for the Big Top: P.T. Barnum, James Bailey, John Ringling, and the Death-Defying Saga of the American Circus

by Les Standiford

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## **The Golden Age of the American Circus**

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were the golden age of the American circus. During this time, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus emerged as the dominant force in the industry. The Ringling Bros. were a family of circus owners who had started their own show in 1884. In 1907, they merged with the Barnum & Bailey Circus to create the largest circus in the world.

The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus was a traveling extravaganza that featured hundreds of performers, animals, and attractions. The circus traveled by train, and it would stop in each town for a few days to perform under the Big Top. The circus was a major source of entertainment for people of all ages, and it helped to create a sense of community in small towns and cities across the country.

## **Death-Defying Feats**

The American circus was known for its death-defying feats. Acrobats would perform daring stunts high above the ground, while animal trainers would work with dangerous animals. Clowns would engage in slapstick comedy, and daredevils would perform feats of strength and agility.

One of the most famous death-defying feats was the human cannonball. The human cannonball was a performer who would be shot out of a cannon into a net. The feat was extremely dangerous, and several performers were killed or injured while attempting it.

Another popular death-defying feat was the high wire act. High wire artists would walk or cycle across a thin wire that was suspended high above the ground. The feat required a great deal of skill and balance, and several performers fell to their deaths while attempting it.

## **Larger-Than-Life Characters**

The American circus was filled with larger-than-life characters. P.T. Barnum was a master showman who was known for his outlandish promotions and his ability to create a sense of wonder and excitement. James Anthony Bailey was a skilled equestrian and animal trainer who helped to bring a new level of excitement to the circus. John Ringling was a shrewd businessman who helped to build the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus into the largest circus in the world.

In addition to these larger-than-life characters, the circus was also home to a cast of colorful performers. Acrobats, jugglers, clowns, and animal trainers all played a vital role in the success of the circus. These performers were often from different cultures and backgrounds, and they brought a unique blend of skills and talents to the show.

## **The Decline of the American Circus**

The American circus began to decline in popularity in the mid-20th century. The rise of television and other forms of entertainment made it difficult for the circus to compete. In addition, the circus was facing increasing pressure from animal rights activists.

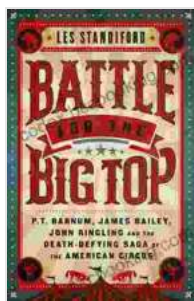
In 1956, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus merged with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus to form the Ringling Bros. and Barnum &

Bailey Combined Shows. The combined circus continued to tour for several years, but it eventually closed its doors in 2017.

## The Legacy of the American Circus

The American circus is a uniquely American phenomenon. It has thrilled audiences of all ages for over 200 years, and it has played a significant role in American culture. The circus has introduced us to some of the most amazing performers in the world, and it has created a sense of wonder and excitement that is unmatched by any other form of entertainment.

The American circus may be gone, but its legacy lives on. The circus has left a lasting impact on American culture, and it continues to inspire artists, performers, and writers today.



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