

Through  
THE  
Looking  
Glass

# The NEW BERN MIRROR

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Yesterday was when few if any New Bernians considered it in bad taste to patronize side shows at fairs and carnivals, where grotesquely deformed human beings were exhibited.

With curiosity whetted by a leather lunged barker, who stood on a platform outside the tent, and the brilliantly painted pictures erected behind him, so called normal mortals eagerly shelled out money to view the "freaks."

This is one aspect of the good old days that all of us ought to react to with revulsion. Morbid curiosity, in varying degrees, is with us always, but compassion for the less fortunate and a sense of common decency should be too.

Embraced in North Carolina's Revenue Act of 1822 was a provision to license shows displaying "natural curiosities" or "artificial curiosities." Natural curiosities, and that meant people and animals born with physical defects, called for a license fee of \$15.

This was collected by the Sheriff of the County where the show was playing. The license, when issued, contained a complete list of the humans and animals who would be on exhibition. License fees were turned over to the State.

This permit was good for a full year in the County where it was issued, but most shows played only a week before moving on. Since New Bern was the one town of any size in Craven County, few shows pitched tent elsewhere.

Included among "natural curiosities" were midgets, giants, fat men, double-jointed individuals, bearded ladies, Siamese twins, two-headed calves, snakes, wild animals, and individual born without arms, legs, or ears, or born with extra arms, fingers, toes or sex organs.

The "artificial curiosities" included everything from the tattooed men and the wild man from Borneo to wax figures or carve figures and all performers in costume.

Disgustingly, we think, the State of North Carolina gave special consideration to shows that reaped their profits solely from human monstrosities. A "natural curiosities" owner, as already stated, paid \$15 for a license, while a show without "freaks" paid \$30.

Judging by the preferential treatment accorded those who traded in human misery, the State evidently considered gawking at deformity more educational, cultural and elevating than other types of "entertainment."

As the State spelled out in Chapter 1129, Section 6, of the Laws of North Carolina, as reported in the Revised Statutes 1836-37, Chapter 102, Section, 17, the \$30 license applied to the following:

"Each and every person or company of stage players, sleight of hand performers, rope dancers, tumblers and wire dancers, or circus riders or equestrian performers."

Most parents in the good old

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A child's world begins  
With once upon a time,  
Wonders in a fairy tale  
And a favorite rhyme.

—Photo by Jack Layne,  
Chick & Jack's Studio.