

"The Mighty Barnum"



AS THE MOST FAMOUS COMMENTATORS OF RADIO RECALL HIM TODAY

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TELLS ABOUT "Re-Joice Heath"

See the 20th Century Picture with WALLACE BEERY

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IT WOULD be just as easy to portray P. T. Barnum as saint or sinner, exemplar of scoundrelism or success. He was as proud to be called "Prince of Humbugs" as "Prince of Showmen" and his delight in catching those suckers of whom one is born every minute was never clouded by a meticulous conscience. Yet his fervent devotion to the Universalist Church and to the cause of temperance, were just as sincere as his conviction that people love to be humbugged. He prefaced his revealing autobiography with two quotations: one from Shakespeare, the other from P. T. Barnum who said: "The noblest art is that of making others happy."

One wonders which phase of this Janus-faced American's life and personality will be emphasized in the Twentieth Century production, "The Mighty Barnum". Perhaps author, actor and director of this forthcoming picture will be unable or unwilling to agree. Then we will see two or three Barnums instead of a single, unified, consistent personality. If the screen should give us this impression it might be nearer the truth than in trying to make this "most typical American" better or worse than he was in real life.

His contemporaries certainly disagreed about him from the time he began playing boyish pranks on his Connecticut neighbors until his death in 1891, as the world's greatest showman. Throughout the 81 years of his life people argued about him and his doings. While it may be true that his enemies were more respectable than his friends, both were fervent in debating the eternal question, "Is Barnum a fraud?" This led a poetic admirer of Bridgeport's most notorious citizen to write:

"Of all demerit wonderments that swell his fame and pelf, There never was a dander one than Barnum is himself."

The debate on Barnum's character began long before he became a showman. It followed him through his early career as boy trader, country store clerk, lottery ticket salesman, book auctioneer, country editor and boarding house keeper. It was in 1835 while Barnum was running his New York boarding house at 52 Frankfort Street that Lady Luck guided his entry into the business that was to become his life work.

New England Tip

A Connecticut guest, one Coley Bartram, told his twenty-five year old host quite casually about selling his interest in an old negro woman—slavery was still an honored American institution—named Joice Heth. He showed Barnum the clipping of an advertisement in the Pennsylvania Inquirer of July 15, 1835. The curious thing about this advertisement, the text of which is preserved for us only by Barnum himself in his autobiography, is that the style and manner of the text resembles no one's if not Showman Barnum's. One may be permitted to wonder whether it was not created by the fertile imagination of the master showman. Here it is: "CURIOSITY. — The citizens of Philadelphia and its vicinity have an opportunity of witnessing at the Masonic Hall, one of the greatest natural curiosities ever witnessed, viz: JOICE HETH, a negress, aged 161 years, who formerly belonged to the father of General Washington. She has been a member of the Baptist Church, one hundred and sixteen years, and can rehearse many hymns, and sing them according to former custom. She was born near the old Potomac River in Virginia, and has for ninety or one hundred years lived in Paris, Kentucky, with the Bowling family."

Bartram told Barnum that he had sold out his interest in this curiosity to his partner who was also anxious to sell out and return to his Kentucky home. Now let us hear Barnum tell what he found when, his showman's blood and Yankee thirst for profit stirred by opportunity, he went to Philadelphia to see the 161 year old negress.

A Real Curiosity

"Joice Heth was certainly a remarkable curiosity, and she looked as if she might have been far older than her age as advertised. She was apparently in good health and spirits, but from age or disease, or both, was unable to change her position; she could move one arm at will, but her lower limbs could not be straightened; her left arm lay across her breast and she could not remove it; the fingers of her left hand were drawn down so nearly to close it, and were fixed; the nails on that hand were almost four inches long and extended above her wrist; the nails on her large toes had grown to the thickness of a quarter of an inch; her head was covered with a thick bush of grey

hair; but she was toothless and totally blind, and her eyes had sunk so deeply in the sockets as to have disappeared altogether."

It all sounds so convincing as the great P. T. Barnum knew how to make things sound. "The evidence seemed authentic," he tells us, and in answer to the inquiry (presumably made by the sceptical Yankee from Connecticut) why so remarkable a discovery had not been made before, explanation was given that she had been carried from Virginia to Kentucky, had been on the plantation of John S. Bowling so long that no one knew or cared how old she was, and only recently the accidental discovery by Mr. Bowling's son of the old bill of sale in the Record Office in Virginia had led to the identification of this negro woman as the nurse of Washington.

"Everything seemed so straightforward," says Barnum, that he determined to buy Joice Heth and become a showman. He had already learned how to buy and quickly beat down the price from \$3,000 to \$1,000. Even this was high for a young married man who only had \$500, but Barnum never lacked courage when it came to backing his judgment on a money-making venture. He was by nature a gambler in any game where he could both deal the cards and play the hand. He borrowed \$500 and launched upon the career that made him famous.

Keen Nose for News

What distinguished Barnum from his predecessors in the show business was his keen sense of publicity. He knew as no one before him that "it pays to advertise." Instinctively he sensed it was not so important that Joice Heth should be all that was claimed if only those claims aroused the curiosity of a sufficient number of prospective customers. "At the outset of my career," says Barnum, "I saw that everything depended upon getting the people to think and talk and

tune, and taught him that he had found his true vocation.

Not Proven Fake

Was she really 161 years old? Medical evidence says no. She died in 1836 and the autopsy indicated that she might have been little over eighty. But the doctors disagreed so Barnum felt he was justified in accepting the claims that had led him to invest his entire fortune in this living mummy. In his autobiography Barnum frankly says he does not know whether the old woman was a conscious or unconscious impostor. "I taught her none of these things," he adds.

Alexander Herten, a Russian novelist and journalist living in London, published in 1856 a scathing analysis of Barnum's character and methods. Basing his conclusions entirely on what he read in the uncensored first edition of Barnum's autobiography, he summarizes the Joice Heth episode as follows:

"Barnum, incidentally, found an old, broken-down, half-demented woman who was continually mumbling some incomprehensible nonsense. He conceived on the spot that it would be a good idea to exhibit the old woman as the nurse of George Washington. What is there to require lengthy reflection? Posters—and the thing was settled. He carried her from town to town, and wherever he went with her, everybody said it was a humbug, an imposition, and an absurdity; that Washington's nurse would be, if living, at least one hundred and fifty years old. Everybody was in a hurry to satisfy his or her curiosity, and ran to see the old woman. One crowd left with loud laughter, and another entered the booth. Both are sure that it is all a humbug and nonsense, and meanwhile Barnum pockets thousands upon thousands.

"After he had everywhere exhibited his siren, Tom Thumb, the false nurse of George Washington, and the true Jenny Lind, Barnum shuffled into high honesty. He was the chairman of many charitable societies and gave fatherly advice to those who were just beginning to make a place for themselves in the world. From the middle-class viewpoint, the past does not affect a million in the safe. A million covers a multitude of sins."

Barnum Criticized

This kind of criticism followed Barnum throughout his life. In the



Joice Heth brought Barnum \$1500 in a week.

become curious and excited over and about 'the rare spectacle'."

It was in behalf of Joice Heth that he first produced those astounding handbills, posters, transparencies, banners, advertisements and newspaper puff paragraphs that created a new era in amusement advertising. It was as though Barnum had said: "It's not what you have—it's what people think you have that counts." Joice Heth herself worked valiantly for her employer by singing old hymns and talking about playing with "baby George."

Barnum sensed instinctively the publicity value of controversy. When the first interest in Joice Heth died down he wrote an anonymous letter to the newspapers charging that the old woman was only an ingeniously constructed automaton made of whalebone, rubber and springs which only talked through a ventriloquist. That brought people back for a second visit.

Joice Heth brought her owner as much as \$1,500 in a single week, laid the foundation for his first for-

eyes of his contemporaries, he was Janus-faced, looking out on the world with both the benignant smile of religious peace and the crafty sneer of commercial war. One thinks of the self-advertising antics of Huey Long as presenting a modern version of one side of the great showman's personality. Perhaps, when the Louisiana Senator is twenty years older, he, too, will become the benignant patriarch who gives an eager world moral counsel on how to live wisely and achieve success. Perhaps, too, since we all prefer to be charitable, it would be well to remember a few homely lines addressed to Barnum which appeared in the Boston "Saturday Evening Gazette":

"You humbugged us—that we have seen.
We got our money's worth, old fellow.
And though you thought our minds were green,
We never thought your heart was yellow!"

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