

“The Circus Comes to Town”

For entertainment-starved frontier towns, the arrival of a traveling circus was a thrilling, community event, eagerly attended by almost everyone. Mary Chase Walker, one of San Diego’s first school teachers, described a Mexican circus that came soon after her arrival in the small town in July 1865:

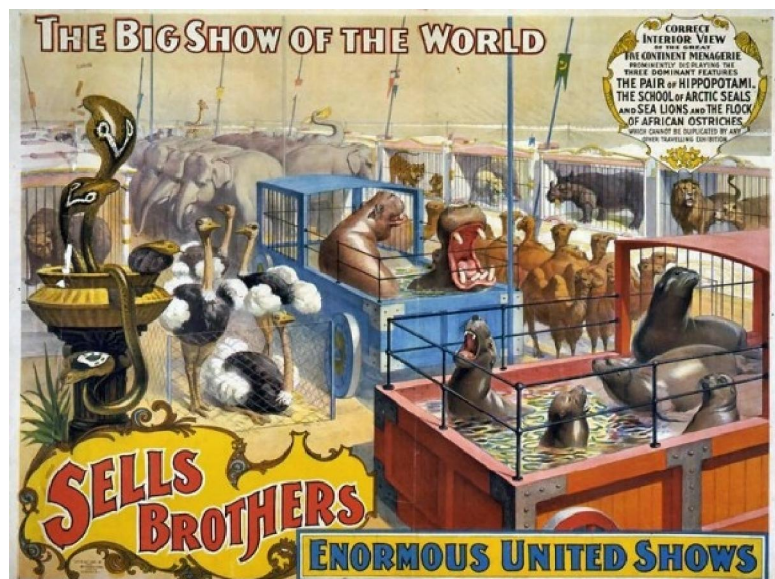
It exhibited in the evening in a corral with high adobe walls, the company having no tents. The place was lighted by strips of cloth laid in cans of lard and then set on fire. The primitive lanterns were set on high posts and at best furnished a poor light. The spectators included nearly all of the population of the town who could pay the admittance fee of fifty cents. I think the Indians were admitted at half-price. The Americans and Spanish occupied one side of the corral, and the Indians squatted on the ground on the other. The performance on the trapeze and tight-rope looked especially weird and fantastic in the smoky light of those primitive lanterns.

The first American circus came to town in January 1869 when George F. Ryland brought his “Exposition Circus” down the rough wagon road from Los Angeles for three performances in Old Town and one in New Town. The English-born Ryland had been a performer since age thirteen and could do it all: juggler, tumbler, clown, and equestrian. His company was small--seven performers were listed in a *San Diego Union* advertisement--and all had multiple roles.

Equestrian feats seemed to be the highlight of the evening. Ryland performed on horseback as the “Juggler of Japan” and was joined by the trick riding of Mlle. Elena Jeal in an act called “The Sylph and Highland Piper.” Three clowns, a pantomime act, and the talents of Mr. Horatio Nelson--who made “Music out of a few Pine Sticks”—rounded out a show called “very credible” by the *Union*.

Ryland’s small troupe would make several more stops in San Diego in the coming years, making their last appearance in December 1878. Larger companies began making the journey from Los Angeles to San Diego—many catering to a public fascination with animal acts. Prof. Samwell’s Circus and Animal Show featured performing dogs, monkeys, and goats. “Educated horses” were a highlight of the Sherman Circus, which appeared in 1881 and 1883.

In the mid-1880s, with the arrival of the transcontinental railroad, San Diegans saw their first nationally-known circuses, brought by train from the Midwest. The Ohio-based Sells Brothers circus would be the biggest entertainment event the town had ever seen.



The press agent for Sells arrived in San Diego on September 25, 1886. S. H. Barrett, the brother-in-law of the four Sells brothers, did his job well. The town was plastered with colorful posters announcing the upcoming spectacle. The next day the *Union* described—in Barrett’s words, no doubt—the show’s famed wild animals: “the greatest zoological collection on earth, including all known quadrupeds, wild and wonderful, ever classified in zoology.”

Anticipation of the circus led to local controversy. When the city schools announced they would close for one day to allow the children to attend the show, the parents howled. One concerned father complained in a letter to the *Union*: “I have utterly failed to find the first thing about a circus that would recommend it to me as a means of entertainment or education for children. I should very much regret to have the impression get abroad, that as a community, we consider a ‘circus’ such a superior means of education.”

The Board of Education replied that the children would go to the circus anyway, leaving the classrooms nearly empty. “Necessity, not choice, rules the matter,” the trustees declared. A petition from nearly 400 Russ High School pupils sealed the deal by arguing that they would learn more zoology and natural history by studying the circus’ wild animals than weeks of schoolbook study.

The Sells circus train of thirty rail cars pulled into the depot at the foot of D Street (Broadway) on Thursday morning, October 14. The parade from the station to the show site featured a loud steam calliope, and a herd of elephants and camels. The performers marched through downtown to a vacant lot at Fourth and C Streets, where an enormous canvas tent was quickly erected.

That afternoon and evening several thousand San Diegans—including, presumably, most school children in the county--witnessed the first big-scale circus performance they had ever seen. In three rings the circus presented its array of arena artists, the most astounding of which, seemed to be a live giraffe, and a pair of hippopotami running loose in the rings.

The next fall the city greeted the John Robinson circus. A “hard crowd” of several hundred gamblers and confidence men were known to be accompanying the circus, warned the *Union*. “The men have all kind of swindling games and devices with them and among the followers are some of the cleverest pickpockets and sneak thieves in the country.”

San Diegans braved the pickpockets and attended the show in huge numbers. The circus treasurer estimated 7000 people were under the canvas for the Saturday night performance, perhaps one-quarter of the entire city population.

With the return of the Sells Brothers on October 13, 1888, San Diegans saw their biggest circus yet. Over forty railroad cars came to a stop near 26th Street and Logan Ave. where a mammoth “Roman Hippodrome” tent the length of a football field was pitched. The traditional procession through town began two hours later followed by matinee and evening shows.

The circus boasted of 300 performers. Acrobats, clowns, jugglers, equestrians, trapeze artists, and tight-rope walkers performed in 90 acts in the tent’s three rings. The featured act was the marksman Captain Adam Bogardus--the “champion wing-shot of the world”--and his three sons.

But the public seemed just as fascinated by the “wild beasts” housed in fifty cages, including “the only pair of blood-sweating hippopotami on earth.”

Like most big railroad circus shows, the Sells would perform for only one day before moving to the next town. “The great circus has come and gone,” reported the *Union*, “and thousands of people testify that the Sell Brothers have produced the best combination ever shown on the Pacific Coast.”



A poster for the Sells Brothers three-ring circus in the 1880s. *Library of Congress*

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