

# NATIONAL POULTRY SHOW POLKA



Barnum and some feathered friends, as depicted on the cover to "Barnum's National Poultry Show Polka," 1850. "Gods! What a crowing!" the showman wrote to a friend in reference to one such exhibition at the American Museum.

# P. T. BARNUM

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The Legend and the Man

A. H. SAXON



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS  
NEW YORK

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1811  
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S29  
1989

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS  
New York Oxford  
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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Saxon, A. H.

*P.T. Barnum : the legend and the man / A. H. Saxon.*

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-231-05686-9 (alk. paper)

1. Barnum, P. T. (Phineas Taylor), 1810-1891.

2. Circus owners—United States—Biography.

I. Title.

GV1811.B3S29 1989

791.3'092—dc20

[8]

89-982

CIP

*Clothbound editions of Columbia University Press books are Smyth-sewn  
and printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.*

*Book design by Jennifer Dossin*

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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# Showman Barnum

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By this time it was clear to my mind that my proper position in this busy world was not yet reached. I had displayed the faculty of getting money, as well as getting rid of it; but the business for which I was destined, and, I believe, made, had not yet come to me; or rather, I had not found that I was to cater for that insatiate want of human nature—the love of amusement; that I was to make a sensation on two continents; and that fame and fortune awaited me so soon as I should appear before the public in the character of a showman. These things I had not foreseen. I did not seek the position or the character. The business finally came in my way; I fell into the occupation, and far beyond any of my predecessors on this continent, I have succeeded.

*Autobiography*

“IF BEING MADE for a thing is a divine call to that thing,” Barnum’s last pastor in Bridgeport, the Reverend Lewis B. Fisher, once wrote of his famous parishioner, “then Mr. Barnum was divinely called to be a showman.”<sup>1</sup> But the “call” had not yet come when Barnum moved with his family to New York City, where by his own account he knocked about for several months without finding congenial employment. His hopes of finding something suitable in the “mercantile” line were quickly dissipated, and when his resources began to fail, he took the ignominious position of “drummer” to a cap and stock store, which paid him a small commission on sales made to customers whom he introduced. Meanwhile, he investigated and rejected various business opportunities advertised in the newspapers. One of these, interestingly, took him to the lecture room of Scudder’s American Museum, where he was offered by its owner the “great Hydro-oxygen Microscope,” whose price of \$2000 was beyond his reach. “I had long fancied that I could succeed if I could only get hold of a public exhibition,” he writes. On another occasion he applied for the job of bartender at Niblo’s Garden, a famous New York pleasure resort, but balked when its proprietor announced he was seeking someone who would agree to remain in the position for a minimum of three years. With money belatedly received from debts owed him in Bethel, in the spring of 1835 he opened a small boardinghouse in Frankfort Street. Around the same time he became



partner in a grocery store with John Moody, whose grandson was to found the well-known Moody's Investors Service.<sup>2</sup>

While attending to business at the latter establishment, Barnum learned of the extraordinary opportunity that was to launch him on his career as a showman. And although he somewhat shamefacedly acknowledged in later editions of his autobiography that this was "the least deserving of all my efforts in the show line," he made no such apology in the original edition. Joice Heth is undoubtedly the most enigmatic episode in Barnum's entire career, for one is never certain how much he really knew—or chose not to know—in regard to this imposition. In his writings and public pronouncements he swore he had been taken in like everyone else; and considering this was his first venture in the "show line," and that he made no bones about his involvement in any number of later frauds, we should probably take him at his word. But there is another version of the story, told by a journalist friend who supposedly got it directly from Barnum, which we shall shortly come to.

As Barnum tells the story in his autobiography, toward the end of July 1835 he learned from Coley Bartram, a Connecticut acquaintance, that a Kentuckian named R. W. Lindsay wished to sell his interest in an exhibition known as "Joice Heth." The last was in fact a blind, decrepit, hymn-singing black slave, whom Lindsay had contracted for with her owner, John S. Bowling, also of Kentucky, for a period of twelve months. The original agreement between Lindsay and Bowling, dated 10 June 1835, is extant and reveals both men planned to travel with Heth "in and amongst the cities of the United States," sharing equally in the expenses and profits, although Bowling took the precaution of binding Lindsay to assist him back to Cincinnati in the event his property should expire on the road, "as he is infirm" and obviously could not get around on his own. Apparently John Bowling had second thoughts about this hazardous expedition, for only five days later he sold his half-interest in the exhibition to Coley Bartram, who in turn sold out to Lindsay in Philadelphia on 24 July. As Bartram now assured Barnum, Lindsay was himself anxious to sell the remaining ten months of his contract, since he had not much "tact" as a showman and wished to return home.<sup>3</sup>

These rapid changes in management might in themselves have led a more experienced person to suspect something was amiss; but such was the picture painted by Coley Bartram for his fellow Yankee languishing behind the counter of a grocery store that Barnum became "considerably excited upon the subject" and immediately rushed off to Philadelphia. For the great selling point of Joice Heth was that she had reached the astounding age of 161 years and had once been the "nurse" of George Washington! When Barnum first viewed this wonder lying upon her couch in Philadelphia's Masonic Hall, "she might almost as well have been called a thousand years old as any other age." Her withered legs, drawn up, could not be moved; and her left arm, whose hand possessed nails some four inches long, lay across her breast and was equally rigid. Her blind eyes were so sunken that they seemed to have disappeared altogether; her teeth were entirely gone; and her weight, as reported in bills and other advertising matter, was but forty-six pounds. Yet she could talk, and

talk almost incessantly, about her "dear little George" and how she had not only been present at his birth but "raised" him. Besides her store of anecdotes about the "father of our country" and the doings of the "redcoats," Joice was extremely fond of discoursing on religious topics (she had been belatedly baptized in the Potomac in 1719, at the age of forty-five) and singing ancient hymns, many of which, Barnum writes, "were entirely new to me," as indeed they must have been to her other auditors. "She retains her faculties in an unparalleled degree," proclaims a handbill Barnum himself later had printed, "and often laughs heartily at her own remarks."<sup>4</sup> One suspects old Joice would have felt right at home in Connecticut.

The aspiring showman demanded some proof of Joice's extraordinary age, naturally enough, and Lindsay obliged by showing him a crumbling bill of sale, signed by Augustine Washington and dated 5 February 1727, for a Negro woman named Joice Heth, described as then being fifty-four years old. Further inquiry elicited the information that after being sold by Augustine to his neighboring sister-in-law, Joice had assisted at the birth of "little George" and was the first person to clothe him. In time she became the property of the Bowling family and was taken to Kentucky, where she was left to decay unceremoniously in an outbuilding, no one being aware (apparently Joice was not talking much then) of her true age or connection with the illustrious Washington. It was during a visit to Virginia that the son of John Bowling, while looking over some documents in the Virginia Records Office, quite by chance ran across the 1727 bill of sale and became convinced that the Joice Heth named therein was the same as his father's slave. The Virginia officials obligingly let him take the bill of sale home with him, and it was this ancient-looking document, framed under glass, that Lindsay now offered as indisputable proof of his exhibit's remarkable age and history.

Barnum writes that he was satisfied by this story, and that he then received from Lindsay, whose asking price had been \$3000, a written promise to sell him the exhibit for \$1000 provided he could come up with the money within the next ten days. Returning to New York, he sold out to Moody his interest in their grocery store, borrowed \$500 from an unspecified friend, and was back in Philadelphia to clinch the deal on 6 August. The friend, very likely, was William P. Saunders, who initially planned to join Barnum as an equal partner in the exhibiting of Heth. His name appears jointly with Barnum's in the body of the extant agreement between Barnum and Lindsay, but is then crossed out, leaving Barnum as the sole purchaser. Presumably, like John S. Bowling, he too had had second thoughts.

There was no hesitation on the part of Barnum, however, who immediately plunged into the "show line" with a will and from that moment on rarely looked back. He had finally found his true niche in life—had hearkened to the "divine call," his pastor might have said. Returning to William Niblo, to whom he had applied for the position of bartender a few months before, he arranged for the exhibition of Joice in a large room of his house near the Garden, with Niblo agreeing to furnish room, lights, and a ticket seller and to pay the expenses of printing and advertising in return for one-half the gross receipts. On his own



Barnum engaged as his assistant Levi Lyman, a facile conversationalist and onetime lawyer from Penn Yan, New York, whose job was to introduce Joice and answer spectators' questions. Like his employer, Lyman was fond of practical jokes and capable of carrying them off with perfect aplomb. Within a week Barnum had flooded the city with bills and posters and had procured lighted transparencies—a new form of advertising—to announce his attraction. "The result," once Joice arrived from Philadelphia and began exhibiting at Niblo's, "proved an average of about \$1500 per week."

The New York newspapers were appropriately impressed, and Barnum was not loath to reprint their glowing notices in his bills and autobiography. When Joice's powers of attraction began to diminish with Manhattan spectators, he took her on a swing through New England. Abolitionist sentiment was already high in that section of the country, and it would hardly have been diplomatic to broadcast the fact that the curiosity he was traveling with was the property of another. He never went so far as to claim Joice was free; but then he never appears to have actually acknowledged to his patrons that she was still a slave, either. By the time they reached Boston, he had devised a strategy to defuse any hostility on this score and was now quoting in his bills a notice he had planted in the *Providence Daily Journal*. "She has been the mother of fifteen children," readers of that newspaper had been informed, "the youngest of whom died two years ago, at 116 years of age. She has five great-grandchildren, now the slaves of Wm. Bowling, Esq., of Paris, Kentucky, to the purchase of whose freedom the proceeds of this exhibition are to be appropriated. She has herself been taken care of many years in Mr. Bowling's family."<sup>5</sup> While exhibiting Joice at Boston's Concert Hall, Barnum made the acquaintance of the German showman Johann Maelzel, who shut down his exhibition of ingenious automations and famous chess-playing Turk (the "mechanism" of which, exposed by Poe, was a small man or dwarf inside the figure) in the face of such overwhelming competition. Apparently he bore his young rival no grudge, for Barnum writes that they often had long talks together and that Maelzel, impressed by his grasp of the effective use of publicity, even offered to send him on the road with some of his curiosities. In lieu of accepting this interesting offer, when the number of his own patrons began falling off, Barnum took a cue from Maelzel's exhibition and spread the rumor that Joice was an automaton and her manager a ventriloquist. The Hall was quickly crowded again, and many who had previously paid their quarters now returned for a second look at Joice to see if they had indeed been "humbugged."

The exhibition continued through New England and then returned to Niblo's in New York, and later visited several other cities in the East. Eventually Barnum entrusted Joice entirely to Lyman, who in late fall left with her on another tour of New England. Becoming ill, she was taken to the home of Barnum's half-brother Philo in Bethel, where she finally departed this life to join "little George" on 19 February 1836. Philo promptly shipped the remains by sleigh to the house in New York where the Barnums were currently residing.

There now began the most bizarre chapter of all in the history of Joice Heth,



who still had one final exhibition to give. For although Barnum assures us he immediately procured a mahogany coffin and nameplate for Joice's body, and that he was determined to see her respectably buried in the Bethel cemetery, he had previously promised Dr. David L. Rogers, an eminent New York surgeon who had examined Joice upon her first arrival in the metropolis, that he would have the opportunity to dissect her should she die while under Barnum's management. After informing Rogers the time had finally arrived, the showman himself "proceeded to arrange for the examination," which took place on the 25th before a large crowd of physicians, medical students, clergymen, and (naturally) editors, each of whom was assessed fifty cents for this extraordinary privilege. Among this eager group of spectators was Richard Adams Locke, editor of the *New York Sun*, who during the previous summer had been behind the famous "Moon" or "Lunar Hoax," a series of sensational articles in his paper describing the pelicans, winged men, and other interesting objects the astronomer John Herschel was supposed to have observed through a powerful telescope trained on the moon. Locke and Rogers were excellent friends. Indeed, the good doctor was widely believed to have been Locke's accomplice, if not the chief instigator, in getting up the "Moon Hoax."

The doctor and his friend were hardly given to hilarity on the present occasion, however. Instead of ruining his precious scalpels on Joice's ossified arteries, from the state of the last Rogers could only conclude there had been some "mistake," for the cadaver before him, he politely informed Barnum, was in all probability that of a person not over eighty years old. When Lyman, who was present, made an offhand remark about the inability of physicians to determine such matters, Rogers went off in a huff on the arm of Locke. Not surprisingly, on the following day the *Sun* carried an article describing the autopsy and what its editor characterized as "one of the most precious humbugs that ever was imposed upon a credulous community." Although Locke charitably allowed that the exhibitors, who took Joice "at a high price, upon the warranty of others," had probably been deceived as much as anyone, he could not help observing they had made at least \$10,000 out of the fraud.<sup>6</sup>

The confusion among those who had paid to see Joice and who now read Locke's exposé, Barnum writes, was considerable. They could hardly disbelieve the evidence of their own eyes, which had convinced them she must have been at least a hundred years old, and possibly as old as she was represented to be. At this point, he continues, Lyman decided to play a joke of his own. Calling upon James Gordon Bennett at the *New York Herald*, he assured the editor that Joice was still alive and living in Connecticut, and that the body Rogers had dissected was actually that of a Negress named "Aunt Nelly" who had recently died in Harlem. The selection of Bennett as the conduit for this story was surely no accident, for the previous summer, shortly after establishing the *Herald*, the irascible Scots editor had played a leading role in exposing the "Moon Hoax." The present opportunity to take another swipe at Locke and his rival paper was, of course, irresistible.

Bennett confidently published these startling revelations in his paper of 27 February, together with the information—doubtless also contributed by

Lyman or Barnum—that the present hoax was the work of someone, probably another doctor, who had been taken in by the “Moon Hoax” and who had passed off “Aunt Nelly” as the veritable Joice in order to even the score with Rogers and Locke. When the *Sun*, which claimed Rogers had known in advance, from his earlier examination of her, that Joice could not possibly be over eighty years old, now revealed that her exhibitors had come directly from the *Herald* office to boast of deceiving the “despicable and unprincipled scribbler” who edited that paper, the still unsuspecting Bennett followed by publishing affidavits from two persons who had known “Aunt Nelly” and were positive hers was the body Rogers had dissected.<sup>7</sup>

Barnum lays the responsibility for all this entirely at Lyman’s door, and goes on to write that the following September, by which time Bennett realized how badly he had been deceived, the enraged editor blew Lyman “sky high” upon meeting him on the street. Lyman laughingly protested he had meant the tale as a harmless joke and promised to give Bennett the “true” story as a recompense. This the credulous editor also published in a series of four long articles commencing with the paper’s 8 September issue. Although Barnum gleefully writes that Lyman, in this latest cock-and-bull invention, revealed how Barnum himself had discovered and coached Joice, there is in fact no reference to him by name in any of the articles. Instead, readers were now duly informed how Joice’s anonymous exhibitors had extracted all her teeth after getting her drunk, rehearsed her in the famous “peach tree” and other anecdotes, and had frequently been at pains to keep her from swearing. The fake bill of sale had been aged in tobacco water, but needed redrafting by the time the exhibition reached New York, since by then someone had discovered Virginia was referred to as a “state” in this 1727 document. Once in the metropolis, Joice was additionally coached in religion and hymn-singing, her tutors taking care to oil the rough road of instruction with a plentiful supply of whiskey, of which Joice, when not busy “god damning” everything, was inordinately fond. Despite Bennett’s hinting that Joice’s New England adventures would make further good reading, at the end of the fourth article the story abruptly broke off. Either Lyman had conveniently drifted into obscurity again, or Bennett—as seems more likely—had finally awakened to the fact that the “complete” story could only conclude with the revelation of how he himself had been so easily duped.<sup>8</sup>

“The question naturally arises,” Barnum writes in his autobiography, “if Joice Heth was an imposter, *who* taught her these things? And how happened it that she was so familiar, not only with ancient psalmody, but also with the minute details of the Washington family? To all this, I unhesitatingly answer, *I do not know*. I taught her none of these things. She was perfectly familiar with them all before I ever saw her, and she taught me many facts in relation to the Washington family with which I was not before acquainted.” On an earlier occasion he had told another story, however. While visiting England with Tom Thumb in the 1840s, Barnum had gone off on a tour of the Shakespeare country with the journalist Albert Smith. As the two men rattled along in their carriage, the showman regaled his companion with tales of his

adventures; and Smith, in a two-part article he later wrote on the subject, assures us he is reporting Barnum's remarks "nearly word for word as the author heard them." When Barnum came to tell the story of Joice Heth, he described how he himself had forged and aged the documents, drilled Joice in her role, and been the prime mover in this extraordinary "do."<sup>9</sup> In essence it was the same tale that had appeared in the *Herald*, only now with Barnum named as the chief instigator. And in fact the showman himself had published this fantastical story a few years before he ever met Smith, in a strange novella he wrote under a pseudonym.<sup>10</sup> But again, there is the later disclaimer in the autobiography, which Barnum also made in a private letter dating from a year or two before the book's publication. By then R. W. Lindsay, who appears to have become an alcoholic, was sick and down on his luck in Boston; and Barnum, in a letter to a Mr. Baker of that city, generously enclosed \$100 toward his relief. In reply to some assertions Lindsay had been making that Barnum was under obligations to him, Barnum assured Baker that these were "ridiculously false":

I never had anything to do with him except to buy from him, in *perfect good faith* & pay him the money for, an old *negress* which he falsely represented as the "nurse of Washington" and which he imposed on me as such by aid of a *forged bill of sale* purporting to have been made by the *father* of George Washington. I honestly *believed* all this & exhibited accordingly, as Lindsay had done for months previous. Finally she died & the imposition became manifest, and *I* have ever since borne the stigma of *originating* that imposture. I never denied it before—but I might have done so truly. This is all the "obligation" I am under to Lindsay, but he is a poor devil, and I hope to see him recover.<sup>11</sup>

The discrepancy between these later accounts and what Barnum reputedly told Smith can best be explained in terms of youthful bravado. When Barnum was whirling through the English countryside in late summer of 1844, fresh from his recent triumphs with Tom Thumb at Buckingham Palace, he was unabashedly reveling in his reputation as a shrewd Yankee "humbug." He was hardly likely to confess that at the very outset of his career he had been "humbugged" himself, and he was more than willing to let the public believe otherwise for years to come. It would have done him little harm, and possibly even some good, had he chosen to continue the lie when he came to write the first edition of his autobiography. Did he then lean a little too far in the opposite direction? Did he never once suspect the truth about Joice Heth during all those months he was exhibiting and, so unreservedly on his own, publicizing her? Certainly James Gordon Bennett, who had been consistently taken in by Lyman, if not by Barnum himself, never accepted this later explanation. For him Barnum was ever afterward a favorite *bête noir*—that "Joyce Heth in breeches," as he sarcastically characterized him.<sup>12</sup>

"I will only add," Barnum piously writes at the end of the chapter detailing his curious involvement with her, "that the remains of Joice were removed to