

The show must go on: A short history of the circus in Watsonville

Circus
"The street parade of the circus was a big card. Main Street was crowded with people. The attraction in San Francisco (Admission Day Celebration) did not take away all our people." — The Pajaronian, Sept. 11, 1890.

Contrary to popular belief, the saying "The show must go on" did not come from the theater but from the circus. When someone fell from the trapeze or an elephant escaped, this was an emergency call to avoid panic, stampeding and women fainting (and maybe a man or two.) More than 100 circuses were traveling the country by the end of the 1880s, and many a child's dream was to run away from home and join the circus.

The late Tim Arano recalled that when he was a youngster, in order to get into the circus he would try to get a job with the big show to defray the cost of a ticket, which his family could ill afford. The tents were set up at various locations in Watsonville: where the Courthouse Annex is now on Freedom Boulevard; at Fifth and Roriguez streets; on West Beach Street; in the city plaza; and, back in those very early years, along Palm Avenue between Lincoln and Brennan streets.

In September of 1890, John Robinson's circus came to Watsonville proclaiming that it was in its 66th year as the "oldest and best show on earth."

"Robinson's circus would not be the 'original article' to the newspaper fraternity if the popular manager and clown, John Lowlow, was not with the show. He has traveled with the Robinson circus over thirty years and always manages to do most of the hard work. Mr. Lowlow has no superior in his profession, and above all is every inch a gentleman." — The Pajaronian, Sept. 11, 1890.

Robinson's circus was said to combine 10 big shows containing four monster trains, 60 special cars, four full-size circus rings and three monster menageries when it



That Was
Watsonville

Betty Lewis

came back to Watsonville in August of 1892. Exhibits modeled after Solomon's temple and the Queen of Sheba were also added. There were two performances daily at 1 p.m. and 7 p.m.

People were not disappointed. In fact, the local newspaper stated that Robinson's circus had come nearer to giving the advertised attractions than any other circus that had visited Watsonville.

The city license for the circus shows during this time period was \$50 a day plus \$12.50 a day for each sideshow. In 1908, the great Barnum and Bailey Circus came to town and more than 10,000 people thronged to the big tent to see the show. Fifteen hundred men, women and children were on the circus payroll, and 700 horses were used in some capacity or another, according to the advertisements.

The six arenas and exhibition tent, which seated 15,000 people, spread across 14 acres. Every day at 10 a.m. there was a free parade featuring 70 elephants and camels, plus 375 "world-famed artists." Tickets for the big show sold for 50 cents, and 25 cents for children under 12. A special feature was the auto somersault act known as "autos that pass in the air." A reporter wrote: "There is no gainsaying the power of this act to thrill an audience. For four seconds they are simply paralyzed with suspense."

The great American showman P.T. Barnum did more to change the circus than any other man. In 1871, he organized a traveling circus called "P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth"

RP 6-2-05
JOHN ROBINSON'S
10 BIG SHOWS 10
COMBINED.
4 MONSTER TRAINS. 60 SPECIAL CARS.
4 FULL SIZED CIRCUS RINGS 4
BIG CIRCUS COMPANIES
3 MONSTER MENAGERIES 3
WATSONVILLE,
THURSDAY, SEPT. 8th.
\$300,000 FREE STREET PARADE EACH MORNING.



In order to make the exhibition season of 1892 an ever memorable and delightful episode in the history of popular entertainments, the new Historical, Historical, Triumphant and Colossal Borneo graphic, Terapachurian, Dramatic and Musical Spectacle of

Associated Press

This flyer, from August, 1892, extolls the many acts in John

and made the wagons even gaudier. James Bailey joined with Barnum in 1880 and thus the Barnum and Bailey Circus was born. In 1907 they joined with Ringling Brothers, and the large circus traveled in 70 train cars and employed 1,400 people.

You can imagine the wide-eyed youth of Watsonville when those gaily-decorated wagons rolled into town

with the wild animals pacing back and forth behind the steel bars, the steam calliope wheezing tunes and clowns tumbling and cavorting down the street. What child could resist, and what parent could deny?

...

Betty Lewis is a Watsonville-based historian and a regular columnist for the Register-pajaronian.