



## Center on Human Policy

### P.T. Barnum's American Museum<sup>1</sup>

In 1840, many cities in the United States had museums. And many were struggling to survive. Those that were solvent had made the transition from science and education to entertainment and amusement while still maintaining the trappings of the museum's respectability. But even owners and managers who had made the transition had not been bold in embracing and publicizing this new form of museum. Some museum managers simply lacked the calling and skill of showmen to make the successful transition. P.T. Barnum, however, seized on the idea of the museum as an amusement center and launched his museum into the national spotlight. Barnum's skills as a promoter and public relations man even earned him the title of "father of modern day advertising."

Barnum went into the museum business in 1841 when he purchased the failing Scudder's American Museum on the corner of Broadway and Ann streets in the heart of New York City. Opposite the museum was the most prestigious hotel in New York, the Astor House. Four blocks north, was Delmonico's Restaurant, the city's best. In between was City Hall. The offices of the Tribune and the Herald were nearby, as were the photography studio of Mathew B. Brady and the lithography studio of Currier and Ives. Brady photographed the human curiosities that Barnum displayed in his museum. Currier and Ives, known for their popular lithographs, made advertising posters of freaks. Barnum's American Museum, then, in which freaks were the major attraction, was a central part of mainstream America at mid-century, and the fame of the celebrity owner was second to none. The American Museum was not a sleazy operation on the fringe of society; rather, it was quite fashionable and most legitimate.

Almost overnight Barnum transformed the museum into an entertainment center where families would come to spend the day. He accomplished this feat by introducing more and more diverse human oddities and entertainment. Gypsies, albinos, fat boys, giants, dwarfs, and Native Americans were soon on his payroll. Barnum advertising aggressively and made up outlandish stories about his exhibits; he decorated the façade of his museum with bright banners depicting the attractions and had a band outside—practices that became a standard part of the freak show.

The American Museum thrived. By 1850, it was the premier attraction of New York City, and it looked the part. A splendid chandeliered lecture hall had been built, accommodating

3,000 people. There the patrons could be educated and amused by “scientific demonstrations,” skits, magic shows, lectures, ballets, and such drama productions as Uncle Tom’s Cabin as well as “human curiosities” or “freaks.”

Fires were common during the period, and the American Museum was plagued by them. In 1868, when the museum burned to the ground, Barnum retired from the museum business.

©Robert Bogdan, 2004. All rights reserved.

---

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Robert Bogdan, Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988. Used with permission.