

FINAL DRAFT VERSION: FOREWORD TO [CLAYTON ANDERSON'S 'KICKING SAWDUST'](#),
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By Katharine Kavanagh

The collection of photographs in this book stands out from other publications because it focuses on the real lived experiences of Clayton Anderson and his travelling family at the end of the 20th Century. It doesn't try to paint a nostalgic fantasy, or conjure romantic myths of escapism and otherness, but captures instead the true human heart and day-to-day work of the showman life, in an era that is often overlooked in the grand narratives of circus and fairground entertainment.

Browse specialist bookshops, or search online, and it's pretty easy to find publications that document this lifestyle at the *beginning* of the 20th Century. However, the rapid development of other entertainment forms as the century progressed removed travelling circus, fairground and sideshow from the forefront of people's imaginations. The prominence of new entertainment media and the backgrounding of travelling showfolk in the experience of public life, in turn, led to misconceptions that the travelling artforms were dying. In fact, they do what they always have – they adapt and evolve. Within the smaller touring circuit of the UK where I'm from, for example, the worlds of circus and fairground remained much more separated, and sideshow – when it appeared – was associated more with the fair than the circus. Seeing all three elements brought together in this book brings a sense of the magical universe that the combined shows of the United States created for their audiences in the last millennium. Nowadays, we can see sideshow at Coney Island or from specialist cabaret performers; we can visit fairground attractions at year-round theme parks; and we can see circus in theatres, on television and on YouTube, as well as in touring tents. What these experiences don't give us is the sense of camaraderie and community life that the combined shows fostered, and that the photos in this book recollect. Now, in the 21st Century, it's more common for the photo collections I come across to illustrate cutting edge developments in the technical aspects of performance – skills, costumes, settings – rather than a wider representation of the touring lifestyle. I think it's vital that people who still choose to work in the classical touring mode of spectacle and entertainment are represented in contemporary publications and not hidden away as if to be forgotten. Clayton's evocative collection does just this.

While the history of travelling entertainers and itinerant performers dates back to time immemorial, the story of combined shows can be traced through just the last three hundred years. The modern circus form of the Global North was established in London,

England by ex-cavalryman Philip Astley and his wife Patty. The pair began selling tickets to horseback entertainment in 1768, soon adding clowning, acrobatics and other animals – such as Patty’s famous ‘lady’s muff’ of bees¹. The mixed programme was a swift success and, while Philip went on to launch amphitheatres in other European cities to present similar programmes, two of his rivals in London went on to coin the word ‘circus’ to describe the events. By 1793, the circus form had arrived in America courtesy of John Bill Ricketts, an Englishman who had worked in circus establishments in London, then in Scotland, before crossing the Atlantic to introduce the form to a new continent. Within a few decades, America was shipping innovations of its own back to Europe, in particular the idea of travelling under a canvas tent instead of pitching temporary wooden buildings or open air arenas. The industrial revolution in the 19th Century generated a massive expansion of railroads and this allowed showfolk to travel with larger enterprises across greater distances. Over the expanses of American soil, different varieties of travelling entertainment were coming together under single entrepreneurial banners to form vast moving cities of circus acts, sideshow presentations, animal menageries and – later - fairground rides, catering for guests with concessions of food, drinks and confectionary alongside the other diversions.

In contrast to the European tradition, led by performing families and focused on the artistry in the ring, circus historian Dominique Jando comments on the particular character of American circuses as a combination of entertainments ‘run by businessmen’². The most famous of these is undoubtedly the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey enterprise, which traced its lineage from Phineas T. Barnum’s later life venture of ‘P.T. Barnum’s Great Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan, and Hippodrome’, launched when the exhibitor was persuaded out of retirement in 1771 at the age of 60. Ten years later, that show merged with James A. Bailey’s well established circus to become ‘The Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth’. In 1907, the Ringling Brothers conglomerate purchased the show, and another merger with their own circus in 1919 created the moniker which took the iconic enterprise up until its closure in 2017, 146 years from its ostensible beginnings. Smaller showfolk businesses though, have also grown up and thrived across the world and, in the United States, these have been characterised by their multitudinous leisure offerings.

¹ Toulmin, V. 2018. “My wife to conclude performs the rest’ – Patty Astley the first lady of circus’. *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 16:3, p.290-300 (p.296-297)

² Jando, D. ‘Short History of The Circus’ at <http://www.circopedia.org>

The standard set-up of a show traditionally included separate regions for the different entertainments over time – the big top for the circus show, the midway for sideshows and stalls, the menagerie for the animals, the fairground for the thrill rides. Sometimes a 'cooch tent' for titillating adult performance, or a restaurant for more upper-class refreshment. The experience of attending one of these combined shows, however, was enriched by being able to wander among and through these different diversions in one wonderful, here-today-gone-tomorrow world of variety and surprise. In this book, Clayton Anderson has combined his photos to give the reader a similar experience. The elements of circus, sideshow and fairground are not separated into distinct sections, but blend together to give you a sense of wandering through this world as if taking your own trip back there. While artists and other show workers often have clear identities based on their role, for audience members it has often been more difficult to know where circus ends and carnival begins, or where sideshow and fairground divulge from one another. In part, this is why circus is so hard to define for contemporary audiences; perhaps the definition should include this shifting pattern of pieces. While most modern publications try to separate, dissect and determine the various forms, it's a joy to find this book that celebrates the intermingling and blurred edges of the audience experience.

Of course, even in the last 30 years, public attitudes and tastes have shifted with the changing times and the photos taken at the end of 20th Century capture a particular era. While showfolk still travel and provide a variety of entertainments for local populations around the world, certain styles of presentation captured in these photos have fallen out of favour. Long overdue public debates around disability rights, animal rights, racial representation and troublesome gender norms influence the way we look back on some of these images today. While it might first seem natural to tut and look disapproving at scenes that sit awkwardly with modern sensibilities, it's perhaps more productive to consider the complexity of the different societal forces at work. Does inviting people to gaze at your difference perpetuate a distancing and dehumanising effect? Or is there agency in taking a career path and a life-style that allows a level of social prestige, respect or privilege ruled out by other possibilities? Naturally, these are questions too big to be answered with one-size-fits-all glibness in this short introduction. What's valuable, however, is recognition of the different – often conflicting – perspectives. This book offers us a portrait of the life Clayton, his colleagues and family experienced on the road, but the 'big picture' is formed

from the many individual portraits it contains. There were no doubt struggles, and no doubt high times and enjoyment too, as for all of us in any walk of life. I hope the book sparks more than nostalgia or voyeurism, and opens up new ways of considering the vibrant and vital lives of travelling show people who still earn their livings giving the rest of us pleasure.

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