

# THE PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH SOCIETY

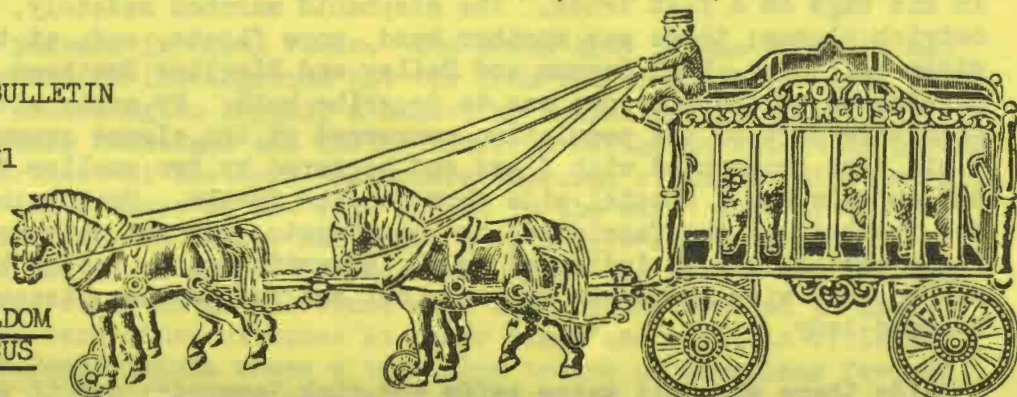
Manly P. Hall, President and Founder

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CONTRIBUTORS' BULLETIN

August, 1981

GRANDMOTHER SELDOM  
MISSED A CIRCUS



Dear Friends:



When I was about nine or ten years old, Grandmother decided to settle down for a time in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Though not by any means a metropolis, Sioux Falls was a major stop on the circus circuit. Not counting small events, the city was favored by Barnum and Bailey, Ringling Brothers, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West. In those days each of these was a completely independent organization, and needless to say there was considerable rivalry. On the outskirts of Sioux Falls, there was a large area of vacant land which was sanctified for the use of circuses. Grandmother would never admit that she had a fancy for circuses, but would insist that I should see them every year. One season I was ailing, but she called upon all her skills in the healing arts to make sure that I would be up and about for the annual appearance of Ringling Brothers.

Sioux Falls had a neat and adequate main street suitable for the grand parade which was indispensable to a successful circus. It was always noted that the parade was two miles long, but everyone knew that the wagons and floats could be a quarter of a mile apart. Grandmother's favorite store was on the ground floor of an office building. It occurred to her that an upstairs front window would be the ideal spot for a clear view of the inevitable parade. One of the second floor offices was occupied by an attorney. She had never met him; but barging in she addressed a fussy little old gentleman seated at a roll-top desk. Her quiet firmness was irresistible, "I'm sure you would not mind if we watch the circus parade tomorrow morning from your front window." Without waiting for a reply, she announced that we would be there at ten-fifteen. Having got one foot in the door, Grandmother watched every parade for the next three years from the same window. She never failed, however, to send a thank you note on her small, black-bordered letter paper.

By the time the parade reached the center of town, most of the citizens, young and old, were lined up along the sidewalk and Grandmother was snugly seated by her open window. First came the police, nattily dressed and riding prancing horses. They were followed by the band who were playing appropriate marching airs. Then appeared several large, decorated wagons in which were

seated the principal performers. The clowns were especially attractive to the children, but even the adults were a little frightened when the tiger came by in his cage on a flat truck. The elephants marched sedately, bedecked with ostrich plumes; there was another band, more floats, and, at the very end, a steam calliope. Both Barnum and Bailey and Ringling Brothers had similar parades so to describe one was to describe both. By early afternoon a considerable part of the population converged at the circus grounds. There was a big tent ornamented with flags and bordered by two smaller tents--one for the animals and a special side show for the freaks. Grandmother rather liked the freaks; she was fascinated by the midgets, was not quite sure that the giant was as tall as indicated by the advertisement. One of her big moments was to chat with the snake charmer, but she sniffed her disapproval of the bearded lady.

Outside there was salt water taffy and pink lemonade, and in due course we were seated on the hard planks which passed for seats. Grandmother was always a little unhappy because the circus had three rings and two platforms and she could not watch them all at once. The acrobats performed without nets in those days, and I remember a performance in which one fell. Grandmother was deeply disturbed and wrote a long letter to management. After the main performance was over, you could remain seated for an epilogue for which an extra twenty-five cents was charged--incidentally, the main fee was one dollar for adults and fifty cents for juniors.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West was different in many ways. There was no main tent but a kind of open amphitheater. This enabled Colonel Cody to do trick rifle shooting without puncturing the Big Top. Buffalo Bill was a prime favorite with the younger set. He was a hero of the Old West, had fought Indians, and pioneered a new land. I remember he was quite a figure when he rode out in a white deerskin suit on his favorite horse. His long white hair hung on his shoulders and he had a nicely trimmed moustache and goatee. An attendant threw small white balls in the air and Cody shot them from the saddle amidst a wild burst of applause. In his closing years, however, his aim faltered and he used a shotgun instead of a rifle.

The performance consisted of bandits holding up a stage coach, the sheriff chasing cattle rustlers, Indians closing in on a wagon train, and a brief but lively rodeo. Incidentally, Buffalo Bill was able to book old Chief Sitting Bull as an attraction at one time and wondrous Annie Oakley, the dead shot of the West, was one of his stars. It was all very wonderful unless it rained. Later Cody combined his program with Major Lilly's Asiatic Circus which included oriental tumblers, dancers, and acrobats. Lilly went under the name Pawnee Bill--it was a great team while it lasted.

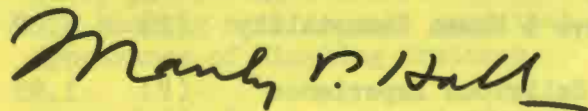
The Indians held quite an attraction for Grandmother, and there are many of them in the South Dakota area. They had a certain dignity about themselves, a stoical attitude which she considered to be a sign of gentility. Usually after the Buffalo Bill Wild West show, she reminisced about Haverhill, Massachusetts. There was much Indian lore in that area including the adventures of Hannah Dustin who journeyed through the forests with her small children and reached home safely after strange adventures with the Indians. Grandmother remembered that when she was a small girl Indians frequently visited the neighborhood, and when her mother went to church the women were always accompanied by men carrying rifles.

Nothing serious ever happened to her family, but Buffalo Bill brought it all back with trimmings.

There were other parades in Sioux Falls. The Grand Army of the Republic had its annual encampment on level ground not far from the Sioux Falls named for the river where, according to legend, a beautiful Indian maiden committed suicide. Grandmother sometimes sat in the lawyer's office to watch the parade of Civil War veterans. At the head was General Howard, riding a spirited horse. He had an empty sleeve where he had lost an arm in the war. Most of the veterans were still able to march, but there were always a few seated in carriages wearing their old-time uniforms. Each year the parade was a little shorter, but it was still an annual event when Grandmother decided to change habitation. There were other circuses at other times and a little village parade in western Pennsylvania where a traveling troupe of thespians favored a rural area with a spirited performance of Uncle Tom's Cabin.

It is a mistake to assume that the folks living fifty or sixty years ago lacked appropriate and stimulating entertainment. Pleasures were more simple and less sophisticated, but they were inexpensive and long remembered. One afternoon Grandmother walking along had one of the old-fashioned parasols that could be tipped to provide shade at almost any angle. As she was standing on the street corner, she felt the parasol gently lifted out of her hand. She turned quickly and looked into the chest of an Indian who was fully six feet, six inches tall. He quietly examined the parasol to satisfy himself how it operated and then with a pleasant grunt, he bowed. The bow did it-- Grandmother had to return it, and for years she always mentioned that this Indian was definitely a gentleman.

Most sincerely yours,



Manly P. Hall

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