

This Day in History... July 5, 1810

Birth of Circus Legend P.T. Barnum



Stamps picture vintage circus posters from Ringling Bros, Barnum and Bailey, and other circuses.

Showman Phineas Taylor “P.T.” Barnum was born on July 5, 1810, in Bethel, Connecticut. Talented at haggling and salesmanship from an early age, Barnum embarked on a variety of business ventures. He owned a general store and newspaper and ran a state lottery, among other things.

Barnum began his showman career in New York City in 1835, running a variety show of scientific and musical entertainment. In 1941, he bought Scudder’s American Museum in New York City. He renamed it Barnum’s American Museum, adding several exhibits and signs. He added a lighthouse lamp and flags to the roof, and large paintings of animals, all attracting lots of attention day and night.

On the roof, Barnum created a garden with a spectacular view of the city and offered daily hot-air balloon rides. The museum housed several stuffed animal exhibits and “curiosities” including jugglers, magicians, exotic women, intricate models of cities and battles, and eventually many live animals. His museum also housed America’s first aquarium. By 1846, Barnum’s museum attracted 400,000 visitors a year.

It wasn’t until he was 60 years old that Barnum established his first traveling circus – P. T. Barnum’s Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan & Hippodrome. He later joined with James A. Bailey in 1881, and in 1907, their show was combined with the Ringling Brothers to create the “greatest show on earth” – the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Barnum himself joined the show, riding around the tent in a chariot and joining his customers in marveling at his spectacle. Barnum became known as the “Shakespeare of Advertising” because of his many innovative ideas for the time.

Outside of the circus business, Barnum served two terms in the Connecticut legislature beginning in 1865. He spoke in support of the passage of the 13th Amendment, saying “A human soul... is not to be trifled with... it is still an immortal spirit.” He also served as mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut, where he helped to improve the water, supply gas lighting to the streets, and put liquor laws into place. Additionally, he helped establish the Bridgeport Hospital and served as its first president.

Barnum suffered a stroke and died on April 7, 1891. In 1936, he was depicted on a US Mint coin for the centennial of Bridgeport, Connecticut. And since 1949, Bridgeport has held an annual multi-week Barnum Festival. After taking a hiatus from 2017 to 2022, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus resumed operations in 2023, removing animals from the show in response to animal rights protests.



Barnum’s was one of the first circuses to travel by train.



This stamp was issued for John Ringling’s 100th birthday.

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