

# Stamps and postal history preserve the circus big top and its stars

By Jack Trammell

One of the more fascinating but underappreciated areas of postal

forms to ancient times and grew out of medieval festivals. They came of age in America in the period just



An 1844 folded letter mailed in London by circus showman P.T. Barnum to a New York City newspaper editor. This type of circus business mail is one way collectors today can document circus postal history. Image courtesy Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries.

connect with people in ancillary businesses that circuses relied on, such as newspaper editors, advertisement managers, veterinarians to care for animals, or agents to purchase replacements.

The performers and staff in the circus, some of them literate (but not always in English), also carried on a significant postal correspondence because of their nomadic lifestyles and the constant need to manage personal and business affairs from a distance.

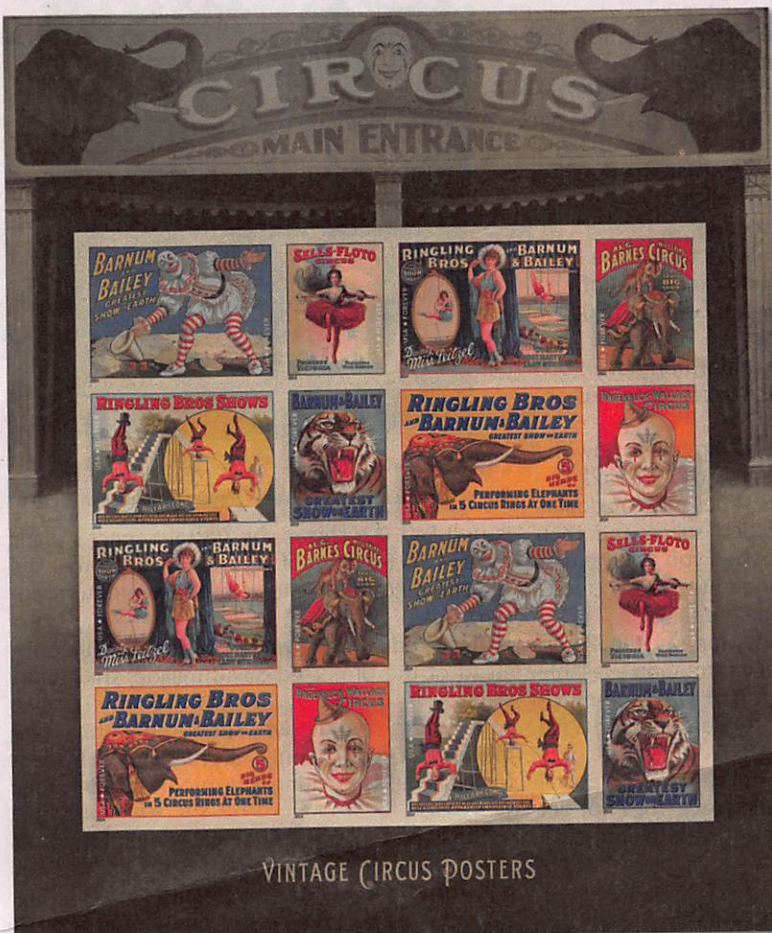
The circus industry in the United States was booming just prior to when the first federal postage stamp was issued in 1847, and during the period when prepayment of postage became mandatory, in 1855, replacing stampless covers.

The circus also was closely linked

ers with circus cachets or artwork; correspondence related to famous circus owners, such as P.T. Barnum or Adam Forepaugh; items related to different types of circuses (menagerie, oddity shows, ring shows, equestrian and so on); or by items related to specific circus acts, such as the famous clown Dan Rice.

So-called flying circuses took their acts airborne, and another type of circus postal history developed. Today, flying circus philatelic collectors can search for covers with cancellations or cachets from specific aerial circuses, or collect by general type, locale or time period.

Based on searches of popular auction sites, the primary methods of collecting circus philately can be categorized as follows: general circus business, identified by recipi-



VINTAGE CIRCUS POSTERS

A set of eight Circus Poster forever stamps issued by the United States Postal Service in 2014. Posters were used extensively by circuses to promote coming events and communicate the details.

history may be circus mail and related circus postal history.

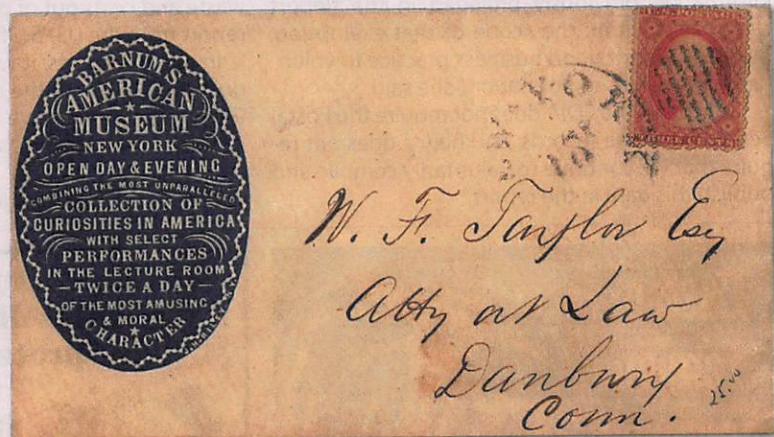
Circuses date back in various

prior to and during the use of postage stamps (approximately 1830 to 1860). Circuses required sometimes voluminous correspondence to coordinate busy travel schedules, finances and connected services.

By the end of the 19th century, the telegraph and the telephone had replaced some of that correspondence, but circus mail continued well into the 20th century and beyond, providing collectors with an opportunity to mix the color and pageantry of circuses with the technical examination of markings, routes and special covers.

The United States Postal Service issued a set of eight stamps in 2014 (Scott 4898-4905) to commemorate the most colorful and popular form of communication circuses used to announce coming performances: the waybill or circus poster.

Behind the scenes, however, circus managers used the mail system to correspond with local agents in scheduled or potential venues, to coordinate transportation, and to



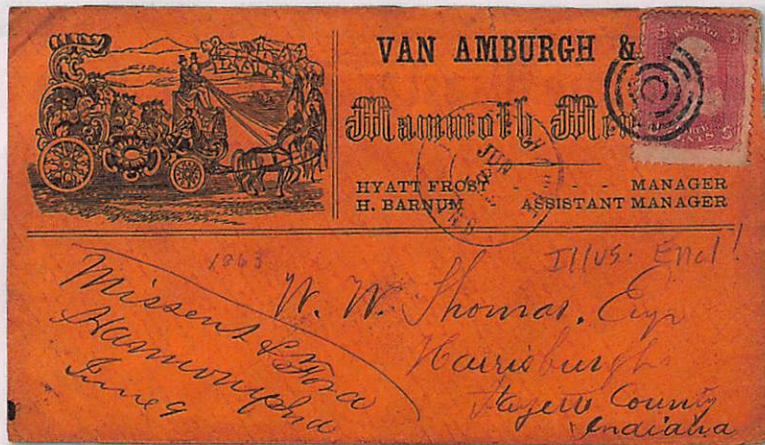
Along with posters, circuses used advertising covers as a way to promote their business. This example from Barnum advertises his New York City museum. Image courtesy Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries.

to the burgeoning American rail system. As a result, postal history buffs have a variety of ways to collect circus mail: stampless covers; covers with specific rail markings; covers with cancellations that track a circus' progress on a tour; cov-

ent or sender information on the cover or in a letter; circus ad covers, the popular use of mail as a promotional tool in the 19th century; and chasing covers, mail that can be identified by markings as trying to catch up with the traveling circus.



Topical stamp collectors have many opportunities to collect circus-related material. The 5¢ American Circus stamp was issued May 2, 1966.



Another method of collecting circus postal history is the chasing cover. This example from 1863 includes a manuscript missent marking. Image courtesy Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries.

Circus stamps themselves can be collected topically, and of course specialists can focus on anything,

from circus-related stamped envelopes to railroad postal markings. Pictured here are three covers

that are examples of each of the three major methods, all courtesy of Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries.

The first cover is a signed, folded letter from P.T. Barnum, the colorful father figure of American circuses who founded the famous Barnum and Bailey Circus (the merger with Bailey occurred in 1881).

Barnum was an unapologetic self-promoter, and no matter what purpose or to whom he wrote, he saw it as opportunity to further a scheme. The 1844 letter is addressed to a New York City newspaper editor to whom Barnum was essentially sending a press release.

The letter was mailed from London, England, and is postmarked with a red London tombstone datestamp.

The second cover features a cameo corner card advertising Barnum's American Museum in New York City, "open day and evening" so visitors could view "the most unparalleled collection of curiosities in America."

In that museum, people could see such strange things as "Ned, the learned seal," a flea circus, entertainers and numerous other attractions. Confederate agents tried unsuccessfully to burn down the

museum during the Civil War, and it did burn down accidentally in 1865 and again in 1868.

The cover is addressed to a Danbury, Conn., attorney, and franked with the 1857 3¢ dull red Type III George Washington stamp (Scott 26), tied with a New York datestamp.

The third example is a circus ad cover for Van Amburgh and Company's Mammoth Menagerie, but it also is an example of what can be classified as a chase cover.

It includes the manuscript marking "Missent and For'd Harmony Ind. June 9."

The circus moved constantly, so mail often had to catch up or could be sent to the wrong town.

The 1863 envelope is struck with a Terre Haute, Ind., postmark and franked with the 1861 3¢ rose George Washington stamp tied by a target cancel.

It also has a circus advertisement as the enclosure from what Siegel described as "the premier zoological circus of the day."

Before television, cinema and the Internet, circuses and similar exhibitions were among the most sensational and visible forms of entertainment for Americans.

Although circus activity has declined over the years, and the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus presented its final farewell event in 2017, the circus lives on for philatelists. There are a great variety of ways to collect, which itself can be a bit of a circus act.

Jack Trammell collects U.S. classics and postal history, and teaches sociology at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Va. ■

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