

Chapter Three

P. T. Barnum and His Influence on Advertising

In 1910 some celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of P. T. Barnum. The same year a writer for *Printers' Ink* mentioned this celebration and proceeded to dismiss Barnum and his contributions to advertising. According to the writer,

it is entirely misleading to celebrate the “advertising ability” of a man like Barnum without making some very sharp distinctions. It is as if medical men should celebrate a hoodoo medicine man of long ago—it is interesting as a starting point of a profession, but lamentably gross and misrepresentative of the modern development of it.¹

However, Frank Rowsome Jr. claimed that Phineas Taylor Barnum was “one of a little group of men whose ideas and enterprise permanently shaped the art” of advertising before his death in 1891.²

EARLY YEARS

Phineas Taylor Barnum was born in 1810 in Bethel, Connecticut; he was named for his maternal grandfather. Barnum learned the value of money early in life. For instance, when he was twelve, he sold lottery tickets for his grandfather. At fifteen, he clerked in his father's store. Two years later, he opened a porterhouse in Brooklyn. One year later, he worked as a bartender in a porterhouse in New York. From the money he earned, he opened a store in Bethel, Connecticut. As Barnum wrote in his autobiography, he learned quickly about consumer behavior. “It was ‘dog eat dog’—‘tit for tat.’”

Our cottons were sold for wool, our wool and cotton for silk and linen; in fact nearly everything was different from what it was represented. The customers cheated us in their fabrics: we cheated the customers with our goods. Each party expected to be cheated, if it was possible. Our eyes, and not our ears, had to be our masters. We must believe little that we saw, and less that we heard.³

One of the first items he advertised was the best-selling lottery ticket. These advertisements consisted of handbills, circulars, gold signs, and colored posters. The language was extravagant, and many of the advertisements rhymed.⁴

When he was twenty-one, he wrote, edited, and published *The Herald of Freedom*, a democratic weekly newspaper, in Danbury, Connecticut, and libeled a deacon of a church, for which he was jailed. Barnum claimed that the deacon had “been guilty of taking usury of an orphan boy.” Barnum used the occasion to his advantage, however. When he was released, he rode in a parade that was preceded by a brass band and forty horsemen and followed by carriages filled with friends and supporters. This event was reported by the press, including his newspaper:

P. T. Barnum and the band of music took their seats in a coach drawn by six horses, which had been prepared for the occasion. The coach was preceded by forty horsemen, and a marshal, bearing the national standard. Immediately in the rear of the coach was the carriage of the Orator and the President of the day, followed by the Committee of Arrangements and sixty carriages of citizens, which joined in escorting the editor to his home in Bethel.

When the procession commenced its march amidst the roar of cannon, three cheers were given by several hundred citizens who did not join in the procession. The band of music continued to play a variety of national airs until their arrival in Bethel (a distance of three miles), when they struck up the beautiful and appropriate tune of “Home, Sweet Home.” After giving three hearty cheers, the procession returned to Danbury. The utmost harmony and unanimity of feeling prevailed throughout the day, and we are happy to add that no accident occurred to mar the festivities of the occasion.⁵

Three years later he and his wife, Charity Hallett, moved to New York, where he purchased an interest in a grocery. Barnum and Hallett had married in 1829. Barnum learned about Joice Heth, an African American who had been the slave of George Washington’s father. She was reportedly 161 years of age. Barnum purchased Heth for \$1,000 from her promoters. Through handbills, posters, and advertisements in newspapers, the public learned that she was the first to clothe George Washington. For Heth’s appearance at Niblo’s in New York, Barnum arranged for the hanging of lighted transparencies—a new technology at the time—bearing the simple message

JOICE HETH

161
YEARS OLD.

In addition, he commissioned a woodcut with Heth's likeness, showing a woman with a deeply wrinkled face and nearly closed eyes wearing a lacy bonnet and a modest dress.⁶

Within the first week of her appearance, Barnum earned a profit. After New York, he brought Heth to other cities.

To sell Heth's appearances, he placed informative advertisements in newspapers and mailed anonymous letters to editors denouncing her credibility. She is "a humbug, a deception cleverly made of India rubber, whalebone, and hidden springs," he wrote.⁷ Receipts and, consequently, profits increased until her death five or six months later. In response to the public's curiosity about Heth's age and to earn more money, Barnum arranged for an autopsy before the public. Each person had to pay to be admitted. Barnum learned that Heth had been about eighty years of age. He, like the public, had been deceived.

For the next several years, Barnum earned a meager living. In 1841 he tried to support a family of four by writing advertisements for the Bowry Amphitheater for four dollars a week. According to M. R. Werner, "Barnum was one of the first men in the United States to realize the power of the paid adjective in advertising theatrical attractions."⁸

Later the same year, Barnum acquired Scudder's American Museum, which was filled with natural and unnatural curiosities. The museum brought Barnum fame and fortune. He entertained the public with educated dogs, industrious fleas, jugglers, ventriloquists, Gypsies, albinos, giants, dwarfs, ropedancers, mechanical figures, glassblowers, and American Indians. More important, he knew how to advertise the museum. He placed newspaper advertisements to announce acts; sometimes these advertisements had qualities of incantations:

VISION OF THE HOURIS
VISION OF THE HOURIS
VISION OF THE HOURIS
A Tableau of 850 Men
Women and Children
CLAD IN SUITS OF SILVER ARMOUR
CLAD IN SUITS OF SILVER ARMOUR
CLAD IN SUITS OF SILVER ARMOUR⁹

Other advertisements appeared but in other forms. A brass band, which could be heard for several city blocks, played harmoniously on the balcony of the museum. Gaslights, which had the effect of modern electronic spectacles, illuminated lower Broadway from the top of the museum. Panels

placed on the outside of the museum featured large paintings of rare animals. Banners strung across streets announced a rare find. Handbills were used, as well as the reliable news column, which Barnum had perfected. As he wrote,

I thoroughly understood the art of advertising, not merely by means of printers' ink, which I have always used freely, and to which I confess myself so much indebted for my success, but by turning every possible circumstance to my account. It was my monomania to make the Museum the town wonder and town talk. I often seized upon an opportunity by instinct, even before I had a very definite conception as to how it should be used, and it seemed, somehow, to mature itself and serve my purpose.¹⁰

When ordinary forms of advertising failed, Barnum improvised. For instance, he instructed a man to place bricks on the corners of several streets. He then instructed the man to carry at least one brick to each corner and exchange it for the other. The man was not to comment to anyone. On the hour, the man was to go to the museum and present a ticket, then enter. Within the first hour, approximately five hundred men and women stood and watched, trying to solve the mystery. When the man went to the museum, they followed and purchased tickets, hoping to learn the answer inside. Barnum's walking advertisement attracted so many people that after a few days the police asked Barnum to withdraw the man from the street. Reporters wrote about the event for several weeks. Harvey W. Root wrote, "This was his aim in advertising, the goal for which he strove in all his publicity, to make people 'talk,' to make them wonder 'what Barnum would do next,' and to have the papers repeat and spread it."¹¹

Another example of improvisation was his invention of "Dr. Griffin" and his preserved Feejee Mermaid. "Dr. Griffin" was actually Levi Lyman, an associate of Barnum. To sell the mermaid to the public, Barnum placed stories in numerous newspapers. These stories informed readers that Dr. Griffin had purchased the mermaid in China for the Lyceum of Natural History in London but that he would be exhibiting the specimen at Concert Hall for one week. A week later Barnum announced that he had secured the rare specimen for the American Museum. According to Frank Presbrey, "Barnum told the public that the 'Wonder of Creation' had been viewed at Concert Hall by 'hundreds of naturalists and other scientific gentlemen' who 'beheld it with real wonder and amusement.'"¹² Because of the advanced publicity, the exhibition was a success; the museum's receipts more than tripled the first week—from slightly more than \$1,000 to slightly more than \$3,000. According to James W. Cook, "The Feejee Mermaid made Barnum the most famous trickster of the nineteenth century."¹³

Another example of improvisation occurred when he hired a man to accuse the American Museum of swindling him out of twenty-five cents. The man had paid twenty-five cents to see the "bearded woman" at the museum.

The man believed that the woman was actually a man garbed in a dress “to deceive and defraud” the public. The man asked that Barnum be punished. Of course, the press covered the trial, which Barnum had desired. Barnum protested his innocence. For additional publicity, he recruited witnesses who testified to the gender of the “Bearded Lady.” These witnesses included her father, her husband, and several physicians who had examined her. An editor of a Connecticut newspaper observed, “Being a case of so novel a character, the newsmongers caught it up and reported it at great length, giving our friend Barnum the advantage not only of a most extensive free advertisement of the Bearded Lady still on exhibition at the Museum, but in a form which his money could not well have purchased.”¹⁴

The publicity was so arranged “that the newspaper accounts of the trial and the sworn evidence of the Bearded Lady’s genuineness would appear just at the right time to attract business to the museum on a national holiday.”¹⁵

In addition to these uncommon forms of publicity, Barnum implemented baby shows, baby contests, and beauty contests to arouse the public’s curiosity. Undoubtedly, he was the first in the United States to use these shows and contests to attract attention. He was responsible for implementing the first successful advertising campaigns. He realized that campaigns increased sales. According to Frank Rowsome Jr.,

in Barnum’s time advertising was simply a series of announcements, a process but not a progression. His acute sense of timing told him that this was wrong, that any promotion should have a carefully timed sequence, leading up to a crescendo of interlocked advertising and publicity.¹⁶

He applied this belief in advertising Tom Thumb.

MIDDLE YEARS

Tom Thumb

Charles Stratton, a midget, was born in Connecticut. In 1842 his parents signed an agreement with Barnum that allowed Barnum to exploit the child; the parents could accompany their son and would get paid. However, for the first year, the family earned only a few dollars a week, plus food and lodging. When the receipts increased after the first year, Barnum raised their income to \$25 a week. To sell “Tom Thumb,” Barnum had him tour the United States. Barnum advertised the age of Tom Thumb as eleven instead of five. He advertised his place of birth as England instead of Connecticut. He had Tom Thumb introduced to prominent families, which was mentioned in advertisements. Biographies as well as lithographs were printed and distributed

wherever he toured. Newspaper editors published stories about him, which sparked additional interest. When he appeared at the American Museum, most of the public had read about him and desired to see him. Barnum introduced him as “General Tom Thumb freshly arrived from England,” and the crowds laughed. In the thirteen months that he was at the American Museum, almost one hundred thousand persons paid to see him.

Barnum, who had grown to enjoy the General, brought him to Europe, where they entertained royalty, including the Duke of Wellington and Queen Victoria. Dressed like Napoleon, Tom Thumb made an unforgettable impression on the noble class. He and Barnum were invited to rambling palaces and plush estates and chateaus. News stories featured these exploits primarily because readers desired to learn about society’s elite.

Barnum had a miniature carriage built for the General:

It was a four-wheeler, with a body eleven inches wide and twenty high, painted red, white and blue. The door handles, hub caps and lamp brackets were silver. The plate-glass windows had Venetian blinds. The cushions were covered with yellow silk. The panels of the doors displayed Britannia and the Goddess of Liberty, supported by the British lion and the American eagle, with the motto, “Go Ahead!”¹⁷

The carriage cost Barnum \$1,500. Barnum purchased four Shetland ponies to pull the carriage, and he hired an eight-year-old as the coachman and a seven-year-old as the footman. Both were garbed in tailored attire. Wherever the carriage with Tom appeared, crowds cheered.

In Paris the General was so popular that a café was named Tom Ponce. Artists begged him to sit for them. Composers wrote songs about him. Shop windows displayed statuettes of him.

After Paris, they toured southern France, Spain, Belgium, and other European countries. General Tom Thumb was greeted with the same enthusiasm wherever he toured. Barnum applied reverse psychology in his advertising. Before the General appeared anywhere, Barnum had an announcement posted. He directed the public not to get excited but to keep quiet. He wrote, “Strange as it may seem, people who were told to keep quiet would get terribly excited, and when the General arrived excitement would be at fever heat . . . and the treasury filled!”¹⁸ The tour lasted three years. Approximately five million persons paid to see Tom Thumb. He had been kissed by four queens and thousands of other women. The tour’s profits were more than \$1 million; Tom Thumb’s share was half. Barnum was not greedy, and Tom Thumb toured in one of Barnum’s shows for several years. They remained friends for life.

In 1846 Barnum employed carpenters and other laborers to construct a Chinese- and Turkish-style lavish mansion along the sea in Fairfield, Connecticut. Two years later he moved his family to Iranistan, his new home.

During the 1840s, Barnum expanded a small lecture hall into the Moral Lecture Room in the American Museum. The Moral Lecture Room was actually a large theater in which patrons saw moral dramas played out by actors and actresses. Such plays included *The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved*.

Jenny Lind

Jenny Lind was the most famous performer in Europe. According to Ruth Hume, “She had everything: a thrilling voice, dramatic talent, and a reputation for piety, modesty, and good works.”¹⁹ Barnum had read about her when he was touring Europe with General Tom Thumb, and he desired that she tour America. In 1850 he hired an Englishman to offer her \$1,000 per concert, plus expenses. Jenny accepted with stipulations. Barnum had to assure her that he would hire her conductor, composer, and pianist, as well as a sixty-member orchestra. He also had to deposit \$187,500 in a London bank before she left Europe.

Barnum soon realized that most Americans had not heard of Jenny Lind. Therefore, he had to enlighten them. An excerpt from his first press release set the tone:

Miss Lind has numerous better offers than the one she has accepted from me; but she has great anxiety to visit America. She speaks of this country and its institutions in the highest terms of praise, and as money is by no means the greatest inducement that can be laid before her, she is determined to visit us.

In her engagement with me (which includes Havana as well as the United States), she expressly reserves for herself the right to sing for and give charitable concerts whenever she may think proper.

Since her debut in England, she has given to the poor from her own private purse more than the whole amount which I engaged to give her, and the proceeds of concerts for charitable purposes in Great Britain, where she has sung gratuitously, have realized more than ten times that amount. During her last eight months she has been singing entirely for charitable purposes, and is now founding a benevolent institution in Stockholm, her native city, at a cost of \$350,000.

A visit from such a woman, who regards her high artistic powers as a gift from heaven, for the melioration of affliction and distress, and whose every thought and deed is philanthropy, I feel persuaded, will prove a blessing to America, as it has to every country she has visited, and I feel every confidence that my countrymen and women will join me heartily in saying, “God Bless Her!”²⁰

Barnum then distributed an authorized biographical pamphlet and photograph that informed the reader of her inimitable talent.

Before Jenny left for the United States, she gave two concerts in Liverpool, at Barnum's request. Both sold out. A critic in London covered the concerts, then wrote a review that praised her performances. When the review appeared in one of the newspapers hours later, several copies were sent to Barnum. The review, which detailed "the unbridled enthusiasm of the Liverpool audience and its grief at Jenny's imminent departure,"²¹ was published in newspapers throughout the United States before she arrived.

Barnum then wrote a letter addressed to himself. The letter, which was supposed to be from Julius Benedict, her composer, appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune*:

I have just heard Mlle. Jenny Lind, whose voice has acquired—if *that were possible*—even additional powers and effect by a timely and well-chosen repose. You may depend on it, that such a performance as hers—in the finest pieces of her *repertoire*—must warrant an unprecedented excitement. . . . Mlle. Lind is very anxious to give a Welcome to America in a kind of national song, which, if I can obtain the poetry of one of your first-rate literary men, I shall set to music, and which she will sing in addition to the pieces originally fixed upon.²²

The letter was followed by an announcement about a song-writing contest. To enter, one had to write a poem that could be set to music. Barnum received more than seven hundred entries. The winner, poet Bayard Taylor, received \$200.

When the ship entered New York harbor, Barnum greeted it with a reporter from the *New York Tribune*. When the ship docked on Sunday, September 1, 1850, about forty thousand persons were present. They followed Jenny and her entourage as they traveled in Barnum's carriage to the Irving House Hotel. Barnum, surveying the crowd, realized that his promotional efforts had paid off. Merchants in New York immediately advertised "hastily re-named Jenny Lind products: everything from Jenny Lind cigars to Jenny Lind sewing stands, gloves, scarves, riding hats, and perfume."²³

Barnum then promoted the Great Jenny Lind Opening Concert Ticket Auction. He persuaded his friend John Genin to be the first person in the United States to purchase a ticket to hear Jenny sing. Barnum then visited Dr. Brandreth, who was known for his patent medicines, and persuaded him to purchase the first ticket at auction. Barnum assured him that it would be an excellent opportunity for him to advertise his medicines. When the auction occurred, several thousand were present to bid against one another, including Genin's bookkeeper and Dr. Brandreth's cashier. The cashier's bid of \$25 was the first. Genin's bookkeeper bid \$50. Others announced various bids. However, everyone, except Genin's bookkeeper, stopped bidding at \$225.²⁴

The publicity was so encouraging that Barnum repeated the auction in several cities. The reviews of Jenny's performances were filled with superlatives; some critics claimed that she was the greatest singer they had heard. Barnum, of course, was ecstatic. Although wealthy, he realized that such publicity would help sell tickets and consequently add to his fortune.

The tour covered more than fifteen cities in the United States and Canada, as well as Havana, Cuba. Jenny gave more than 90 concerts, not the 150 that had been planned. Barnum claimed that he renegotiated Jenny's contract after her successful performances at Castle Garden in New York. The renegotiation benefited Jenny, not Barnum, as she was provided a percentage of profits in addition to her fee. Barnum claimed that the renegotiation was his idea, not Jenny's.²⁵

On June 9, 1851, Jenny informed Barnum she was ending the tour. Barnum and Jenny parted friends. The tour he had managed earned more than \$700,000. Others in her entourage encouraged her to leave Barnum and tour alone. Jenny tried, but she was not very successful. Organizing the advertising was too difficult. Her affection for Otto Goldschmidt, her pianist, was blossoming; they were married in Boston on February 5, 1852. On May 24, 1852, she performed her last concert in the United States in Castle Garden, the concert hall where she had performed her first.

The campaign for Jenny Lind reflected Barnum's brilliance. "It converted her, in the months before her arrival in this country, from a relatively unknown soprano to the toast of America, greeted by ecstatic thousands who vied to draw her carriage."²⁶

Barnum wrote and published *The Life of P. T. Barnum, Written by Himself* in 1854. The book, which was edited and published under different titles over the years, became a best seller.

Barnum invested in the Jerome Clock Company, which ultimately went bankrupt, forcing him and his family to leave Iranistan in 1856. They retreated to a rented house in New York, and Iranistan was closed.

In 1857, desiring to return to Iranistan until it was sold or auctioned, Barnum hired carpenters and painters to repair it. Apparently, a worker's pipe was carelessly misplaced; it set fire to the mansion, causing it to burn to the ground. In New York, Barnum received a telegram about the fire from his brother Philo. Although the home was worth \$150,000, it was insured for only \$28,000.

In 1865 Barnum became a Republican representative of the legislature of Connecticut. On July 13, while he addressed the legislature, a telegram from his son-in-law Samuel H. Hurd arrived. It informed Barnum that his famous American Museum in New York had burned. Barnum continued his oratory. The following morning he went to New York to see what remained of his museum. Later, he wrote,

Here were destroyed, almost in a breath, the accumulated results of many years of incessant toil, my own and my predecessors', in gathering from every quarter of the globe myriads of curious productions of nature and art—an assemblage of rarities which a half million of dollars could not restore, and a quarter of a century could not collect.²⁷

A reporter for the *New York Times* wrote that the fire “originated in a defective furnace in the collar under Groor’s restaurant, beneath the office of the Museum.”²⁸ The following day, a reporter for the same newspaper wrote, “Some of the employees of the Museum were notified a day or two ago that threats of burning the establishment had been made, but little attention was paid to this information.”²⁹ H. O. Tiffany, an employee at the museum, claimed that he discovered flames on the second, third, and top floors. Had the fire “originated in a defective furnace”? Or had fires been started on the second, third, and top floors? Several Confederate soldiers had set fires to several hotels and Barnum’s American Museum in 1864.³⁰ However, the fire department had responded immediately. Had another Confederate soldier or an enemy of Barnum’s repeated the act?

Undeterred by his loss, which he estimated to be \$400,000, Barnum opened Barnum’s New American Museum on November 13, 1865. However, it, too, burned on March 3, 1868. Barnum was asleep at his home in New York; he learned about the fire the next morning when he read the newspaper. Barnum claimed he lost more than \$250,000 as a result of the fire.

Although he thought about retiring after his beloved New American Museum burned, he promoted other acts and tours, including General Tom Thumb. In 1870 he and a partner created the P. T. Barnum’s Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan and Circus, the largest of its kind in the United States.

In 1872 the Hippotheatron—a multisided wood-and-iron building in New York that Barnum purchased for part of his Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan and Circus—burned, killing most of the animals. As if this was not bad enough, Charity, his wife, died a year later. Several weeks later, in 1874, he married Nancy Fish, a much younger woman.

Barnum dissolved his partnership and disposed of some of his enterprises in 1876. With others, he created the Greatest Show on Earth, which included a circus and a museum. He had rail cars built for his show, which traveled across the country. He employed large-scale colored posters. He had a rail car—“Advertising Coach”—that preceded the show by at least two weeks. Opened to the public, this rail car displayed posters and other media of Barnum, his circus, and his animals.

LATER YEARS: JUMBO

In 1881 Barnum propositioned his leading competitors, James Bailey and James Hutchinson, and together they merged the Greatest Show on Earth and the London Circus. Barnum knew that the circus needed a major attraction. Jumbo, perhaps the largest elephant ever, was on display in the London Zoo. Barnum offered \$10,000 for the animal. Eventually, the superintendent agreed. Reporters in London learned of the agreement and interviewed statesmen and others, who urged that the sale be canceled. The following excerpt appeared in the *London Daily Telegraph* and reflects the sentiment of the British press at the time:

Our amiable monster must dwell in a tent, take part in the routine of a circus, and, instead of his by-gone friendly trots with British girls and boys, and perpetual luncheon on buns and oranges, must amuse a Yankee mob, and put up with peanuts and waffles.³¹

Yet, the press in the United States encouraged Barnum to purchase the animal.

Barnum watched the ship that carried Jumbo ease into New York harbor. Thousands of spectators waited patiently for the large elephant to be brought ashore. Thousands more lined the streets as Jumbo passed on the way to Madison Square Garden. Public interest was widespread. Although Barnum had paid \$10,000 for Jumbo and \$20,000 for the elephant's transportation to the United States, he grossed more than \$30,000 the first week that the elephant was on display.³²

Newspapers carried stories about Jumbo, and readers sent hundreds of gifts. Some consumer products carried Jumbo's name; others were compared to the elephant's strength or size. When the Brooklyn Bridge was completed, Jumbo tested its strength. Thousands lined the shores to watch.

On September 15, 1885, after the Greatest Show on Earth had performed in St. Thomas, Ontario, Jumbo and a smaller elephant were led to a train car. The trainer saw an unexpected freight train approaching and tried to get both elephants off the track; the engineer saw the elephants and applied the brakes. Jumbo was hit and killed; the smaller elephant was injured. Barnum informed the press that Jumbo had pushed the smaller elephant to safety, and the news was cabled all over the world. Like Barnum, millions experienced grief. Never missing an opportunity, Barnum the showman arranged for Henry Ward, the nation's leading taxidermist, to prepare Jumbo for exhibition. Eventually, Jumbo was given to Tufts University.

Two years later, Barnum offered Bailey an equal partnership in the new Barnum and Bailey circus, which Bailey accepted. The same year, their winter quarters in Bridgeport, Connecticut, which contained several build-

ings that housed numerous animals, burned. The fire started around 10 pm in the main building but spread to the other buildings, killing most of the animals. A reporter for the *New York Times* wrote, “The watchman making his rounds discovered the fire and started to give the alarm, when some unknown person hit him on the head with a blunt instrument, felling him to the ground and cutting a number of severe gashes on his head. He staggered to his feet and gave the alarm, enabling the other watchmen in the building, who were preparing for bed, to escape.”³³

In the November 22, 1887, issue of the *New York Times*, a reporter wrote,

George W. Myers, the watchman who discovered the fire and sounded the first alarm, had an experience that seems to prove the fire to have been of incendiary origin. He found the door of the stable in which the ponies were housed open when it ought to have been closed. The stable was already on fire. He sounded the alarm, then laid the lantern he was carrying on the ground, and was about to enter the stable to loose the ponies when he was struck on the head with a billy by an unknown man. He lay unconscious, he supposes, for 10 or 15 minutes. When he recovered the fire was raging in all quarters of the main building, which was about 200 feet broad by 500 feet long.³⁴

In the same story, the reporter asked Barnum about the fire. His lengthy response claimed that the fire had been a blessing in disguise, at least to the public. He stated, “Besides, it will give us a lot of free advertising. That, of course, will be some compensation for our loss.” Barnum informed the reporter that a greater show would rise from the ashes. He stated, “I begin to think it was a good thing we were burned out after all.”³⁵

Barnum disclosed that the land in Bridgeport, on which the winter quarters had been constructed, had increased in value, and, consequently, he would not rebuild the winter quarters on it.

The reporter ended the story with the following:

Sunday’s fire was the seventh from which the old showman has been a direct sufferer. In October, 1852, his showy residence in Bridgeport, known as Irani-stan was nearly destroyed by fire. Five years later the same house, reconstructed and refurbished, was completely destroyed, entailing a loss of about \$125,000. In July, 1865, the American Museum, at Broadway and Ann-street, was burned, and in March, 1868, his new museum on Broadway, near Prince-street, was completely wiped out by fire. Three years later, December, 1871, the Hippotheatron was totally destroyed by fire, and in July, 1873, fire burned up a tent and all its furnishings while the show was in Chicago. Taken altogether, Mr. Barnum’s losses will aggregate close to \$1,000,000.³⁶

What is troubling about these fires is that none seemed to bother Barnum. As he described in his autobiography, his reactions displayed unconcern, even when at least two of the fires may have been started by arsonists.

Although he lost money as a result of each fire, he rebounded financially quite successfully as a result of the publicity about each fire. Specific individuals called Barnum “the arsonist.” Of course, this accusation was made in haste and not based on any evidence. However, fires followed Barnum throughout his professional life.

Barnum made enemies. It is not inconceivable to think that one or more of his enemies may have been responsible for one or more of the fires. For instance, he and James Gordon Bennett, the publisher of the *New York Herald*, had several confrontations, including a major dispute over real estate. Whether Bennett was responsible for one of the fires is debatable.

Barnum died in 1891.

From the advertising campaigns discussed, it is easy to summarize Barnum’s philosophy of advertising: first, he realized that one needed to keep one’s name or business before the public; second, he realized that unique or original devices could be used to produce conversation as well as attention; third, he realized that one needed to take advantage of every opportunity to bring about editorial comment or news; and fourth, he realized that one needed to provide more real value than one’s competitors. Barnum’s success, reputation, and number of imitators proved that he was correct not to use the more traditional methods of advertising of his day but the unusual methods of advertising that he perfected. Thus, the writer for *Printers’ Ink* apparently overlooked the above, which undoubtedly had a dramatic influence on advertising.

According to Jennifer Wicke,

He looms largest in American advertising partly because circumstances permitted his exploitation of the pure, self-reflexive poetics of advertising before industrial advertising had realized it in such monumental form. Under his hegemony, advertising came to be a form of social literature distributed to fashion as aesthetic space around products, which in Barnum’s case were all theatrical and “aesthetic” spectacles, but for later advertisers were such non-spectacular goods as shoes, inks, machines, and plumbing tools.³⁷

NOTES

1. “Barnum and Advertising,” *Printers’ Ink* (July 14, 1910), 193.
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3. M. R. Werner, *Barnum* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923), 15.
4. Frank Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (New York: Doubleday, 1929), 212.
5. *The Herald of Freedom*, December 12, 1832.
6. Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum’s America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 33.
7. Rowsome, *They Laughed When I Sat Down*, 30.

8. Werner, *Barnum*, 42.
9. E. S. Turner, *The Shocking History of Advertising* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1953), 130.
10. P. T. Barnum, *Barnum's Own Story: The Autobiography of P. T. Barnum* (New York: Dover, 1961).
11. Harvey W. Root, *The Unknown Barnum* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), 205–6.
12. Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising*, 216.
13. James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 119.
14. Root, *The Unknown Barnum*, 208.
15. Root, *The Unknown Barnum*, 209.
16. Rowsome, *They Laughed When I Sat Down*, 30.
17. J. Bryan III, *The World's Greatest Showman: The Life of P. T. Barnum* (New York: Random House, 1956), 56.
18. Bryan, *The World's Greatest Showman*, 59.
19. Ruth Hume, "Selling the Swedish Nightingale: Jenny Lind and P. T. Barnum," *American Heritage* (October 1977): 99.
20. *New York Commercial Advertiser*, February 29, 1850.
21. Hume, "Selling the Swedish Nightingale," 103.
22. *New York Daily Tribune*, August 14, 1850.
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