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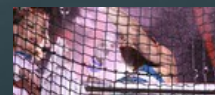
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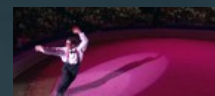
TALKING CIRCUS: THE
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CLOWN DREAMS: A
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JOINING THE CIRCUS,
LEAVING THE CIRCUS



RUNNING AWAY WITH
THE CIRCUS



The Big Apple Circus crew gets ready for a haul.

If you're a First of May clown under the big top, it's unlikely you'll be performing with the Iron Jaw or working the haul. With any luck, you'll hang with the other joeys in clown alley where you'll cut up jackpots and ask around about cherry pie.

Unless you've spent a little time laboring in the circus, the preceding paragraph probably sounds a little wonky. (For help deciphering it, check out our [Circus Lingo Glossary](#).) Like any other tight-knit group, the circus community has, through the

centuries of its history, developed its own special vernacular, and the unique words and phrases both communicate meaning and insulate a community that often feels removed from the mainstream.

"[The circus] is a working man's culture," says Wayne Keyser, circus researcher and podcaster of [Ballycast](#), an online broadcast devoted to carnival, sideshow and burlesque history and trivia.

"These [circus workers and performers] are people who get sweaty and they're proud to do so," he says. To that end, much of the language that develops in the traveling shows is tailored to the physical grind of tearing down, moving and resurrecting the circus every few days or weeks.

For instance, circus shows that pull up stakes every few days, leaving nothing but trailer tracks in its wake, are referred to as "mud circuses." The workers who dismantle the show and build it up again in the next town are called "roustabouts," and the physical act of carrying the "big top" (main tent) and rigging to the empty lot for set-up is dubbed "the haul."

Most professions and groups of like-minded people develop language specially suited to their needs, and the circus is no exception. Through its long history, circus performers have often been considered outsiders of the communities they entertained. In reaction, circus lingo developed as a way for "carries" (circus and carnival workers) to communicate with each other without tipping off the "townies" (townspeople).

One of the best examples of this defensive language is when a carry yells "hey, rubel!" at the first sign of trouble. That expression means little to the uninitiated, but to a fellow circus worker it signals a brewing fight with a townie and that physical back up is likely needed.

According to Keyser, the circus community also developed its own encoded speech, known as "Carry" or "Ciazam." This special language, similar to Pig Latin or Double Dutch, involves inserting a nonsense syllable after the first consonant of each word. In Carry, the syllable is always "eaz," pronounced "ee-uz," says Keyser. For instance, the question, "Can we take this hick?" becomes "C-eaz-an w-eaz-e t-eaz-ake th-eaz-is h-eaz-ick?" This linguistic conflation most certainly shrouds the meaning from bystanders, buying the carries time to flee or fight.

As much as circus lingo is part of the private language of the big top, certain phrases and words,

first birthed under the big top, have become a part of mainstream American idiom. For instance, the adjective “jumbo” was likely derived from two Swahili words meaning “hello” and “chief.” According to Keyser, zookeepers in London gave the moniker to a large elephant that was eventually sold to P.T. Barnum, the famed showman and American circus owner. Barnum promoted Jumbo as the largest elephant on earth. Today, Jumbo’s name is used as an adjective for anything excessively large.

For more examples of circus lingo and circus-related phrases, browse our glossary:

CIRCUS LINGO GLOSSARY

ANNIE OAKLEY

A complimentary ticket or free pass. Oakley performed as a sharpshooter in a 19th century wild west-themed show, and she would shoot a hole through a playing card that had been tossed up in the air. Tickets that were punched with holes resembled Oakley’s playing cards and earned her name.

BALLY

A platform at the entrance to a circus or sideshow where a circus “talker” stands to deliver a prepared spiel, or ballyhoo, advertising the show, hoping to attract a crowd.

BALLYHOO

Literally, the prepared speech delivered from the bally. Also any form of hype used to advertise the show.

BANNER

An advertisement painted on canvas that highlights a particular circus attraction or act.

BIG TOP

The main tent in a circus where the performances take place.

BULLS

Male or female elephants.

CALLIOPE

An old-fashioned musical instrument similar to an organ and constructed of steam whistles. Years ago, the Calliope was used to signal the end of a circus street parade.

CANDY BUTCHERS

A vendor who sells candy, soda, popcorn and other food items.

CLOWN ALLEY

The area just outside of the big top where the clowns wait to perform or relax after working the ring.

CHARIVARI

A humorous, energetic acrobatic exhibition performed by clowns or acrobats.

CHERRY PIE

Work performed for extra money.

DOG AND PONY SHOW

literally, an old-timey circus act featuring dogs and horses. Today, the term is used for any event, often political, that has lots of hype but little substance.

DONIKERS

Bathroom facilities for circus patrons.

FIREBALL

A traveling circus that earns a reputation for swindling patrons or having overall dishonest policies. These shows often ruin venues for other, more reputable circus shows and can be referred to as a “fireball outfit.”

FLEA BAG

A ragged, downtrodden traveling show in need of physical repair.

FIRST OF MAY

A rookie circus performer who is trying to learn the ropes during his first season under the big top. The term originated years ago when many circuses began their traveling schedule in early May.

FUNAMBULIST

High wire-walker.

GRINDER

A showman who entices the crowd before the show or during intermissions with a verbal pitch. Often ticket sellers have a “grind” or pitch that they deliver as they interact with the public.

GUYS

Hefty ropes and cables that help support the big top rigging.

HAUL

The move the crew makes from the circus train or trailer to a new empty lot to set up the big top and rigging.

HIGH SCHOOL HORSE

A horse who has learned fancy steps as part of a performance.

IRON JAW

An aerial act in which an acrobat swings and does tricks while hanging from a suspended mouth piece.

ITCHY FEET

A performer or crew member's desire to return to circus life and the road after they've been away from the big top for a while.

JACKPOTS

Tall tales about life under the big top. To "cut up jackpots" is to tell these stories.

JOEY

A nickname for a clown. The term "Joey" originally referenced the famous English clown, Joseph Grimaldi, who lived and worked during the 18th century.

JUMBO

The name of P.T. Barnum's famous elephant, which the showman billed as the largest elephant on earth. Today, Jumbo's name is used as an adjective to reference something luxuriously large.

LIBERTY ACT

Horses who perform circus acts without human riders.

LOT LICE

The children of circus performers and workers who grow up under the big top.

MIDWAY

An amusement area located mid-way between the entrance to the lot on one end and the big top on the other. It's an area filled with concessions, games and extra shows.

MUD CIRCUSES

Traveling shows that move from one town to another every few days.

RINGMASTER

The person in charge of welcoming the audience, introducing the acts, and holding the show together.

ROSIKBACK

A Horse used for bareback riding. Traditionally, rosin is sprinkled on the backs of the horses to prevent riders from slipping.

ROUSTABOUT

A circus laborer.

SCREAMERS

the up-tempo marches adapted as circus music and used to rouse the crowds.

WEB

Canvas-covered ropes that are suspended from the top of the tent and used by aerial performers to ascend and descend the performance rigging. Occasionally, the ropes are also used as props in other acts.

WINDJAMMER

A musician in the circus band.



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