

ANIMAL CRACKERS AND SULPHUR BATHS

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

It's hard to envision a connection between animal crackers and our summer resort where sulphur baths were the main reason for its popularity, but let's take a look at who visited here in the late 1800s.

The name of P. T. Barnum is familiar to most because of his association with 'The Greatest Show on Earth'. Phineas Taylor Barnum, born in Connecticut in 1810, was many things during his lifetime including an author, publisher, general store owner, book auctioneer, businessman, politician, lecturer, promotor, philanthropist and family man.

In his early twenties, he founded a weekly newspaper. Shortly thereafter, he moved to New York City in 1834. He got into entertainment with a variety troupe and soon purchased a museum where he promoted hoaxes and human curiosities. Economic reversals in the 1850s from poor investments caused him to rebound by starting on a lecture tour as a temperance speaker. Beginning in 1865, he served two terms in the Connecticut legislature, speaking for the abolishment of slavery. In 1875, he was elected mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut and worked for the betterment of the area including starting the Bridgeport Hospital in 1878. He didn't begin his attention to the circus until he was age of sixty.

Married in 1829 to Charity Hallett, they had four children. After her death in 1873, he married, in 1874, Nancy Fish who was forty years his junior.

Known as the Barnum's Grand Traveling Museum, Caravan and Hippodrome, his adventure in the entertainment world merged in 1881 with Bailey's enterprise, becoming Barnum & Bailey's. Their first circus display was in three rings and the first to be moved by train to all parts of the United States. He was always promoting new 'inventions' that he felt would be an attraction and advertising was a top priority in order to keep his creations in front of the public eye.

Noted for his love of hoaxes, P. T. felt he was justified in presenting them to the public in that the others received a value in seeing them.

However, it was reported in the Mercury in May of 1883 when he was visiting Richfield Springs, that a joke was played on him instead, that didn't make him at all happy. 'The story is told by P. T. Barnum of his experience in Richfield two summers ago when he was at the American Hotel. All of the heftier men in the place agreed

to run a race from the steps of the American to the fence enclosing the Spring House property. The last man who touched the fence was to 'get'em up' in the shape of a wine supper. The 4th of July was the day set for the race. All of the selected men, including Barnum, were in line and as the town bell struck the twelfth stroke, and they were all to start. That they did, running across the street amid the shouts of a thousand spectators but -no men touched the fence but Barnum who did touch it and was, of course, the last (and only) one to do so. The bill rendered was for \$300.'

Barnum died in 1891 at age 80 from a stroke. He had asked to have his obituary published prior to his death so that he could read and approve it! After his passing, Mr. Bailey honored his request to keep the show going. Since then, there have been many name changes, combinations of enterprises, adjustments to changing times and ownerships.

In August of 1893 the Mercury reported that: 'One of the most genial gentlemen now sojourning at the resort is G. F. Bailey of New York who has quartered at the Darrow House. Mr. Bailey was, for many years, the partner of P. T. Barnum and it is said that it was greatly by his skilled management of the vast amusement enterprises that P. T. amassed a fortune as did Mr. Bailey. Mr. Bailey has great faith in the curative powers of the sulphur water at Richfield Springs which has given him complete relief from a troublesome skin affliction which he has suffered from for years. His treatment is under the direction of Dr. Alfred Crain.'

The Barnum & Bailey circus had many showings in both Oneonta and Utica in the early 1900s and there were many reports of people from this area traveling to enjoy the performances. The trolley line offered reduced rates from Richfield to Mohawk and return for \$.85. The Lackawanna railroad excursion from the valley to Utica was \$1.00. There were, and are, so many promotions relating to the circus and all of its side-shows including the Barnum and Bailey March, played as part of one of the village summer park concerts by the hotel orchestra in 1939.

What does all of this have to do with a product that is so familiar to us - animal crackers? As you may remember, animal crackers became synonyms with P. T. Barnum's and Bailey Circus. This wasn't always the case. In the late 19th century, animal-shaped crackers called simply 'Animals' were imported from England to the



United States. The demand for these crackers grew so much that bakers began to produce them domestically. Stauffer's Biscuit Company produced the first batch of animal crackers in Pennsylvania in 1871. Other domestic bakeries soon followed. In 1902, animal crackers officially became known as 'Barnum's Animals' to take advantage of the familiar circus theme. There was no licensing fee paid to Barnum and Bailey Circus as the product actually said 'Barnum's Animals' with the subtitle of 'Crackers'. In 1902, the now familiar box was designed for the Christmas season with the innovative idea of attaching a string to hang it from the Christmas tree. Until that time, crackers were generally sold only in bulk or in large tins. These small cartons which retailed for five cents at the time, were a big hit and are still sold today - obviously with a price difference.

These crackers tend to be light colored and slightly sweet, but darker chocolate flavored and frosted varieties are also available. Although they have the flavor of cookies, they are made with a layered dough like crackers and are marketed as such. The number and variety of animals represented in each box has varied over the years with a total of fifty-three different animals represented since 1902.

Ever wonder why there is a tiny hole in the middle of each cracker? This reduces the rising process by allowing some of the air to escape the

crackers through the holes which are called dockers. This trick allows the crackers to retain more of the animals' shapes. A single bushel of wheat can make approximately 245 boxes of Barnum's Animals

Crackers.

In 2018, a new design for the boxes was released after consultation with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). The boxes now show the animals freed from their traditional circus boxcar cages. This occurred one year after the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus ceased operations.

This has been one product that has brought fun to children as well as adults and the one exception to a mother saying to her offspring 'Don't play with your food!' Playing is encouraged not only for fun but for educational benefits to be gained by games such as counting and the use of imagination. Directions on how to use the crackers to decorate cakes, etc. would often appear in the Mercury and the crackers were always available in our local food stores just as they are today.

No matter your age, you can celebrate National Animal Crackers Day on April 18th of this year, remembering P. T. Barnum and how a simple product brings about a reminder of an age of comfort and security.