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The Big Top Online: Circus Digital Resources

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Circus World

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The history of the American circus reveals a unique community filled with its own culture and language. It is a rich history representing a way of life that, in many respects, is a reflection of the audiences it strives to entertain. It is a subject that has, in recent years, attracted the attention of academic historians and graduate students who have come to see the circus as an opportunity to gain insights into the social history of a number of different time periods. It is a history that attracts the keen eye of model builders; curious genealogists seeking data on their ancestors; musicians enthralled with the stirring sounds of Sousa-like marches, fanfares, and gallops; collectors looking to expand their knowledge of material culture; and performers studying the acts of others who have gone before.

Listed in this article is a selection of important online catalogs of research materials regarding the American circus. The list presented here is separated into two categories. The first category, Major Collections, presents websites that contain multiple collections and/or large numbers of images. The second category, Small Collections, describes websites that include a few hundred items or a single finding aid.

Though small in number, several common threads connect the different websites. The vast majority of online resources focus on images, specifically lithographic posters and photographs. Folder-level manuscript finding aids are limited, however, several collections do contain extensive book records. The subject matter is also limited. Whereas many of the resources do provide a wealth of information on such matters as transportation, advertising, performers, and business records, most online catalogs are dominated by materials related to the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, or its predecessors (The Ringling Brothers Circus and the Barnum and Bailey Circus). This is not surprising since the Ringling circus has been the dominant circus in the United States since the 1930s. Yet there were once hundreds if not thousands of different circus shows of all sizes, and finding documentation on many of these other shows can be difficult at best. Also significantly absent in nearly all the repositories, online or otherwise, are the personal papers of circus employees.

Today fewer than 10 circuses still travel the country. Ever since the emergence of radio, motion pictures, and television, the circus has steadily declined and has all but disappeared from the public consciousness. The websites presented here represent the work of a limited number of collecting institutions that provide a window into a quickly disappearing cultural form.

**Major Collections**

The Special Collections Department of the Milner Library, Illinois State University (library.illinoisstate.edu/unique-collections) contains an extensive collection of circus books that can be searched through the main library online catalog. Also at the Milner Library is the Circus and Allied Arts Collection (library.illinoisstate.edu/unique-collections/circus-allied-arts), a website of digitized resources available online through the websites referenced in this article.
Kodachrome slides from the 1940s and 1950s. The site also contains additional black-and-white photographs that date back into the 1930s. The images illustrate a broad range of subject matter including loading scenes, personal snapshots, back lot scenes, and performers.

The John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Art (www.ringling.org) is one of the largest online circus resources. It includes nearly 378 color slides, over 4,000 lithographic posters (the largest collection currently found online), and wardrobe design drawings.

The Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center at Circus World (circus.pastperfect-online.com/30070/cgi/mweb.exe?request=ks) is perhaps the most recent addition to the online community. The online catalog, established in 2011, contains over 6,000 records, including photographs, lithographs, and smaller advertising materials such as heralds and couriers. The online catalog also contains folder-level finding aids and over 3,000 book records.

The American Antiquarian Society (catalog.mwa.org/index.html), which focuses its collecting activity on pre-1876 materials, maintains an online catalog of over 500 records relating to both circuses and menageries, and is perhaps the single most important resource relating to pre–Civil War shows. This online resource does not contain any digital imagery nor does it contain folder-level finding aids, but it does maintain a searchable online catalog which references books, handbills, print ephemera, and manuscript materials.

No other online resource attempts to be as comprehensive as the website of the Circus Historical Society (CHS, www.circushistory.org/index.htm). The society does not collect physical archival or library materials, but its website still remains a significant research resource. The CHS website contains a “virtual library,” which includes indexes to Bandwagon, the historical journal of the CHS, as well as

The website of Illinois State University’s Milner Library includes Kodachrome slides from its Circus and Allied Arts Collection.
other serial publications such as *Circus Report* and *Circus Fan Fare*. The site also contains select digitized copies of historical publications such as *The Billboard*, route books, newspaper advertisements, and biographical information on numerous performers and other personalities.

**Small Collections**

The online catalog of the [Wisconsin Historical Society](www.wisconsinhistory.org) contains over 200 photographs, numerous newspaper clippings, architectural and historic inventory records, and posters.

Indiana University–Bloomington houses the collection of [Charles W. Cushman](webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/cushman/index.jsp). Though the vast majority of the 14,500 Kodachrome color slides bear no relation to the circus, the collection does contain 179 color images from 1941 through 1965 of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus during its many performances in Chicago, Illinois.

Princeton University boasts two circus collections. The [McCaddon Collection of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, 1871–1907](findingaids.princeton.edu/collections/TC040.pdf) consists of 85 cubic feet of papers of the Barnum and Bailey Circus in the years leading up to its purchase by the Ringling Brothers in 1907. The collection includes scrapbooks, advertising materials, lithographs, correspondence, and photographs. A second finding aid, *Circus Posters Collection*, circa 1850–1973 ([findingaids.princeton.edu/collections/TC093.pdf](findingaids.princeton.edu/collections/TC093.pdf)) describes a collection of circus posters from the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus as well as other miscellaneous circus shows.

The online catalog of Tufts University contains the finding aid for the [P. T. Barnum Papers](dl.tufts.edu/catalog/ead/tufts:UA069.001.DO.MS002), which includes correspondence, photographs, news clippings, and other memorabilia documenting the career of P. T. Barnum.

The Missouri Historical Society holds the records of the [Parker and Watt Circus](shs.umsystem.edu/manuscripts/invent/2307.pdf), a midsized truck show from the mid-twentieth century. The collection contains general business records, employee and general correspondence, newspaper clippings, and photographs.