Dan Rice

THE ONE-HORSE SHOW

The Life and Times of Dan Rice, Circus Jester and Philanthropist

A Chronicle of Early Circus Days

By

JOHN C. KUNZOG

John C. Kunzog

Published by
JOHN C. KUNZOG
36 Norton Avenue
Jamestown, N. Y.

1962

ze flour and the boiling water required was obtained from a hotel itchen. Paste was always made in the early evening and allowed to ool and firm before using. It was this custom that made it possible for ice to wreak vengeance on Spalding during the season of their bat- e with rat sheets. Rice had in his employ a man who knew a few ings about billposting that was not general knowledge and he was ommissioned to follow the Spalding posting brigade on a mission of botage. Evenings when the advertising crew was in town, this emis- ry of Rice would sneak into the livery stable where their wagon was uartered and empty a small pailful of yeast and soft soap into the ewly made paste. At that period yeast was not available in com- ressed form, only in liquid state at some bakery or brewery, soft soap as sold by grocers. The yeast caused the paste to ferment and de- roy its adhesive qualities. The bills would adhere when first put up ut after a short time the damp air of the night plus the heat of the un, the posters invariably loosened and a breeze finding an opening t some edge was all that was needed to have the posters peel off.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Rhinoceros and the Peanut Make Their Debut

The circus met its northern engagements, enjoying a successful season and in early November horses and equipment were again quartered at Conneautville and Dan Rice and his troupe of winter performers headed southward. The circus reached New Orleans in mid-December and opened the season December 19th, but the show stayed only for two weeks as misfortune had visited New Orleans amusement purveyors in the form of fire which destroyed the Varieties Theatre on November 21, 1854. The drama was considered far higher on the amusement scale than the circus, so when Dan Rice arrived in the Crescent City he was approached by a committee of civic-minded individuals, among which was G. C. Lawrason, site owner; David Bidwell, amusement promoter; Cuthbert Bullitt, editor of the *Picayune*; James Robb, a banker; James H. Caldwell, financier; Thomas Placide, actor and manager, as well as several other distinguished citizens, who cast envious eyes on the amphitheatre because of its seating capacity. They implored Rice to relinquish his lease so that dramatic performers could trod the boards. Rice assented, and gave his afternoon show amid the cacaphonous clatter of construction while workmen were remodeling the building into a permanent theatre. He opened on Tuesday, December 19 and closed the season with the evening performance on Friday, January 5, 1855, and Rice's Amphitheatre was re-christened Pelican Theatre.

But Rice's Amphitheatre should not be forgotten, for it was here that the American circus-going public was introduced to the roasted peanut. At that period, among the edibles vended at circuses were gingerbread, maple sugar cakes, popcorn, which instead of being buttered and salted as today, was coated with coffee sugar (brown sugar), or bedropped with molasses—a rather sticky precursor of the carmel corn of today. Hickory nuts, black walnuts and pecans were vended,

but these nuts entailed laborious hours of cracking before they could be offered the public, and even then much of the meat was lost for lack of means of picking it from the shell, nor did these nuts have the tantalizing aroma of freshly roasted peanuts.

New Orleans had its share of street vendors and their cries ran the gamut from flowers to hot corn. Passing through a street lined with these street vendors, Dan Rice was intrigued by a Negro who was offering "roasted goobers." The aroma of his product roasting in an iron spider oven over an open fire pleased the clown, and purchasing a tin cupful for one cent he ate some and was more than delighted with the flavor. Here was a nut that required no cracking prior to sale; the customer could do it with his fingers and get out all the meat.

This nut was variously known as goobers, pinders, ground-nut, monkey nuts, goober peas or ground peas, or pea-nut. They were brought to this country by Negro slaves who raised them for their own use. They were boiled by some, roasted and used in lieu of coffee, and nuts harvested beyond personal needs were fed to pigs. As yet they had not become an important article of commerce.

Rice acquired a portable coffee roaster—a large sheet iron device much like a large stove pipe, with ends enclosed, a pivot on one end and a crank at the other. A sliding door allowed access to the interior. This roaster was rested on iron sockets, and with a fire underneath and the roaster filled with nuts, a Negro lad slowly turned the device to keep the nuts from burning. When properly roasted the nuts were dumped into a wooden tub and the subsequent aroma permeating the tent brought people to the stand to buy.

In 1854 the Rice circus took the peanut north to introduce the new tidbit to patrons of the show—and give birth to a circus tradition. Different sections of the country had their own name for the nut. Goobers is, perhaps, merely a gutteral pronunciation, and pinders may be the effort of Negroes to say peanuts. Why the name "pea-nut" was given is hard to say. It is a member of the bean family, and resembles the bean more than the pea. In ancient circus at Rome a class of peas were roasted and another species steamed, and sold to the crowd. The north knew nothing of the nut, but recognized in its tantalizing fragrance a tidbit of worth.

When Rice surrendered his claim on the amphitheatre he reorganized the show to appear under canvas, placing it under the management of Frank Rosston and calling it Crescent City Circus. Rice left New Orleans, taking with him the elephant Lalla Rookh, the albino camel and his trick horses Excelsior and Eureka. He returned

to his new home in Girard where in February, 1855, the Rices held "open house" when the villagers called and inspected the Rice home. They found Mr. and Mrs. Rice gracious persons, and their two daughters, Elizabeth and Katherine princesses of politeness and decorum. The quidnuncs who but a few months previous were condemning all show folk, now were profuse in their laudation of their new neighbors.

But the villagers were not the only ones who called, for the kings of the circus world came to extend their felicitations to the young circus owner and his family. Among them were Gen. Rufus Welch, Levi North, Herr Driesbach, Lewis Lent, Jerry and Edmund Mabie, plus three members of the Flatfoots: Avery Smith, Seth B. Howes and Nathan A. Howes, an organization of Empire State circus operators who found in Rice an adversary worthy of their steel. They admired his pugnacious determination in surmounting all obstacles and his ever-growing popularity with circus goers. The all-conquering Dan was riding the waterways to glory and gold, infecting the Flatfoots with an avarice itch that could not be stilled. His charitable nature, they reasoned, was his vulnerable spot. Why not meet charity with charity, and what could be more charitable on the part of the Flatfoots than to sell to Rice the black rhinoceros they had acquired a few seasons past? It was a vicious animal, had killed one attendant, injured several others and was so great a liability that the animal was rusticating at the Flatfoots' farm in Putnam County (N. Y.) from whence it acquired the name Old Put.

And so it was that Avery Smith with a siren song on his lips and avarice in his heart, extolled the beautiful estate of Rice, praised his genius as an entertainer and bespoke untold success for the showman. He mentioned the rhinoceros as a wonderful acquisition for the Rice show.

Avery Smith, in a persuasive plea, extolled the merits of having the animal grace the Girard scenery where the rhinoceros would become a magnet to draw the curious, resulting in untold benefits in the form of publicity. Yet Smith neglected to mention the omniverous appetite of the animal that was causing concern among the Flatfoots over maintenance costs. Avery Smith offered the animal to Rice for a paltry $2,000, but Rice, rascallion that he was, seemed well versed with the record of Old Put and the reason of the charitable offer. He did, however, buy the animal, but not at the asking price. Having listened attentively to the pretty word picture Avery Smith presented, Dan Rice proceeded to delineate the history of the beast, and then

for a mere $700 purchased the rhinoceros, assuming the costs of transportation from New York State.

The animal was brought to Girard and quartered on land which is still known as Rhinoceros Hollow. Here Rice patiently watched his latest acquisition. He learned that the hearing of the animal was fully as acute as that of a pig—it could detect a snap of a fingernail at ten feet. The showman provided himself with two thimbles, one for the thumb and one for the index finger, and began a system of education with a series of clicks. In 1855 but a few months after having acquired the animal, Dan Rice advertised the only performing rhinoceros in the world appearing in the ring without shackles. The Flatfoots winked at each other. Some day Dan would be picked up for obtaining money under false pretense with such brazen publicity. But rumors reached their ears which created a sense of doubt, for continuing reports told of the animal performing in the ring under the direction of Rice.

Avery Smith set out to investigate. He violated the cardinal rule of the day by purchasing a ticket for the show instead of being admitted gratis on his own recognizance, and this is what he observed:

Rice made his entrance, followed at a distance of ten feet by the rhinoceros, heavily shackled and led by an attendant. The chains were removed as the animal entered the ring. A pair of platform stairs, three steps in height, were placed in the ring which Old Put would ascend and standing at the top would let out a deafening bellow when Rice asked: "Did I train you to obey my commands?" While the animal stood on the platform Rice lighted some red fire inside a small paper house. "Fire!" he yelled, "ring the bell!" At which command the animal clambered down from the steps, ran to a rod on which hung a swinging bell and would toll it with his horn. This alarm brought out the clown fire department riding in a pig drawn cart.

This scene was followed by Dan Rice walking around the ring, followed at a short distance by the rhinoceros. Divesting himself of his coat, a large handkerchief was observed to protrude from his hip pocket. The animal increased its pace, seized the kerchief in its mouth, when attendants placed an inverted wooden tub between Rice and the animal. Turning around, Rice placed one foot on the tub, and looking at the rhinoceros now standing on the other side, he would say:

"Put, you old scamp; you have stolen my kerchief. Return it, I say."

But the animal merely stood there looking at Rice, sometimes emulating its preceptor by also placing a foot on the tub. Dan re-

peated the request for the kerchief several times to no avail, and then, standing erect, he clicked his heels together, gave a smart military salute and said:

"General Putnam, sir; I have come for the return of the kerchief."

Upon being so addressed the rhinoceros opened its mouth and the kerchief fell upon the tub and the two performers bowed to the plaudits of the spectators. On leaving the ring, shackles were again placed on the animal, which was then led out of the tent.

Avery Smith refused to believe his eyes. He witnessed the show several times before he was convinced that Dan Rice, indeed, had subjugated the two-ton rhinoceros to obeissance. He sought out Rice and opened overtures for the purchase of the animal and for the services of the showman to exhibit it in the Flatfoot organization, but his offers and pleas were of no avail, for Rice was adamant in his refusal to sell Old Put, so a crestfallen Avery Smith returned to report to his partners that Rice had the greatest drawing card of any circus, and the Flatfoots, not in derision but in envy, bestowed upon the rhinoceros the title "The Learned Shoat."

The albino camel also was taught the art of ring performance. The waltz was relatively new at that period. Garbed in blue pantellettes on each leg, replete with ruffles and lace, and covered with a large red blanket, its white pelage completing the national color scheme, the animal executed its version of the waltz with her master as partner. A very sedate, decorous and dignified maiden she appeared to be. For an encore, her personality suddenly changed. The animal seized a specially made large cigar from Rice and puffed it with much apparent enjoyment, while the band struck up the rhythm for the can-can dance. A camel does not kick like a horse, but sends its legs sideways, so with invisible strings tied to the animal's legs and attached to the blanket so it would pull up a large expanse of ruffled pantellettes were brought to view as the camel proceeded to execute its version of the dance, bringing howls of delight from the men, while girls and women smothered their laughter and tried to conceal their blushes of embarrassment behind kerchiefs or fans. Having concluded the act, the camel exited, still smoking the cigar—a fair example of a brazen hoyden. The message of the dual personality of the animal was easily divined for it was named Van Orden.

In the ensuing years a number of trick mules were trained by Rice. They had a finesse of movement that bore the hallmarks of Rice genius. No one ever claimed the monetary reward for riding a

or a mere $700 purchased the rhinoceros, assuming the costs of transortation from New York State.

The animal was brought to Girard and quartered on land which still known as Rhinoceros Hollow. Here Rice patiently watched his ıtest acquisition. He learned that the hearing of the animal was ılly as acute as that of a pig—it could detect a snap of a fingernail : ten feet. The showman provided himself with two thimbles, one or the thumb and one for the index finger, and began a system of lucation with a series of clicks. In 1855 but a few months after hav- ıg acquired the animal, Dan Rice advertised the only performing ıinoceros in the world appearing in the ring without shackles. The latfoots winked at each other. Some day Dan would be picked up r obtaining money under false pretense with such brazen publicity. ut rumors reached their ears which created a sense of doubt, for conuing reports told of the animal performing in the ring under the rection of Rice.

Avery Smith set out to investigate. He violated the cardinal rule the day by purchasing a ticket for the show instead of being admitd gratis on his own recognizance, and this is what he observed:

Rice made his entrance, followed at a distance of ten feet by the ıinoceros, heavily shackled and led by an attendant. The chains were moved as the animal entered the ring. A pair of platform stairs, three ɛps in height, were placed in the ring which Old Put would ascend ıd standing at the top would let out a deafening bellow when Rice ked: "Did I train you to obey my commands?" While the animal ood on the platform Rice lighted some red fire inside a small paper ıuse. "Fire!" he yelled, "ring the bell!" At which command the ani- al clambered down from the steps, ran to a rod on which hung a inging bell and would toll it with his horn. This alarm brought out e clown fire department riding in a pig drawn cart.

This scene was followed by Dan Rice walking around the ring, llowed at a short distance by the rhinoceros. Divesting himself of s coat, a large handkerchief was observed to protrude from his hip cket. The animal increased its pace, seized the kerchief in its mouth, ıen attendants placed an inverted wooden tub between Rice and the imal. Turning around, Rice placed one foot on the tub, and look- g at the rhinoceros now standing on the other side, he would say:

"Put, you old scamp; you have stolen my kerchief. Return it, I ."

But the animal merely stood there looking at Rice, sometimes ıulating its preceptor by also placing a foot on the tub. Dan re-

peated the request for the kerchief several times to no avail, and then, standing erect, he clicked his heels together, gave a smart military salute and said:

"General Putnam, sir; I have come for the return of the kerchief."

Upon being so addressed the rhinoceros opened its mouth and the kerchief fell upon the tub and the two performers bowed to the plaudits of the spectators. On leaving the ring, shackles were again placed on the animal, which was then led out of the tent.

Avery Smith refused to believe his eyes. He witnessed the show several times before he was convinced that Dan Rice, indeed, had subjugated the two-ton rhinoceros to obeissance. He sought out Rice and opened overtures for the purchase of the animal and for the services of the showman to exhibit it in the Flatfoot organization, but his offers and pleas were of no avail, for Rice was adamant in his refusal to sell Old Put, so a crestfallen Avery Smith returned to report to his partners that Rice had the greatest drawing card of any circus, and the Flatfoots, not in derision but in envy, bestowed upon the rhinoceros the title "The Learned Shoat."

The albino camel also was taught the art of ring performance. The waltz was relatively new at that period. Garbed in blue pantellettes on each leg, replete with ruffles and lace, and covered with a large red blanket, its white pelage completing the national color scheme, the animal executed its version of the waltz with her master as partner. A very sedate, decorous and dignified maiden she appeared to be. For an encore, her personality suddenly changed. The animal seized a specially made large cigar from Rice and puffed it with much apparent enjoyment, while the band struck up the rhythm for the can-can dance. A camel does not kick like a horse, but sends its legs sideways, so with invisible strings tied to the animal's legs and attached to the blanket so it would pull up a large expanse of ruffled pantellettes were brought to view as the camel proceeded to execute its version of the dance, bringing howls of delight from the men, while girls and women smothered their laughter and tried to conceal their blushes of embarrassment behind kerchiefs or fans. Having concluded the act, the camel exited, still smoking the cigar—a fair example of a brazen hoyden. The message of the dual personality of the animal was easily divined for it was named Van Orden.

In the ensuing years a number of trick mules were trained by Rice. They had a finesse of movement that bore the hallmarks of Rice genius. No one ever claimed the monetary reward for riding a

Rice-trained trick mule, for the animal was taught to completely roll over on the ground, making it necessary for its rider to dismount and forfeit the reward.

Trick mules were not a novelty but a standard act with circuses of that period, and it may be stated, parenthetically, that on one occasion a young lad whom his chums called "Lysses" once dared to ride one of these ornery creatures and managed to stay on long enough to earn the five dollars offered, despite the efforts of a monkey that leaped on the boy's back and tried to divert his attention by pulling his hair and other disconcerting tactics. But the lad tenaciously hung on to receive the money begrudgingly paid by the circus owner. The boy won higher glories for himself and his nation—he was Ulysses S. Grant.

While all circuses boasted trick mules, the ones trained by Rice had a dexterity of movement never achieved by other trainers. They became the envy of circus owners and he was besieged with requests to train mules for other shows, and for which he received $5,000 a pair.

But Pete and Barney Duffy were two that Rice kept for his own show, and although other circuses advertised the kicking and bucking Pete and Barney, the originals always were in the Rice show.

While on the subject of animal training it is not out of place to mention a giraffe Rice added to the show a few years later. These animals are voiceless, their only means of defense is in flight in which their long legs are admirably suited to carry them from danger. In the circus they are merely an animal for the menagerie tent and not for ring presentation. Yet Rice had a giraffe that while it did not possess an extensive repertoire of tricks, it did appear in the ring. It made its entrance with head hanging down and having a rather dejected look. Dan diagnosed the animal's ailment as "millinery-melancholia." He removed his high hat, inside of which were tucked ribbon streamers. The animal lowered its head while Rice placed the hat on the giraffe's head and tied the streamers in a neat bow. "You look bewitching; be off you vixen." And the giraffe, head erect, stalked out of the ring and tent as proud as any woman with a new bonnet.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Tanbark Ring

The tanbark ring—a rust-hued cushion of resiliency reeking with an alluring incense that drew the populace of a nation to worship in adoration at this shrine of pungency; a clay-rimmed circle which caused poets to wax lyrical over its charm yet in their effusions neglected to mention its physical body. The title is not a misnomer, for it was constructed of tanbark and clay, while the genius and talent of circus performers and trained animals transmuted its base elements into a miniature fairyland upon which a centerpole cast its shadow of approval under the soft glow of candlelight, and fleeting minutes were converted into aureate moments of happiness.

When Dan Rice's Great Show first began to tour the country lot location was of paramount importance. It had to be within easy walking distance from town. Horse-cars operated only in large cities, and carry-all service in small communities offered by some local livery stable left much to be desired in transportation where crowds were concerned. It was the duty of the advance man to select a suitable field, fairly free of stumps and boulders, and arrange for building the circus ring on a clearing free from obstructions. The axe was the implement of progress and as towns grew, forests were felled, but stumps were not easily eradicated and while they were not too great an obstacle to grazing cattle or the plowman, they were undesirable on a circus lot.

As grass would become slippery and conducive to accidents, as hard ground would prove detrimental to animals' hooves, circus men constructed their conception of the ideal ring. They knew that the speed of a race horse varied according to soil formation of the track; its time always better on muck soil or cushiony ground than on a hard, gravelly course. So early showmen provided a uniform ring at all stands with a resultant uniform performance. The ring was two and one-half rods in diameter and local workmen constructed what was facetiously termed "the mud pie circle." The wooden curb ring was still in the future so clay was hauled to the lot and workmen with