

The Noblest Roman of Them All: The Life of Adam Forepaugh

by Stuart Thayer



Adam Forepaugh as portrayed in a poster printed around 1874 by Clay, Cosack & Co.

RMA, Tibbals

Part VI Some Forepaugh Advertising



Advertising posted for Forepaugh's Aggregation in 1869.

CWM

From the time he and John O'Brien bought the Mabie menagerie in 1865, Forepaugh's advertising emphasized his zoological offerings. Though the posters and advertisements proclaimed a full roster of circus acts, the acts were definitely subordinated to the zoological wonders. In this, Forepaugh deviated from standard circus advertising, which emphasized headline performers in the arena.

When, in 1866, Forepaugh and O'Brien first added performers to their show, the newspaper ads bunched the performers' names in a single paragraph, while most of the space was devoted to the menagerie. Forepaugh continued this practice in 1867 when he put his own name on the circus. "Twenty-four massive dens and 160 stalwart draught horses for transportation," were announced in Rochester, New York, where Forepaugh faced opposition from two other circuses. In Syracuse, the cage occupants were presented at length, but again, only a paragraph was given to the human roster. Professor Langworthy, the lion trainer, always came in for notice, but the others—the riders and acrobats and clowns—were almost an afterthought.

The thinking behind this advertising must have been that, since arena acts were fairly cut and dried, and all circuses had them, it was best to emphasize the birds and beasts that other companies lacked. This same effort is seen

in the advertising for Yankee Robinson's circus, and George F. Bailey's Quadruple Combination (which boasted the first hippopotamus on any circus).

Forepaugh introduced the separate menagerie tent in 1869 and had the only two-tent exhibition in America that season. In newspaper columns the huge bull elephant Romeo and Little Annie, an elephant calf, were mentioned more often than such human luminaries as Tom King or the Stokes Family. By 1870 the circus toured thirty cages of animals and three elephants, the largest menagerie of any show then traveling.

In 1871 the P. T. Barnum circus emerged as the largest in the land, and Forepaugh's 1872 advertising was overhauled to meet this new challenge. No longer satisfied reciting the merits of the Aggregation, Forepaugh's writers began piling on numbers, most obviously fictitious. They wrote of a thousand men and horses, ten thousand museum curiosities, fifteen hundred wild animals. Such embellishment was muted when there was no opposition in sight. The following superfluities are extracted from ads in Galesburg, Illinois, when the Barnum show was but eighteen days away:

"Moving by rail from Baltimore to Pittsburgh required 129 freight cars and six passenger coaches." That was exactly twice the actual number used. It was further stated that the

show was so large it had been “compelled to Abandon Railroads Forever (to become) a City Moving Overland.”

Barnum’s advertising, on the other hand, emphasized such ethnological marvels as the Fiji Cannibals and the Museum of Historical Curiosities, as well as unusual humans such as midgets and giants and bearded women. The Barnum show called itself a “Traveling World’s Fair,” not a circus, though Dan Castello’s circus was mentioned as an appendage.

Forepaugh touted Chang and Eng, the famous Siamese twins, and a two-headed baby (in formaldehyde). Since he had no giraffe (as did Barnum), nor a rhinoceros (as did Barnum), he put forward a tapir, which he called a “hippopotamus (S. A.)” meaning from South America.

In the next season, 1873, Forepaugh again went west—to Michigan, Indiana and Ohio, while Barnum opted for New England, so there was no opposition between them. The focus of Forepaugh’s advertising was his circus’s five-tent arrangement (two menageries, two museums, and the arena), as well as the addition of a rhinoceros, Forepaugh’s first.

The progression in animal procurement followed a pattern that most shows adhered to over the years. In this, the more common and easily cared-for types—the big cats, and camels, and oxen—were usually the basis for a menagerie. As new species were captured and offered by dealers, they were advertised as new wonders. An example was the wildebeest, or gnu. Various antelope species enjoyed brief acclaim, as did exotic birds. But the giraffe, the rhinoceros, and the hippopotamus were considered the epitome of an expensive outlay. These animals were always extensively advertised, not alone for their cost but for the necessity of nurturing them and accommodating them in unique housing. Giraffes, for instance, were notoriously fragile and seldom survived long in the day-to-day jolting that circus display required. It would be 1879 before Forepaugh could boast of having the three species on his show at the same time.

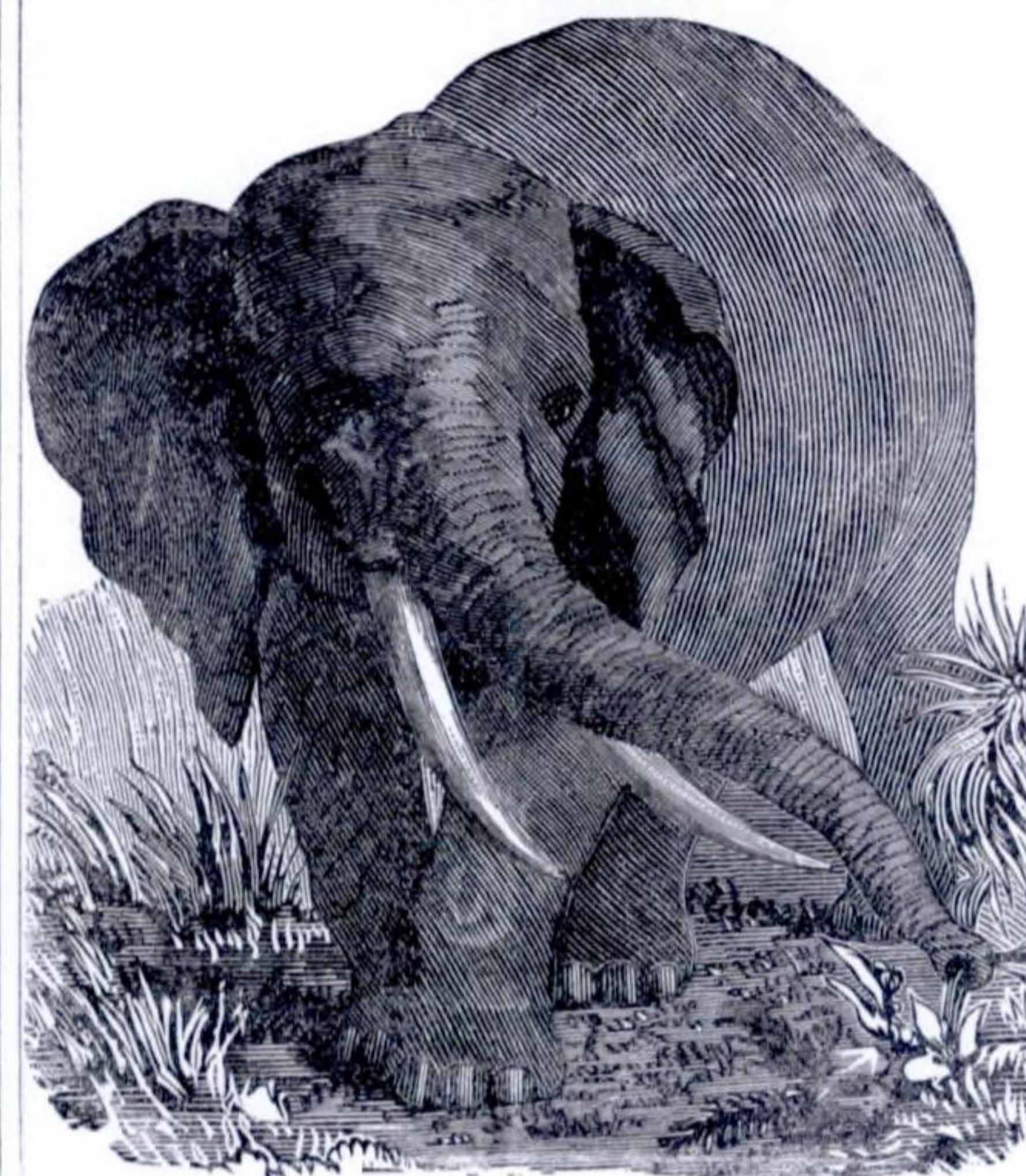
By 1874, Forepaugh was advertising a rhinoceros and a giraffe as well as three elephants. Since Barnum was announcing that his Hippodrome was not a circus, and it had no menagerie, the difference between them was clear; this difference continued into 1875, when Barnum’s Hippodrome ventured into the West as far as Omaha, Nebraska, while Forepaugh spent much of the season in Canada.

With the 1876 advent of the Flatfoot management team on the Barnum circus, the show returned to a conventional circus format, and the annual rivalry between the various shows reverted to the intensity of 1873. By this time, the larger outfits were all advertising similar animal features. Four had giraffes, three had rhinoceroses, three had sea lions, and two had hippopotamuses. Then elephants came to the fore, a preview of the “elephant wars” of the 1880s.

THE OLD WAR ELEPHANT “ROMEO,”

WEIGHING MORE THAN FIVE TONS.

The Largest and Best Performing Elephant
IN AMERICA!



Peaceful beneath primeval trees, that cast
Their ample shade o'er Niger's yellow stream,
And where the Ganges rolls his sacred wave;
Or 'mid the central depth of blackening woods.

High raised in solemn theatre around,
Leans the huge Elephant, wisest of brutes!
Oh, truly wise! with gentle might endowed,
Though powerful, not destructive.

The War Elephant, Romeo was one of the best advertised features of the Forepaugh show in the 1870s. RMA, Tibbals

Howes’ Great London carried ten (of which five performed in the ring), Cooper & Bailey had seven, Forepaugh had six, and Van Amburgh & Co. owned five.

The lessening of differences between companies created the need for increased publicity, with ever larger newspaper ads and the posting of more and more lithographs. Newspaper ads cost more where population was high, so we find the ad volume in smaller cities as much as ten times larger than in high-circulation metropolitan areas.

Once the Forepaugh show had joined the fraternity of railroad-mounted circuses in 1877, the advertising department headed its offerings with “Coming With Three Great Railroad Trains!” and “Drawn by Three Thirty-Ton Engines!” In addition, in that season of 1877, the show acquired its first hippopotamus, an eight-month-old male, added to the menagerie in August, when the circus was in Ohio. The hippo calf went to California and back, but must



The animals of Forepaugh's menagerie were prominent features of the advertising for the 1874 Aggregation. RMA, Tibbals

have died in 1879, as another replaced it in winter quarters in Louisville.

In 1879, Frank A. Robbins sold popcorn at the entrance to Forepaugh's menagerie tent, which stretched behind him almost as far as the eye could see. When visitors asked, "Where are the seats?" his standard reply was, "Go straight ahead three-quarters of a mile and turn left." That sort of bombastic utterance fit well with the efforts of the new writers for the Forepaugh forces, W. W. Durand (1837–1886) and C. H. Day (1842–1907). With the ascendancy of these two word wizards the show's public pronouncements underwent a definite change, much of it as ridiculous as "... and Adam gave names to every beast of the field." We can believe such reckless boasting pleased Forepaugh. It was a clever mixture of the biblical and the personal.

The Forepaugh circus went into New England in 1879 for the first time in twelve years. This was Barnum territory, and had been for seven seasons. Forepaugh prospered in it. Every circus in the country prospered in 1879. Not one lost money, according to the *New York Clipper*, which further announced among circus owners a growing desire to "out-elephant" one another. The rapidly increasing number of elephants involved

in this competition would have invited trouble if the circuses traveled by horse and wagon, but carrying them by rail made it safer and easier, so that by 1941 Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey would move forty-seven elephants daily.

The attempt by larger circuses to "out-elephant" one another was slow to develop. Though the attractiveness of the great beasts had long been recognized, their cost was a deterrent. Acquiring one elephant sufficed for most shows, its presence being a boon to publicity. The first elephant had landed in America in 1796, and early menageries (as opposed to circuses) often featured a single animal that was led from town to town and exhibited in barns for twenty-five cents. It wasn't until 1831 that two elephants were displayed together in a menagerie. In 1843 James Raymond, the leading menagerie owner of the time, introduced a four-elephant hitch on his bandwagon. In 1851, long before he owned his famous circus, Barnum joined with Seth B. Howes to import ten elephants from Ceylon, eight of which survived shipping. This was the largest group of elephants imported to that time.

Forepaugh had first acquired two elephants, Romeo and Kate Rice (also called Juliet), in the 1865 Mabie Me-

nagerie purchase. When Forepaugh and his partner John O'Brien parted in 1866, Forepaugh took Romeo, which he owned until the animal's death in Chicago on June 7, 1872, following an operation on his front legs to remove infected material.

Forepaugh had one of the country's leading elephant trainers in his family. Adam Jr. began appearing in the ring with his father's elephants in 1875, replacing his uncle, George Forepaugh, at the task. Abetted by a friendly elephant man known as "Big Babe," young Adam had learned the craft in secret, unbeknownst to his father (whom he always addressed as "Pop"). When Babe asked Adam Sr. for a raise, he found himself out of a job, and Adam Jr., to whom his father could deny little, asked to fill the vacancy. Though he was but fourteen at the time, "Addie" proved to be a very competent presenter of the six animals then in the herd. His act ended with the six elephants forming a pyramid on tubs. This was very popular, and almost every review praised it. Addie may be the reason his father kept acquiring elephants until there were thirty-one. Eventually, the show presented two rings' worth.

Elephants figured in what was quite possibly the largest advertising sham of the era, in 1884. Known as the White Elephant War, it was perpetrated by both Forepaugh and the Barnum show. It was a war of words surrounding the exhibition of "sacred" white elephants, which each show claimed to have. Many feel the conflicting claims were a discredit

to both organizations and may have hastened the public's disenchantment with circus advertising. It was the first instance we have found in which the press derided both sides of a controversy.

Although show claims had been subject to exaggeration since the 1850s, up to this time claims were still accepted as truth by much of the public. Advertising in general was not provable on its face. Newspapers and outdoor walls blossomed with promises from patent medicines, grooming aids, horse liniments, and agricultural tools. The circus writers simply followed the common practice of the day.

In July 1879, Forepaugh and Barnum engaged in an advertising battle in upper New York State. They were three days apart in playing Syracuse, and a week apart in Rochester. The Forepaugh writers waded in, claiming their show was "A rival-crusher, and triton among the minnows. No balloon sensations or deceptive dodges, but all solid, solid, solid merit." The writers changed their tune in 1880, when Forepaugh added a daily balloon ascension as a prelude to the matinee.

The most outstanding advertising opportunity of 1880 was a gift to the Great London circus (owned by James A. Bailey and James E. Cooper) when, on March 10, one of its elephants was delivered of a calf, proclaimed (incorrectly) as the first such infant to be born in America. "Oh, that precious baby elephant!" trumpeted the ads, and it proved to be the greatest of novelties. The show was assured of full houses that season.

Also in 1880, the Great London and Forepaugh opened the season by combining shows for a two-week stand in Philadelphia. It was advertised as "the greatest array of talent hitherto seen," laying the groundwork for later cooperative actions by Bailey and Forepaugh, two showmen who approached their work with equal intensity.

On November 5 that same year, Barnum & London held a great auction of surplus property, brought about by the combination of the two large circuses. Forepaugh was one of the buyers at the sale, a fact gleefully noted by the Barnum & London advertising department. Their ads said Forepaugh had purchased "the stuffed monkeys; old stuffed snakes; the old, blind horses; the worn-out harness; the dilapidated cages; the old, rotten canvas; and the old, worn-out wagons." Obviously, they chortled, this exposed Forepaugh as a fraud and a swindler. Such verbiage was usually ignored in the circus business, and accepted in the back and forth of claims to superiority. But in this case Forepaugh felt aggrieved and instituted a civil suit in the Court of Common Pleas in Philadelphia asking for \$50,000 in damages.⁵⁴ This began a three-year battle in which the personalities of the owners played as great a part in the advertising as did the wonders under canvas.

Forepaugh's suit came to nothing. By June 11, a news-

Forepaugh's Elephants over the Years

The increasing number of Forepaugh's pachyderms charts like this:

- 1866: one
- 1867: two (three in late season)
- 1868: two
- 1869-1871: three
- 1872: three (until death of Romeo)
- 1873: one
- 1874: three
- 1875-1878: six
- 1879: twelve
- 1880: fifteen
- 1881: twenty
- 1882: twenty-two
- 1882-1886: twenty-five
- 1887: thirty-one

ADAM FOREPAUGH'S GREAT SHOW, LARGEST IN THE WORLD.



MUSEUM. MENAGERIE. TRIPLE CIRCUS & ROMAN HIPPODROME.

"Addie" Forepaugh was a very talented boy, and one whom every commentator has granted unusual ability, both as a performer and administrator. Adam Jr. appears on the roster in 1867, at age six, which can probably be put down to nothing so much as paternal pride. But the boy appeared in the ring riding a pony at the age of eight.

RMA, Tibbals

paper reported that "the difficulties between Forepaugh and Barnum have been amicably adjusted."⁵⁵ However, the Forepaugh writers had to get in that they were "glad to get an official acknowledgement that Barnum's attractions were stuffed monkeys and worthless animals."

It should be remembered that arena acts were not overlooked entirely. Though Forepaugh always advanced his zoological properties first and foremost, he also had to adjust his publicity to the practices of his competitors. This was to put forward the essence of the circus—the acts in the arena. These had been established long before Forepaugh appeared on the scene, and were what the public expected in terms of circus entertainment. Menageries made fine additions to a show, but were not prerequisites. Proof of this lies in the fact that many circuses lacked menageries. One pioneer manager, Lewis B. Lent, had "the heartiest contempt" for what

he called "cat shows." He resisted adding menageries to his large circuses until the 1870s. His conservative beliefs extended to other facets of the business, such as proclaiming that "one ring was best," and that street parades were unnecessary. In 1880—the dawn of the golden age of circuses—only fifteen of the thirty-six shows on tour in America included a menagerie. Of course, as few as two cages could constitute a menagerie.

To Forepaugh, a man who had bought and sold horses and cattle for many years, the value of animals was part of his stock in trade. If he paid \$200 for a horse, he always regarded it as a \$200 horse. This same line of thinking predominated when he acquired a menagerie of exotic animals, although the prices dealers asked were generally known, much like the stock market or meat dealers' prices. When Forepaugh paid \$800 for a lion, that was its value to him. Adding up the cost of his investment in animals produced a

defined figure, and one he could comprehend. But when it came to evaluating performers and their salaries, he was at the mercy of the market. He had to pay what the competition paid—more if he wanted first-class talent. There was no way he could determine if a \$100-a-week rider was worth that salary. He left it to others to determine who should be hired. He had veto power, of course, but his long-time managers, such as William Monroe and Jack Forepaugh, were capable men who served “the Governor” well.

Forepaugh was willing to pay for top talent, which was fortunately abundant. Hiring practice at the time was dependent on performers offering their services, usually by mail. “Name your lowest offer” was the message in hiring ads. On average, a performer could expect to serve two seasons, and then move on. There were a few superstars who commanded top salaries and changed shows as often as every season, lured by higher and higher emoluments. It was unusual for a leading performer like Dan Rice to spend three seasons with one show as he did with Forepaugh. Rice’s \$1,000 weekly salary probably cemented him there until his political antics earned him Forepaugh’s ire.

More typically, performers might begin on Forepaugh, move to Barnum, then to W. W. Cole, then to Sells Bros. and so on. As they aged, and lost a step or two, their path inclined toward smaller circuses. It was not unusual for declining riders to turn to clowning.

As owner of one of the larger menageries, Forepaugh had an investment that was well worth advertising, and his agents spent a lot of money to do just that. In contrast, performers, who regularly changed shows, represented a much smaller investment and received less lavish promotion. Dan Rice was a featured performer whose name also titled the circus. When Rice left Forepaugh’s employment after 1868, the spotlight fell on J. M. Langworthy, the lion trainer, and Stewart Craven, the elephant man. William P. Williams replaced Craven in 1867, and in the next season it was the Stokes Family of riders, and Tom King, the leaper. The five-member Madigan family of riders was on the posters in 1869, as was George Forepaugh, Adam’s brother, who was by then in charge of the elephants. Tom King and the Stokes troupe returned in 1870, when, for the first time, Adam Forepaugh, Jr., called “Addie,” was granted recognition. “Addie” was nine years old.

For the most part, performers’ names were not broadcast heavily, and the weight of the advertising message remained with the four-legged attractions. There is more publicity for Forepaugh’s featured performers in the newspaper reviews than in the show’s advertising. These reviews are the best source for descriptions of the various acts. Even after the Barnum show emerged as a major competitor in 1871, Forepaugh’s advertising continued to favor his menagerie, a wise move since his and Van Amburgh & Co.’s collections

were the largest on the road.

Nevertheless, Forepaugh and Barnum were in heated competition, and the more Forepaugh and the Barnum interests spent on acquiring talent, the higher their advertising budgets became. In the wagon show days Forepaugh spent roughly 8 percent on print advertising; by 1880, 25 to 30 percent of expenses went to lithographs and newspaper ads. One reason for this was the reduction in the cost of four-color printing from as much as fifty cents per poster to as little as four cents, allowing a commensurate explosion in purchasing. The change reflected the move from job press printing to stone lithography.

The Price of Circus Advertising

Fred Lawrence (1838–1895), press agent of the Forepaugh show, was interviewed for the August 2, 1880 edition of the *Cleveland Leader*. He volunteered examples of the cost of advertising in just that one city (a two-day stand):

5,000 sheets of pictorial paper:	\$300
3,000 lithographs:	\$200
140,000 programs:	\$400
Cost of billboards:	\$350
Wages of billposters and cost of rented teams:	\$260
Newspaper advertisements:	\$1,200

Lawrence said the total for Cleveland was \$3,030

All the larger circuses mentioned specific performers; the small ones used “stock paper,” which was printed with idealized circus scenes and mentioned no names. Beginning in 1880, the so-called “thrill acts” came into prominence. These were daredevil deeds, over and above the riding, acrobatic, and strength acts that had for so long defined the circus. Forepaugh presented Ella Zuila, who rode a bicycle on a tight wire sixty feet in the air. George Loyal was shot from a cannon (a form of rubber slingshot) to be caught by the same Zuila, hanging head down from a trapeze. A troupe of bicycle-mounted jugglers (Selbini and Villione) graced the 1881 program. And, though not a thrill act, the Lalla Rookh pageant was, in one form or another, an element of Forepaugh advertising for years after 1881. These special acts required iconographic explanation. Since the audience was familiar with the traditional acts, a simple mention in news-



LOYAL & ZUILA.

Strong woman, Ella Zuila, and her human cannonball husband, George Loyal, were stars of Forepaugh's shows throughout the 1870s.

paper ads was sufficient. But shooting a man from a cannon could only be explained by some kind of pictorial.

Forepaugh's audience was largely rural and appreciative of seeing animals, performing or otherwise. Not surprisingly, Addie Forepaugh was the show's longest-running performer. He first presented an elephant act in 1875 with two grown animals and two calves. The public response to this fourteen-year-old putting gigantic beasts through their paces was immediate and lasting. For the next fifteen years Addie's elephants were headliners in his father's programs. He increased the herd until by 1880 he worked twenty animals in three rings. For the 1883 season, Forepaugh's elephant herd swelled to twenty-five, of which Addie's act used fifteen.

Adam Jr. trained horses as well, and the Forepaugh program featured Addie's twenty-two-horse liberty act. (Leo Van Weste assumed responsibility for this act in 1882.) Leonati's descent by bicycle down a spiral ramp just 12 inches wide was another thrill act. But the star of the 1882 Forepaugh program proved to be Louise Rentz, a ménage rider from a well-known German circus family, who presented an outstanding exhibition of controlled riding. Often, people came to see her act and then went home, ignoring the remainder of the program. Despite her popularity, Rentz, like so many

"Zuila walks the high wire blindfolded, trundles a barrow over it, in which is seated her child; crosses it with her feet encased in sacks, and performs other equally incredible acts."—*Courier-Journal (Louisville, Ky.)*



The illustrations on this page represent the astounding performances of Miss

ELLA ZUILA, THE FEMALE BLONDIN

Now with the Great Forepaugh Show. The Most Extraordinary Spectacle of the Age! Only to be seen in the Great Forepaugh Show. ZUILA.

CROSSING 3-4 INCH WIRE 100 FEET FROM THE GROUND HER FEET AND BODY ENCASED IN SACKS,

Reaching to her arms, using no balance-pole or counter-weights. The height of human audacity, and the climax of recklessness is witnessed when she actually

Walks Blindfolded Across a 3-4 Inch Wire

High in mid-air, using nothing to aid in her perilous journey, trusting only to Providence, her own skill, and the aerial thread that sustains her in space. She also

WALKS UPON STILTS OVER THE SAME SLENDER ROADWAY.

With the like ease one would traverse the solid earth. The consummate skill, the cool, determined, Spartanic bravery of this youthful, graceful, modest petite Parisienne, surpasses that of her once famous countrywoman, Mademoiselle Souyai and La Maga, who won renown a generation ago on the tight rope, or the more recent achievements of the world-famed Blondin. Zulia also executes the first of

European performers, spent but a single season touring with an American circus before returning to her homeland. The everyday movement of an American show often proved anathematic to European riders. In Europe circuses played indoors for a whole season, and on level, smooth surfaces. In America, by contrast, they had to perform on a different surface every day. We know of one French riding troupe that canceled their American contract because they felt they couldn't perform their best when one day they were faced with a sandy field and the next with a near-swamp. In addition to working under sub-par conditions, circus food was low-quality, usually salt pork and boiled potatoes.

The Roman Hippodrome Races, which closed the performance, were new and popular features over the ensuing three years. These contests were run by various mounts—chariots, ostriches, elephants—with both human and simian jockeys. Another imported act in 1883 and 1884 involved thirty Arabian gymnasts. These types of acts naturally lent themselves to the colorful lithographs of the late century.

But then in stormed Cody & Carver's Wild West. The duo—Colonel William F. Cody and Dr. William F. Carver—split at the end of that first (1883) season, Carver for some reason bearing a strong grudge thereafter. Buffalo Bill's Wild West followed the next year and circus managers

were quick to acknowledge its appeal. The Barnum & London show added a troupe of American Indians, and Forepaugh brought out what he called A Wild West Border Show. He also changed his show's title to Adam Forepaugh and the Wild West, which it remained through 1890. He added cowboy and Indian spectacles, such as an Indian attack on a covered wagon train, and a reenactment of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. An unfortunate by-product of all the discharge of weapons was that the tent was filled with gun-smoke for some time after the battles.

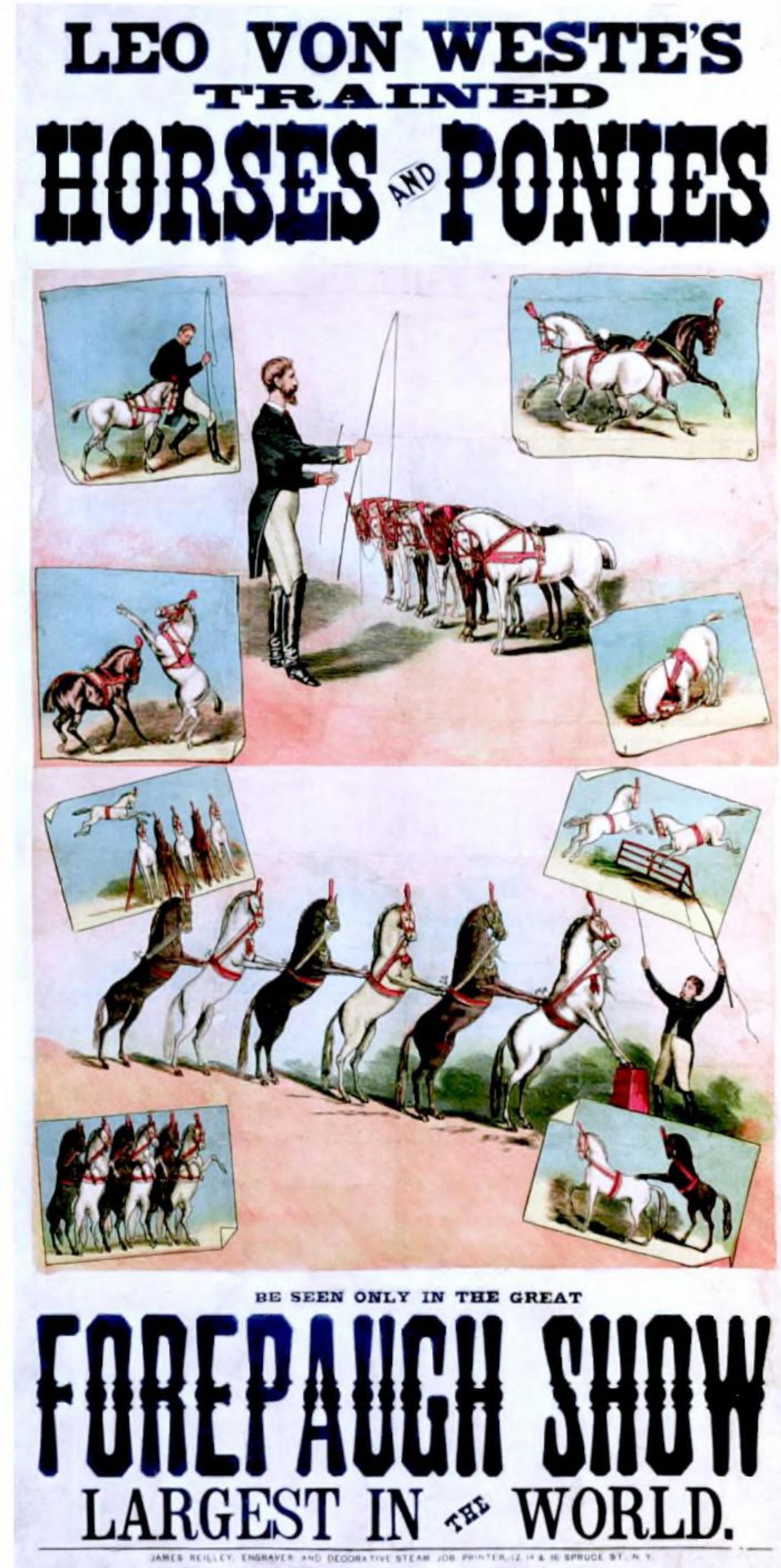
All these changes from the programs of the first ninety years indicate the circus was becoming a repository for acts outside the accepted circus canon. It was as if they had no other venue in which to display themselves.

The craze for bicycling was reflected in Forepaugh's hiring the Elliot family, six unicycle and bicycle riders. He signed sharpshooter A. H. Bogardus and his marksmanship act, and later a similar act by W. F. Carver. Forepaugh arranged permission to bring fifty Indians from the Pine Ridge Reservation, not only for their use in western-themed dramas, but for their exotic presence in street parades.

The circus as an institution had always been composed of disparate acts, each with its own beginning, middle, and finale, and unconnected one to another. Because of this separation, it was not difficult to insert any attraction in the program. Animal acts were relatively inexpensive because, once purchased and advertised, the creatures only needed to be fed. But human beings, performing such seemingly impossible feats as leaping, hurdling, standing on the backs of hurtling steeds, and shooting from the mouths of cannons, were the essence of excitement and the reason the public filled the tents.

For fifty cents, the ticket holder could witness all that he had been studying in the flaming pictorials pasted on the village walls. When promises were not kept, the newspapers were quick to point them out, but by then the show had gone. Circuses large and small often advertised features that they lacked. The blandishments in the handbills were sometimes not in evidence in the show. Here is one review of such a situation: "In the first place, the beautiful horse, one Black Hawk, which had been trained to walk a single plank three hundred feet long to the top of the fifth center-pole, didn't walk the plank very extensively. In fact, he didn't walk the plank at all, for two very good reasons, viz; there was no plank to walk upon, and there was in all probability no horse to perform the difficult feat, which about a thousand people stood in the mud to observe."⁵⁶

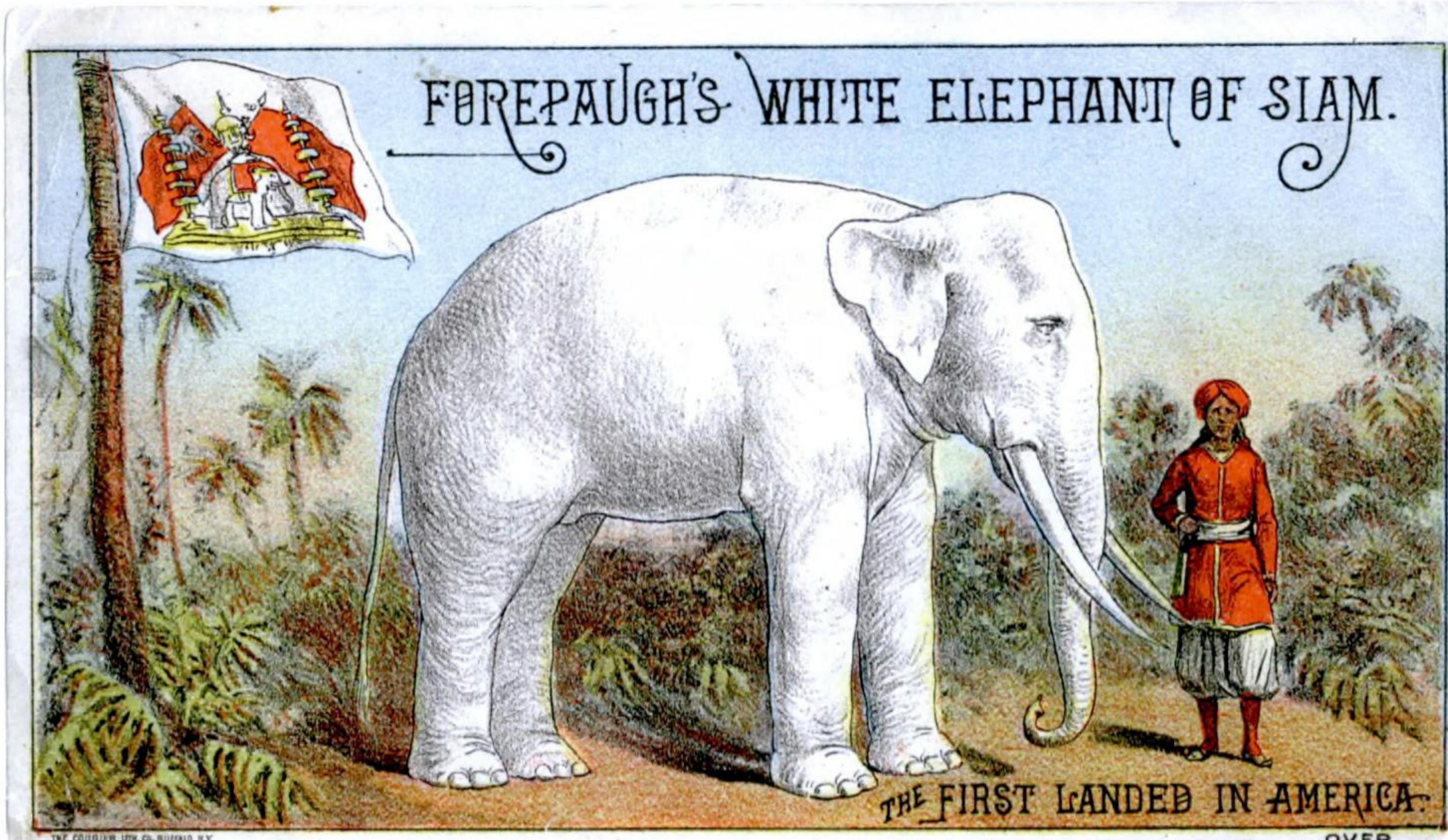
Days, sometimes months ahead of the circus proper, billposters went out in hired buggies to plaster lithographs on any vacant walls they were able to rent. The appearance of the colorful illustrations instantly focused public attention on the coming show. Townspeople gathered before the



Leo Von Weste took over the presentation of horse acts in 1882.
RMA, Tibbals

posters and gaped and talked. The galloping horses, snarling lions, and women in knee-length skirts fascinated country folk and made them resolve to attend the show.

In smaller towns, the pictorials would go up ten days in advance of the show dates; in cities they might be hung three months in advance. In the biggest cities, large billboards might announce the show six months hence. Even those who thought the circus sinful (Forepaugh's "church people") were well aware a circus would soon be in their



The epic battle of the white elephants was, in Forepaugh's mind, the root of public distrust of show advertising. Trade card, circa 1883.

midst. "Bill it like a circus," became an advertiser's by-word.

In December 1883, Barnum & London announced that their agent, W. B. Gaylord, telegraphed from Mandalay that he had procured a white elephant, an elephant revered in Burma as sacred or holy. It was the custom there for all light-skinned (i.e., "white") elephants to become the property of the king. They were specially stabled, fed the choicest forage, and guarded by a host of attendants. A sacred elephant was extremely expensive to maintain and could not be disposed of, so if the king wanted to discipline one of his subjects, he had but to present him with one of the white elephants. The cost of keeping the beast would often bankrupt the recipient. From this comes the definition of a white elephant as an unwelcome or worthless gift.

Forepaugh could not let such a wonder escape him, and he announced on January 5, 1884, that he, too, had bought a white elephant and was having it shipped to Philadelphia. Thus began a rash of claims and counterclaims in which each circus insisted theirs was the genuine article. The opponent's, of course, was a fake. Amid cries of fraud from both sides, the arguments lasted through the early part of the season.

Barnum's animal was named Toung Taloung. He was fifteen years old; 7 feet, 6 inches tall; and weighed 6,400

pounds. He was not snow white. Albinism in elephants manifests as a light ashen color, with pink splashes.⁵⁷ This one had pink on his trunk and his chest. He was lodged at the London Zoo, from where he was shipped to New York amid a cascade of press releases.

Forepaugh's "white elephant" landed in New York on March 20.⁵⁸ Given the name Light of Asia, he was 4 feet, 8 inches tall, not quite five years old, and described as "the color of the ash on a good cigar."⁵⁹

Barnum issued a statement saying that all sacred white elephants but his were imposters. In the shouting between the two sides, Barnum's statement was discounted as just more "humbug."⁶⁰

As it played out, Forepaugh's agent, Sam Watson, had purchased a small Indian elephant named Tiny from Samuel Cross, the Liverpool animal dealer, and had him artificially colored with Paris white, a shade achieved by mixing a pigment with either lead or powdered chalk. It was said Forepaugh hired two men to paint the animal fifty times before shipping him to America. This treatment caused blisters and sore spots on the animal's skin. The paint had to be removed and a salve applied. Henry Cross, brother of the dealer, was quoted as saying they then sandpapered the beast with pumice stone to lighten the outer layer.⁶¹

Forepaugh exhibited Light of Asia in a black tent inside the menagerie. Netting prevented the public from getting closer than eight feet.

Much of the press coverage had a tongue-in-cheek attitude. The *New York Clipper* ran several poems about white elephants, including one about a drunk standing at the end of a pier in Manhattan who, when asked what he was doing, replied that he was waiting for another white elephant to appear. The same newspaper reported a western showman claiming to have a coal-black sacred elephant.

The question as to which, or either, elephant was white played into the hands of the show writers, especially those working for Barnum & London. Since the Forepaugh show played Philadelphia first, from April 14–24, 1884, Barnum had to resort to "Wait" ads. These were common then, and are sometimes seen today. "Wait for the Big Show," they read, hoping that the public would do so. "The only Sacred White Elephant [to] set foot in a Christian land," was Barnum's theme. Forepaugh responded with "the first and only white elephant to be exhibited in Philadelphia this season." Barnum offered to donate \$10,000 to charity if Forepaugh's animal proved to be genuine. So it went, back and forth.

On April 17 the Barnum & London publicity people announced that their opening day parade in Philadelphia, April 21, would feature "a painted, stained, and discolored elephant exactly in imitation of Forepaugh's." Forepaugh countered with "too white for Barnum."

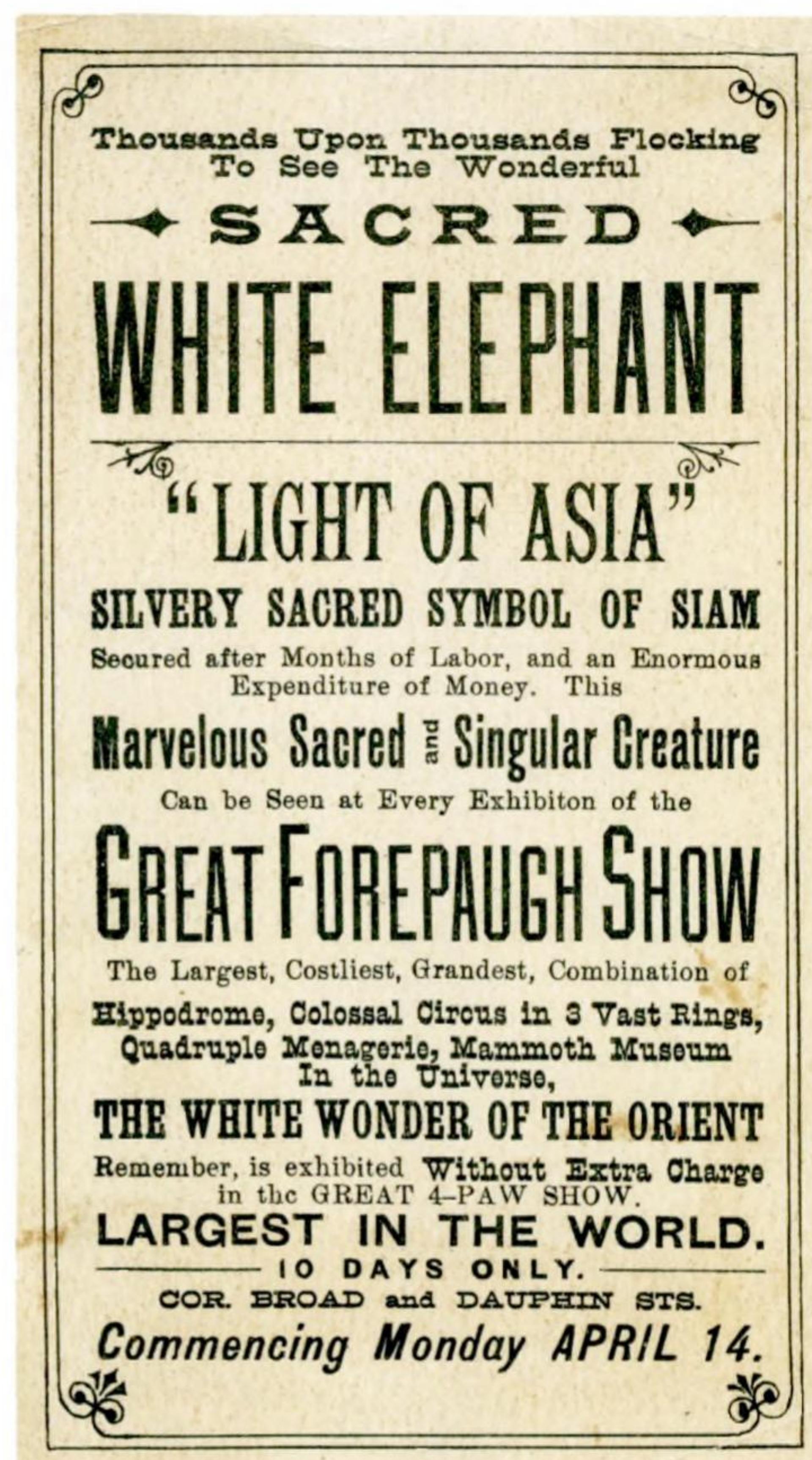
Even the *New York Times* couldn't resist the temptation to tease the showmen about the "sacredness" of the animals: "Mr. Barnum's elephant is claimed to be a thoroughly divine beast, and as evidence thereof, it is daily and publicly worshipped by alleged Siamese priests, who are hired at a liberal salary to illustrate the Siamese system of elephant worship. . . . Unlike Mr. Barnum, Mr. Forepaugh has never made a special point of appealing to the religious public."

The contentiousness was mainly manifested in the early season big city dates where Barnum and Forepaugh played closely on each other's heels—in Philadelphia, and several towns in New Jersey. Barnum & London then went into New England, while Forepaugh went to Buffalo and the western states. The white elephants were heralded much less as the circuses drew apart.

Forepaugh got rid of his animal by announcing its death. In actuality, the handlers simply stopped the pumice sanding, which allowed its natural color to return.

Barnum's Toung Taloung perished in an 1887 fire at the Bridgeport winter quarters. The *New York Dramatic News*, quoting "a Philadelphia circus proprietor" (obviously Forepaugh), printed his remarks as "Dem Barnum folks always gets out some sensation in de spring of de year."

As with most such allegations, nothing was proven. But before Forepaugh left for New Jersey, his advertising hinted



Back of a trade card, circa 1883, featuring the white elephant.
RMA, Tibbals

something had been settled: "Jealous rivals silenced. All slanders refuted. Every lie laid bare."

The cost to each of the participants in the white elephant controversy was estimated at \$30,000 above what ordinary advertising would have been. Uncharacteristically, Forepaugh was said to particularly regret the business because it created distrust in the public mind as to the truth in circus advertising.

Three years later the *New York Times* wrote of Barnum and Forepaugh: "Once in a while, they blunder exactly alike. The 'white elephant,' the cause of the 1884 war, is a case in point. The 'sacred brute' helped neither show, and it hurt the scientists who ventured to vouch for its integrity."