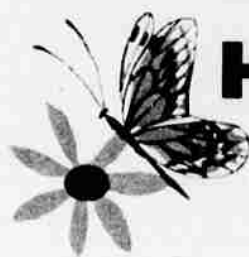




The birthplace of the American circus is a child's paradise. They play in relics that preserve a magic past.



How the Traveling Circus Was Born

by K. C. Jerome



A statue of "Old Bet," first star of the circus, stands before the hotel which was center of former showlife.

IN 1815 Hachaliah Bailey was peacefully working his farm and serving as postmaster in Somers, N. Y., when his brother, a sea captain, came into port with an unusual cargo—an elephant.

Hachaliah went down to New York harbor—and was delighted with what he saw. He paid \$1,000 for the beast, named Old Bet, and began traveling the countryside exhibiting her.

Later Bailey added some monkeys and a bear and took his menagerie as far as New England and Canada. Old Bet soon earned enough money for Bailey to build the Elephant Hotel in Somers, and in front of the hotel he erected a statue of the pachyderm atop a granite shaft.

At first, Hachaliah's neighbors snickered, and local preachers even threatened eternal damnation to anyone connected with the circus. But it wasn't

long before circus fever spread all around Somers.

Four of Bailey's neighbors, for example, acquired a circus called the Zoological Institute. The whole neighborhood, some 50 miles from New York City, became a hotbed for seedling circuses. It was said of a ball given at Bailey's Elephant Hotel:

"At one time on the floor there were individuals whose aggregate wealth amounted to upwards of five million dollars and the foundations of whose fortunes were laid in the exhibition of wild animals throughout the United States."

More than a century has passed since that ball. Circuses have traveled a long road from their early days around Somers.

And while Old Bet still stands atop her monument, the Elephant Hotel now serves as Somers' municipal building. But to some townsfolk, the

smell of sawdust and the clatter of the calliope are still fresh. They plan a circus museum to commemorate the fact that Somers was the birthplace of America's traveling circus.

To raise money for the museum, they recently held an exhibition of circus relics in the Elephant Hotel. Amid the many colorful trappings of the big top was a poster advertising the exhibition of a woman said to be 161 years old and the nursemaid of George Washington. "The greatest natural and national curiosity in the world," it said, "she weighs but 46 pounds, and yet is cheerful and interesting."

This attraction was one of the first circus ventures by a young man from Bethel, Conn., only a few miles from Somers. His name, of course, was Phineas T. Barnum, the originator of "The Greatest Show on Earth."