

Josiah Benjamin Garrison, Living Skeleton
West Union, West Virginia
1858 - 1884

At one time or another, all of us have wanted to run away and join the circus. Josiah Benjamin Garrison did just that.

In 1883 Josiah toured with the most prestigious and famous circus of all time. He was then engaged by two dime museums, which were all the rage in the last years of the 19th century. His problematic marriage in Philadelphia to Bertha Clear made the newspapers from coast to coast. JB Garrison, as he was known in the circus world, left behind a biography which ended up in the stacks of the Harvard Library. All this packed into the last year of his short life. He died in August 1884, age 25.

Early Life of JB Garrison

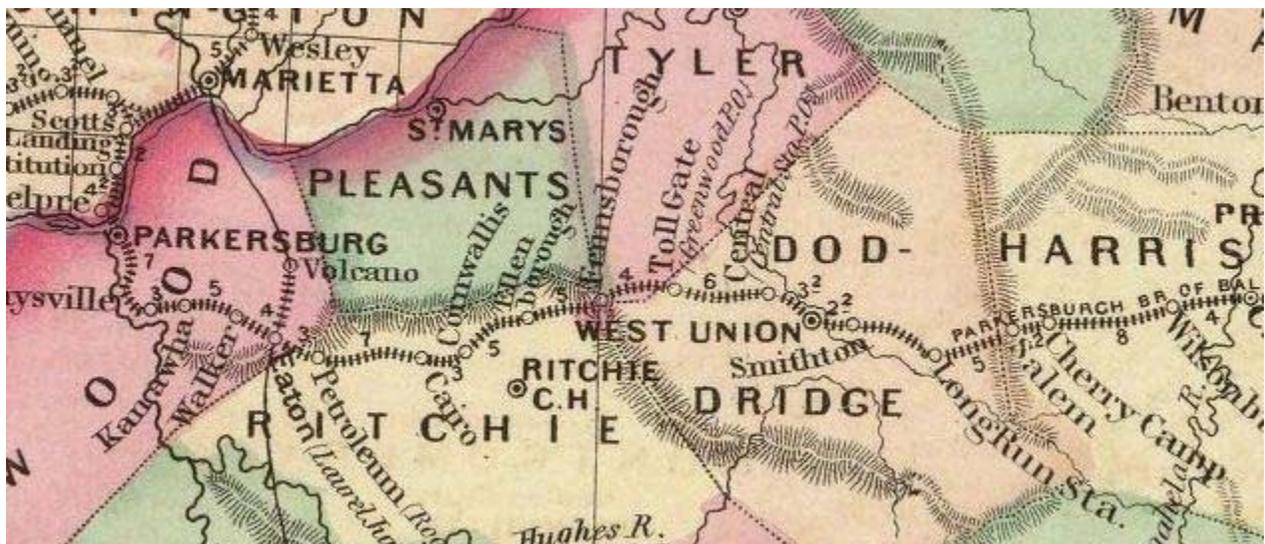
Josiah Benjamin Garrison was born on December 5, 1858, last of the nine children of Aaron and Martha Stout Garrison. His father was a tailor. Josiah grew up in West Union, West Virginia.

According to his biography, Josiah was a puny baby, first cradled in a cotton-lined cigar box, then vacillating between life and death until he was four. For the next ten years he was a normal, robust boy, but at 14 his weight started to decline from 135 pounds to about 80 pounds in a two year span. Consultations with doctors revealed no certain cause.

Josiah's father tried to teach him the tailor trade, but that did not work out. Then his father started him in a candy business, but that did not pan out either.

Josiah ran away from home a few times (once with his 16 year old girlfriend) but was always apprehended by his father or the law and returned home.

Finally, in August of 1883 Josiah and a chum hot-footed it out of town (maybe they took the Baltimore & Ohio train) and headed west. Either by design or fortuitous happenstance, 50 miles down the road the boys' escape route crossed paths with the Barnum & London Circus in Parkersburg, West Virginia.

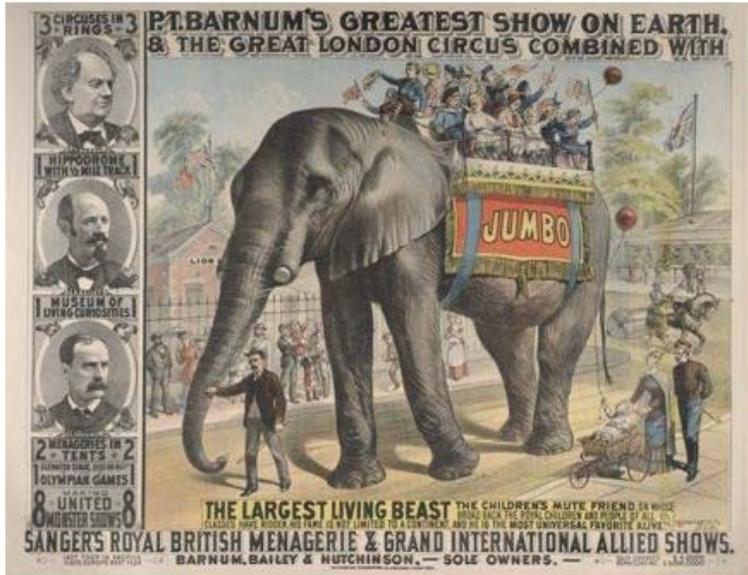


1874 Asher & Adams

The Escape Route - West Union to Parkersburg

1883 Tour of the Barnum & London Circus

In 1881, the famous P.T. Barnum joined forces with J.A. Bailey and J.L. Hutchinson. Their shows were merged into an extravaganza named "P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth, and The Great London Circus, Sanger's Royal British Menagerie and The Grand International Allied Shows United," shortened for practical reasons to "Barnum & London Circus."



*P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth and The Great London Circus
Jumbo*

Copyright 1883, The Strobridge Litho. Co.

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Howard Tibbals Collection

The 1883 tour started as usual in March with a four week engagement at Madison Square Garden in New York City. For the next seven months the circus moved from town to town through the upper eastern states and southern Canada, travelling 9,932 miles.

The 1883 Barnum & London Circus statistics are impressive: 650 employees, 249 horses, 22 ponies, 29 elephants, 25 camels, assorted animals in 24 cages; tents for the hippodrome, menagerie, museum, dressing room, sideshow, stables, blacksmith shop, and kitchen; 61 baggage and tableau wagons. The number of stakes and toe pins driven down and taken up every day, 1,300. All of this packed into 73 railroad cars. The train travelled at night. In the morning the

showground was set up, a matinee and evening show would be held, then the train was packed up and the circus moved on to the next town.

The undisputed star of the entire show was Jumbo the African elephant. At 11 feet tall and 6 tons, Jumbo travelled in his own custom-built, crimson and gold boxcar.

The sideshow this year was without a skeleton (apparently skeletons were hard to come by). Isaac Sprague, who had formerly filled this position for P. T. Barnum, was no longer with the circus. The lanky lad JB Garrison was in the right place at the right time.

1883 Barnum & London Route Log: Friday, August 10th, Parkersburg, W. Va., 99 miles. Clear and warm. Cage of leopards thrown from the flat while nearing the town. Damage slight.

In Parkersburg, Garrison signed up to perform as a living skeleton and was sent on to Steubenville to join the circus.

1883 Barnum & London Route Log: Thursday, August 16th, Steubenville, O., 102 miles. Arrived late. Flat car containing the Lion, tiger and rhinoceros cages jumped the track throwing one of the cages into the ditch.

Josiah counts August 17, 1883 as his first experience as a curiosity.

1883 Barnum & London Route Log: Friday, August 17th, Canton, O., 83 miles. Clear, very warm.

1883 Sideshow Department of the Barnum & London Circus

Charles E. Kohl (photo at right) was the manager of the sideshow. Frank Bristol and Charles Melville sold tickets and Ben Corry was the door keeper.

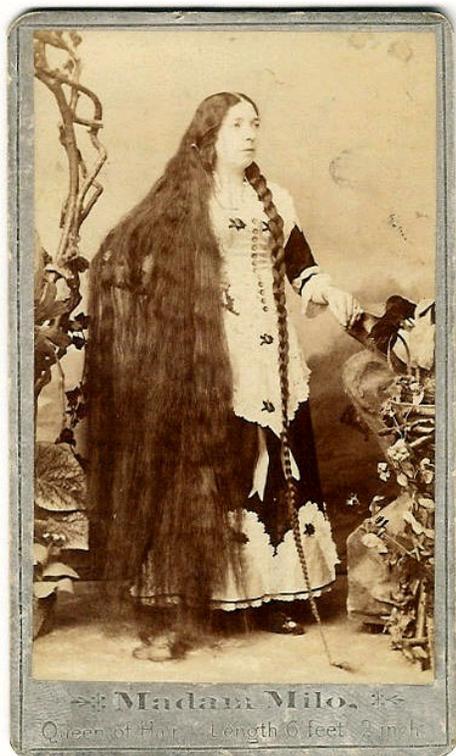


William Henshaw, lecturer and orator for the sideshow. Henshaw was born and died in Connecticut (1840-1902). He is remembered as among the best of first-class sideshow openers and lecturers, which means he was born with a golden tongue and could reel in the crowds and entertain them from one end of the sideshow tent to the other, narrating the history of each curiosity and facilitating sales of their photos and biography pamphlets.

JB Garrison's fellow curiosities were veterans of the sideshow and dime museum world:

Miss Annie Jones, Bearded Lady

Annie was born in 1865, covered head to toe with a thin layer of coarse dark hair. She started her career early (one year old with her mother in attendance) at P.T. Barnum's New York Museum, earning more than enough money to support her parents and siblings back in Virginia. She travelled with Barnum's circus, appeared in dime museums and toured Europe with her second husband. Annie invested her money in real estate and became known for her musical skills and gracious manner. She died at 37, reportedly of tuberculosis.



Madam Milo and Madam Correy, Long Haired Wonders

No photo of Madam Correy, but here is Madam Milo with her 6' 3" tresses. She was more commonly referred to as the "Queen of Hair."

Madam Milo's biography, which should tell all, is at Harvard Library. Its intriguing title is *Life and Adventures of Madam Milo, the Queen of the Hair: With Full Receipts for Preserving the Hair: Also A History of Siberia, and Life of Russian Exiles*. Madam Milo's real name may be Madeline Madoff, born 1850.



Eli Bowen, Legless Wonder

Eli Bowen was born in 1844 in Ohio with undeveloped feet attached at the hips. He developed upper body strength and excelled at acrobatics. His career spanned 50 years, working in circuses and sideshows. Eli married and had four children. He died in Coney Island in 1924.

There is a publicity photo of Eli Bowen and Charlie Tripp on a bicycle built for two, complementing their physical capabilities: Eli is steering and Charlie is peddling.

Charlie Tripp, Armless Phenomenon

Born in Woodstock, Canada in 1855, Charlie headed to New York City at age 17 and immediately started work with P.T. Barnum. His career spanned 57 years. For the last 17 years he toured with carnivals so he could travel with his wife. Charlie died in 1930.



Shields Brothers, Texas Giants

What a life for tall farm boys from Texas! They toured with the sideshow for about 10 years. Shade, Frank and Jack returned to Texas, but Gus married a giantess and the couple toured together.



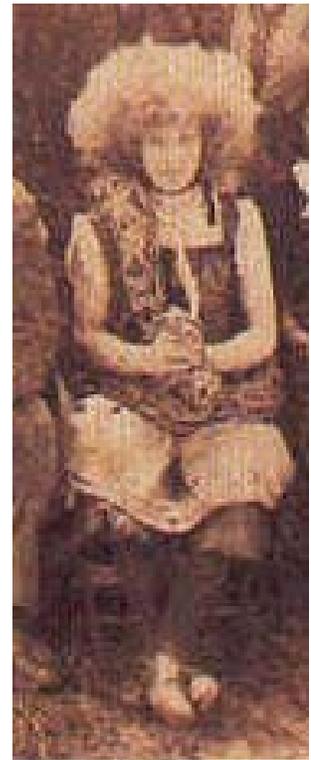
Two Aztecs

Maximo and Bartola were taken from their home in Latin America in about 1848 with the promise to their mother they would be cured in the United States. The siblings were sold to a promoter who passed them off as Aztecs. Alternately, they may have been found in an Ohio insane asylum and returned to same after their commercial draw ceased. The children, described as small, childlike curious people with a mental age of two, were probably microcephalic.

Maximo and Bartola were exhibited world-wide and eventually became part of P.T. Barnum's show. In 1883 they travelled with one E.G. Browne, agent and manager.

Ida Jeffreys, Circassian and Snake Charmer

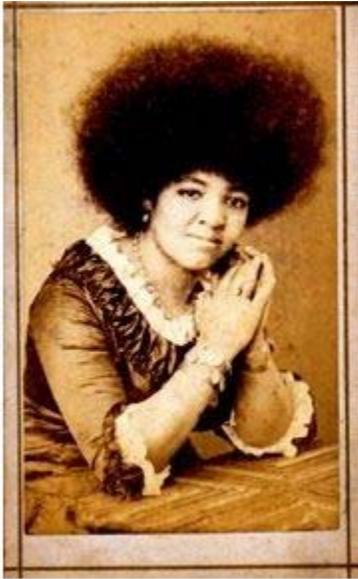
Ida was born in New York City. As a child she was intrigued by the glass cages of snakes in Central Park. Her family was in show business and she started as a high-wire performer in the circus. Influenced by the famous snake charmer Nala Damajanti, Ida bought four little anacondas in 1878 and took the stage name Alna Don Janata. She also charmed alligators.



C. A. Bonney, Musical Albino

Charles Archfred Bonney was born in 1854 in Michigan. Apparently he really was albino; this was not just a circus guise. Over the years his act included bagpipes and Highland dancers. Bonney imitated animals and birds. He married and had two children.

My last sighting of Bonney is March of 1909 where his act at the Bijou in Muskegon, Michigan, garnered this review: *Charles A. Bonney, a veteran performer, gives some truly wonderful imitations of various animals and birds. His imitation of the mother horse calling her colt is especially clever.*



Miss Mary Sawyer, Illawarra Quadroon

Illawarra is in Australia and a Quadroon is a mix of Aboriginal and Caucasian ancestry.

Mary was still on the circuit in 1893, appearing at the South Clark Dime Museum in Chicago.

Mlle. Adelina,
Outside Ascensionist

Miss Adelina travelled with the Barnum & London Circus for the 1882 and 1883 seasons, performing on the high wire and juggling. She did a high wire ascension act for the sideshow.

I don't know where she came from or where she ended up. Miss Adelina may have been with the Orrin Brothers Circus in Mexico in 1886. Well, at least she stopped in at John Wood's photography studio at 208 Bowery Street in New York City to have her photo taken. Here she is sporting her Circassian hairdo.



Mlle. ADELINA.

Great Tight-rope performer, wire-walker,
and lady juggler.

J. WOOD, Photo. 208 Bowery, N. Y.



JB Garrison, Living Skeleton

This photo has been passed down through the Garrison family. It is now owned by Georgia Halloran, whose great great grandmother was a sister to JB.

The photo is an 8" x 10" colored tintype. Georgia's grandmother kept the tintype, along with other old photos, in a cardboard box placed in a wooden trunk. The photo must have been taken between August and October 1883. I am amazed the tintype has survived to this day to round out this gallery of sideshow curiosities.

JB's older brother, Nathaniel, fought in the Civil War and was held in the infamous Andersonville Civil War Prison Camp. Having no other clues to go on, the family always thought this photo was of Nathaniel, having barely survived his imprisonment; but as Georgia Halloran says "why would that man have those clothes on?" Now Garrison descendants know they have a living skeleton in the family closet!



Signor Giovanni, assisted by Master **Charles Williams**, Musical Glasses and Performing Canary Birds

In addition to travelling with the sideshow, Giovanni and his 16 educated canaries made appearances around the northeast at poultry exhibitions. Notably, "Spot" performed on a tight rope and "Bijou" stood on a little barrel and ran it up and down a table (a trick accomplished after two years of training.)

For musical entertainment venues, Signor Giovanni played his "silver toned glasses."

Other members of the 1883 Barnum & London Sideshow, whose photos/bios have not yet made it to the internet:

Monsignor Milo, Ventriloquist (I wonder if he was related to the Queen of Hair?); and the **Robert Goins' (Colored) Band**.

Charles Carroll, Assistant. Listed in the 1883 Route Log, just after JB Garrison, is Charles Carroll, Assistant. Possibly this was JB's personal assistant. Indications are that JB could not stand or walk.

So JB Garrison and the rest of this moving feast travelled through the country on a pretty relentless schedule. The 1883 Route Log recounts accidents and death to man and beast, terrible weather, fires, elephants running amok and the comings and goings of circus personnel. The last stop was Hannibal, Missouri, and then the circus headed east to its winter quarters in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

The sideshow performers, on the other hand, would find positions at curio halls and museums for the winter break.

PROVIDENCE MUSEUM
AND
PALACE THEATRE,
236 WESTMINSTER STREET,
PROVIDENCE, R. I.
FRANK DREW - Sole Proprietor and Manager
This new and magnificent amusement enterprise is situated in the most central portion of the city, surrounded by the fashionable stores and shopping resorts. In magnificence of appointments and roomy, well-lighted, comfortable Curiosity Halls and Theatre it surpasses any museum in America. It is all on the ground-floor, heated by steam, and lighted by the electric incandescent light.
THE GRAND OPENING TAKEN PLACE
MONDAY, OCT. 22, 1883.
Curiosities and Performers already engaged report on **SUNDAY, OCT. 21**
WANTED, a Ventriloquist, French and Judy and two more Living Curiumille, for opening. Open dates at all times for good attractions. Engagements for curiosities last three weeks.
Address all correspondence to **F. F. A. N. M. DREW,**
23-11
PROVIDENCE MUSEUM, Providence, R. I.

Providence Museum, Providence, Rhode Island

After the Barnum & London tour concluded in October of 1883, JB reports he was offered a position at a new museum in Providence, Rhode Island.

JB's biography was compiled in Providence. It outlines his life and offers up some PR for the circus. In dime museums and sideshows, the curiosities augmented their salaries by sales of their photos and biographies.

Providence Museum soon became known as Drew's Dime Museum. Frank M. Drew had worked with P.T. Barnum for the previous 16 years. The Providence Museum marked the start of his career operating dime museums and playhouses across the country.

The New York Clipper 10-6-1883.

Hagar & Campbell's Dime Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

JB's next venue would be the Dime Museum at the corner of Ninth and Arch Streets in Philadelphia, which had opened in September 1883. He arrived in Philadelphia sometime in December, found lodging in a boarding house on Arch Street, and joined his fellow curiosities on the third floor of the Dime Museum. It was here JB encountered Bertha Clear, which sparked the next startling event in Josiah's life. This episode is covered in the "The Skeleton's Bride."



This drawing is included in a full page article about Dime Museums in the March 15, 1891 *Sun* newspaper. This is how JB Garrison and his fellow curiosities would be displayed at a Dime Museum.

Back to West Union, West Virginia

As we know, JB's marriage to Bertha Clear never got off the ground. Bertha returned home a day after the marriage, a court case ensued, divorce or annulment proceedings went forward. At some point, JB left the Dime Museum in Philadelphia. His death in West Union (of a broken heart or a pulmonary condition) was prematurely announced in newspapers in the early part of May 1884.

This paragraph is included in the Personal Clippings column of the Thursday, August 21, 1884 issue of *The Telegraph and Messenger* (Macon, Georgia):

—J. B. Garrison, the living skeleton, who attracted so much attention a few months ago by his marriage with a young lady of Philadelphia, died at the residence of his mother in West Union a few days since. He had been there some time, having dropped out of sight after his matrimonial adventure, which it will be remembered terminated rather unsuccessfully.

Josiah Benjamin Garrison's Final Venue

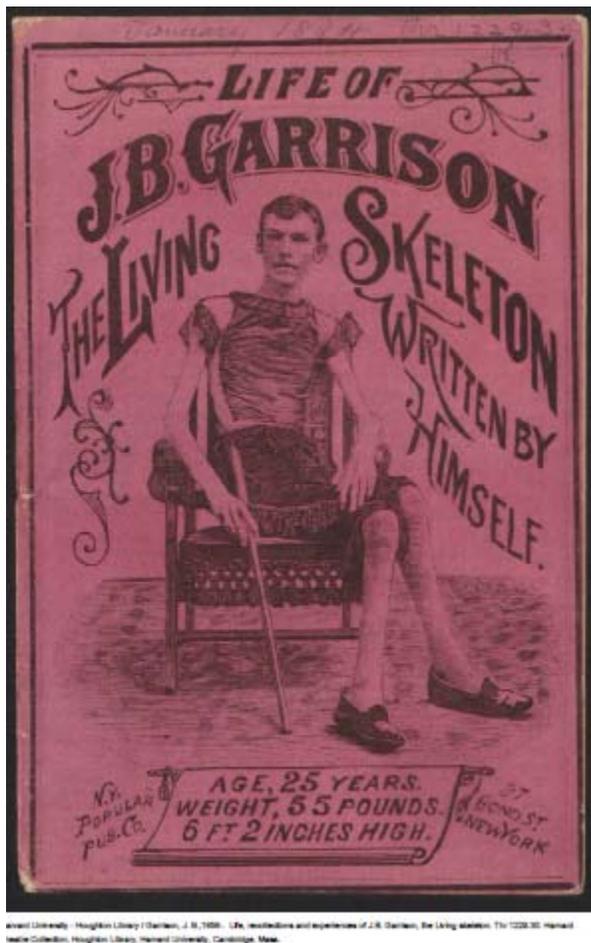
Josiah is buried in the Old Seventh Day Baptist section of the Blockhouse Hill Cemetery in West Union, West Virginia, along with his parents and some siblings.

A photo of his broken gravestone can be found at findagrave. Reportedly, the gravestone lists his death date as August 6, 1884. Josiah died a few weeks short of one year after he ran away from home and joined the circus.

END NOTES

I haven't plucked this information from thin air; there is a source for all this material. My interpretations and attributions may be incorrect. If anyone wants to know where specific information came from, just let me know!

Nancy Ettensperger
P.O. Box 86, Underhill, Vermont 05489



Harvard University - Houghton Library / Garrison, J. B., 1808. - Life, recollections and experiences of J. B. Garrison, the living skeleton. The 1828-30. Harvard
eBook Collection. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

I asked my local library to try to obtain this 1884 booklet in some form through an inter-library loan. Harvard Library's procedure turned out to be this:

In keeping with our digitization and preservation policies, we'll post the images on the Web for free public viewing. (You pay; the world benefits.)

So for \$20, JB Garrison's autobiography has come to light in the digital age.

You can access this booklet on-line via the Harvard Library Portal.

Garrison Family Tree: Georgia Hileman Halloran family tree at ancestry.com
<http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/69603574/person/38197423317>

CircusHistory.org: 1883 Route Log for Barnum & London and much, much more

Map of the Escape Route: Asher & Adams 1874, found in the David Ramsey Historical Map Collection at Harvard University

Circus and Carnival Ballyhoo, Sideshow Freaks, Juggers and Blade Box Queens by A. W. Stencell, BCW Press, Ontario, Canada, 2010.

Jumbo: This Being the True Story of The Greatest Elephant in the World by Paul Chambers, Steerforth Press, NH, 2008

The Circus Age, Culture & Society Under The American Big Top by Janet M. Davis, University of North Carolina Press, 2002

Wild Weird and Wonderful, The American Circus 1901-1927, as Seen by F.W. Glasier, Photographer by Mark Sloan, The Quantuck Lane Press, NY, 2003

P.T. Barnum, American's Greatest Showman by Kunhardt, Knopf, NY, 1995

1883 Barnum & London Circus Sideshow Curiosities

The internet abounds with information about most of these people. Many of the photos originally derive from The Ronald G. Becker Collection of Charles Eisenmann Photographs, on line at Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections

C. E. Kohl: photo in *Circus Memoirs: Reminiscences of George Middleton as told to and written by his wife* by George Middleton, G. Rice & Sons, 1913

William Henshaw: photo from *P.T. Barnum* book, page 327; original held at Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

Annie Jones: this biography is not available on line, but someone could dig into the box: Syracuse University Libraries, Special Collections, Ronald G. Becker Collection of Sideshow Memorabilia, Box 16, #1034, *History of Miss Annie Jones, Barnum's Esau Lady*, booklet 1885

Madam Milo:

Harvard Library Portal - for 20 bucks you can make these titles available to the world!

Life and Adventures of Madam Milo, the Queen of the Hair: With Full Receipts for Preserving the Hair: Also A History of Siberia, and Life of Russian Exiles, New York Popular Publishing Co., 188?, 14 pages
Subject: Madeline Madoff, b. 1850, Call # Thr 1229.2*

Isaac W. Sprague, the Living Skeleton: A Wonderful Curiosity: Weight 46 lbs, Damon & Peets, NY, 187_, Call # Thr 1229.30

Eli Bowen: I found references but not a source for a pamphlet *The Wonder of the Wide, Wide World: The True History of Mr. Eli Bowen*, published 1880

Charles B. Tripp: biography is included in *American National Biography: Supplement 2* by Mark C. Carnes, Oxford University Press, 2005, page 558 - available on line. A Glasier photo of Charles Tripp, taking a photo, is on the last page of *Wild Weird and Wonderful*

The Shields Brothers: website includes photographs and a biography recounts their lives up to the spring of 1883 just as the brothers were to appear in the sideshow of the Barnum & London Circus
<http://www.thetallestman.com/shieldsbrothers.htm>

The photo I used was submitted to sideshowworld.com by Ellen a great granddaughter

Two Aztecs: *P.T. Barnum*, page 150; also photo and biography at:
<http://www.19thcenturyphotos.com/Maximo-and-Bartola-122450.htm>

Ida Jeffreys: photos *P.T. Barnum*, pages 326, 327 (Alma Janata). Newspaper interview in 1888 found here:
<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=iaFCAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=v7kMAAAAIBAJ&pg=3456,6361645&dq=alna-don-janata&hl=en>

C.A. Bonney: photo comes from here:

<http://boards.ancestry.com/surnames.bonney/134.145.147.1.1/mb.ashx>

Mary Sawyer: photo of Mary Sawyer taken by Charles Eisenmann, included in Circus World, Robert L. Parkinson Library online catalog found here:

<http://circus.pastperfect-online.com/30070cgi/mweb.exe?request=record:id=B9771AF0-0D0E-4C6D-8403-375050275055:type=102>

Mlle. Adelina: another photo is here:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/swampcrone/2312849934/>

J.B. Garrison: photo owned by Georgia Halloran

Signor Giovanni: drawing and review of his act found in *The Poultry Monthly*, Vols 2-3, page 38 via Google Books.

Frank Drew of the Providence Museum: biography in *A History of Cleveland, Ohio: Biographical* by Samuel Peter Orth, 1910, page 566 - available on line

The Skeleton's Bride: Or How You Can Get Distracted While Searching for Ancestors, Nancy Ettensperger, 2011, available online courtesy of Ed Bradford:

<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~edbradford/ed/additional.htm>

In his *Circus Memoirs*, George Middleton told this story about Isaac Sprague, living skeleton in P.T. Barnum's sideshow: A rain storm was approaching and it was urgent and imperative to pack up the sideshow tent before it was soaked. *Kohl picked up Sprague and leaned him up in a fence corner...it was raining, with thunder and lightning, and there stood Sprague over in the fence corner, swearing and calling, but no one paid any attention to him until the tent was put away, then they took him down and put him away in the car.*

Such was the lot of the skeleton in the sideshow.

And last but not least, how to get the stand-up hairdo sported by some of the sideshow ladies, from *Shaw's Book of Acts For Carnival, Side Show Museum and Circus* by W.H.J Shaw, 1896

"Soak the ladies' hair in one quart of stale beer. Do up the ends in the ordinary way. Leave the hair up for three days, soaking it twice a day. After three days, carefully remove the leads and comb the hair upwards. The hair will remain standing and will be long and wavy like that of Circassians."

Next page: Advertisement for the August 17, 1883 Barnum and London show at Canton, Ohio, where JB Garrison would make his first appearance as the Living Skeleton.

