



Fabulous and freaky: clockwise from left: Astrid and her father Franklin warm up; Charlie Bell, in 1948, was one of America's most famous clowns; a ticket wagon in 1950



The greatest show on Earth

Lucy Davies is dazzled by a pictorial history of circuses in their heyday

The eye-watering photograph reproduced on the facing page shows a woman demonstrating an aerial act known as the "Iron Jaw", in which the performer flew through the air suspended by a mouthpiece clenched between her teeth. The act required little training, but was a staple of the American circus soon after it emerged in the later decades of the 19th century.

The image is just one of nearly 900 deliciously strange photographs in *The Circus: 1870-1950*, a mammoth book that brings together material from the scrapbooks and albums of former performers and circus historians.

During its 80-year heyday, the American circus was the greatest show on Earth. In 1905, nearly 100 circuses played in the US to audiences of up to 20,000 a day. Each company would employ as many as 1,600 men and women. Strongmen, trapeze artists, daredevils and "freaks" criss-crossed the country on creaking wagons, or travelled from town to town by night on newly constructed railroads. According to the American writer John Steinbeck, the circus offered "beauty against our daily ugliness, excitement against our boredom... What doctor can do as much?"

Collated by Noel Daniel over two years, the photographs

include lurid shots from the Forties and Fifties of women in spangles conversing with midget clowns; a portrait of the famous juggler Francis Brunn flanked by guy-ropes strung with freshly-laundered underwear; and a seductive image of showgirls sunbathing on top of a wagon.

Thrilling daguerreotypes of women performing in full petticoats, taken by early photographers such as Frederick Whitman Glasier and Edward J Kilty, jostle with shots by more familiar names such as Walker Evans, Weegee and Stanley Kubrick. There's oddity, too, including Jo-Jo, the "Dog-Faced Boy", who was marketed as "living proof of

Darwin's theory of the descent of man".

But the circus's popularity waned, overtaken by the moving image. By the Sixties, the Beat generation had laid claim to the circus's romantic notion of adventure on the move. Barnum and Bailey may be out of business, but their spirit lives on in storybooks and fashion magazines alike. "You can shake the sawdust off your feet," whisper the last lines of Cecil B DeMille's film *The Greatest Show on Earth*, "but you can't shake it outta your heart. Come again, folks. Come again."

❖ *The Circus: 1870-1950* (Taschen, £120) is out now.