

1947: For children who grew up with the circus, performing chimpanzees were part of their extended family



Lords of the ring

A new book collects images from a golden era of American circuses: the backstage camaraderie, the glamorous costumes and the exotic animals.

Circus owner **Nell Gifford** tells us what it is like to be part of the excitement

Circus people are attuned to the weather. Like farmers, fishermen or soldiers on parade, we work outdoors. Performing vigorous tricks in a heatwave is an exercise in extreme sweating. At times like this, the costumes of a circus artist are peeled off the body after a show, dripping wet. When it rains, ballet shoes are swapped, backstage, for rubber boots, and the crew set about digging trenches to drain off the water. The flooded ground in one of these photos is concrete, so the water is not draining. Nonetheless the lady in the green dress with the gold hair tucks it out, her smile shining.

The first circus that I ever worked for was the American Circus Flora. I loved the people I met and their matter-of-fact dedication to their peculiar skills. They did not self-consciously spin mysteries and romance about themselves – they were simply mysterious and romantic. Family life in a circus, though conducted in the open air, often in seven languages, surrounded

by exotic animals, was wholesome and straightforward – meals were at regular times and were cooked carefully and properly. The caravans were furnished with comfortable seats, televisions and china cups – even fish tanks.

On a circus, you are truly part of a community. I often feel that life on one is probably the closest I will get to understanding what life would have felt like in a small village before the Industrial Revolution. Your life is bound up with the lives of the 40 or so people that you live and work with – your future and their future go hand in hand. One person's laziness depresses everyone, another's enthusiasm brightens the day. The atmosphere of the company, day to day, minute by minute, can be felt as surely as the changing weather. It is claustrophobic in the extreme – but it is also deeply companionable, and the slightly insular quality of a circus company is the flipside of its solidarity. Time and time again I have heard circus people talk of the pride they take in their vocation, the thrilling identity that the circus provides. The faces of the people in these photographs >>>



1950: A circus performer tries to keep dry in the rain. Buckets are being used to stem the flood



« exude this confidence, and the self-assurance that comes from the security of being surrounded by your family and your animals. These people are travellers but they are not wanderers.

The circus is a dangerous and continuously shifting environment. Lorries can crash, caravans can jackknife and overturn, tents can blow down. To be a dangerous person on a circus is to be unprofessional in the extreme. The key to living happily on the road is to be extremely well organised, to be strong, to be solid. All the wire walkers I have known have been immaculate in all areas of their lives – to the point, for example, of laying out the power cables to their trailers with tape measures and rulers. The high-wire acrobats in the photograph here cross the sky like mechanical birds. I would guess that the lives of these people are neat and precise, obsessive even. This feat would be impossible if the washing up in the caravan was congealing in the sink and the bed was a bundled mess. The freedom of the circus is not what you might assume. It is not the recklessness of an endless

and random road trip, not at all. The freedom is in the circus's ability to give a place for a certain kind of physical, dauntless creativity. But you have to live up to its constraints.

My favourite of these photographs is the one of Dorothy Herbert lying back on the rearing horse. If you turn the photograph upside down and look at her face she appears to be smiling at someone, not just smiling. It is concentration appearing as abandon – at this moment her life embodies the life of every artist in every medium; instinct and craft married for a split-second of genius.

The people in these photographs have rough hands and swollen ankles, but they squint into the sun and show us their trained snake, their hand-stitched costumes, their acrobatics which are not fearless but fear overcome by skill – with a pure, golden glamour ●

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The Circus, 1870-1950, edited by Noel Daniel, is published by Taschen, priced £120. taschen.com

(Clockwise from above) **1948: Dorothy Herbert practises her famous 'layback', a dangerous and difficult trick. A 1939 circus programme described Herbert as 'the most recklessly fearless and expert rider of reinless rearing and jumping horses ever known'**

1956: Harold Alzana was a daring British high-wire acrobat who performed most of his act solo. This bicycle stunt, which ended his act, was spectacular but actually not very difficult and less perilous than the rest of his performance

1945: Popular performer Corky Cristiani was part of the Italian Cristiani family of extraordinary bareback riders and acrobats

1946: Though not over-affectionate, snakes get used to their handler and are rather placid when fed regularly. The Cole Bros snake charmer pictured here knows this, but her audience does not

1954: Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey clown Charlie Bell puts on his makeup in the open, a rare occurrence since clowns typically made up away from prying eyes, in Clown Alley

