

CHAPTER TWO

AARON TURNER (1830-1834)

There was a great change in America and in Americans in the period 1815 to 1845. One historian has said that change was the ruling characteristic of the country in those years.¹ Geographically, the thin line of coastal settlement had become a broad brushstroke reaching to the Mississippi. Politically, the uncertain steps of fledgling government had given way to a certain belief in the power of independent action. The closed society of European manners had been opened by democratic principles and the ambition of men from humble circumstances.

With all this, the economy, freed from pre-Revolutionary restraints, had grown beyond the control of the conservative coastal merchants of the early Republic and men of ambition were everywhere forcing their way into positions of economic primacy. The ways of making money were multiplying along with the population and the number of places to work and the types of work to be had.

In the circus business the absence of the European impresarios who had brought the genre to this country necessitated their replacement by American managers. Some of these were performers who organized their own troupes with themselves as the principal attractions; others were men willing to invest money and manage their property; yet others were simply investors. The amusement business of that time was a very uncertain undertaking yet the risks may have been as great in shipping or turnpikes, or, indeed, commercial banking.

Aaron Turner* (1790?-1854) of Danbury, Connecticut, would seem to typify the rising ambition of the showman of the Jacksonian era. Uneducated and forceful, he and others like him were part of the phenomenon so often described as the rise of the common man. He was one of those small capitalists from undistinguished backgrounds who were able to realize their own potential as they learned to exploit the new economy. No longer was it necessary to come from a good family, be educated or trained, or have experience at the task in order to achieve success. Andrew Jackson, himself, personified this, being the first president to come from outside the system that groomed future leaders by training them in government.

Turner was the son of Mercy Hony of Ridgefield, Connecticut and was born near to 1790. In 1799 as a minor of "about nine years of age" a guardian was appointed for him, one Dorcas Osborn, also of Ridgefield.² Turner became an apprentice shoemaker and followed that trade for some years. He married and was the father of two sons and a daughter. His oldest son, Napoleon B. (1816-1849) was one of the early American-born circus riders. Whether Aaron Turner followed his son into the business or vice versa hasn't been determined. Napoleon's first year on the bills was 1823; he probably served at least a year prior to that without notice. It is possible that Turner,

* The spelling of Turner's first name is a topic of some disagreement. George F. Bailey, Turner's son-in-law, pointedly remarked in an 1895 interview that it should be spelled with one "A." We have been advised by Silvio Bedini, who has done the major investigation into Turner's career, that he has seen only the spelling "Aaron."

senior, ^[investor, anyway] was a partner in an equestrian company with Nathan A. Howes and Sylvester Reynolds in 1826.³ If so, it was his earliest recorded activity. He definitely was involved in a circus in 1828. From then he was on the road continually until his retirement in the late 1840's.

The great P.T. Barnum worked for Aaron Turner in 1836 and in his autobiography⁴ he supplied a description of the man in which we see him as an exemplification of the early nineteenth-century entrepreneur, showman or no:

"(He) was an original genius; a good judge of human nature, a man from whom much information might be derived. He was withal a practical joker. By his untiring industry he amassed a large fortune, and was not a little proud to inform the world that he commenced life without a shilling. Frequently I have heard him say, "Every man who has good health and common sense is capable of making a fortune, if he only resolves to do so. As a proof of it, look at me. Who am I? I don't know who I am or where I came from. I never had father, nor mother that I know of; at all events I must have started at the lowest depths of degradation. I never had any education; I commenced life as a shoemaker. What little I can read, I picked up myself after I was eighteen years of age; and as for writing, why the way I first learned

that, was by signing my name to notes of hand! I used at first to make my mark, but being a poor devil, I had occasion to my note so often that I finally learned to write my name, and so I have got along by degrees. You see what I am now. I have become so by industry, perseverance and economy; and any man may become rich who will determine to do so. There is no such word as cannot in the English language. Never say you can't do a thing - and never cry broke until you are dead."

Turner and those like him were not performers as previous proprietors had been, they were managers. The successful impresario had moved into the counting house, so to speak, as had his counterpart in the theatre the generation before. It was these forceful and ambitious men who Americanized the circus. Basing his troupe in Danbury, Connecticut he roamed the country under the title Columbian Circus, a name he first used in 1828. Known to be penurious to an extreme he gave the circus business a phrase, "Go it like Old Turner," meaning to hold expenditure to the minimum. Barnum tells of a meal on the road with Turner's company in 1836 as follows:

"...instead of halting on the road to dine as I expected we should, Mr. Turner stopped at a country farm house, bought three loaves of rye bread and a pound of butter; then, borrowing a knife from the farmer's wife, he proceeded

to cut off pieces of bread, spread them lightly with butter, and handed one to each man. The bread and butter were soon consumed; Turner paid the woman fifty cents, ordered his men to water the horses, and we proceeded on our journey, having tarried less than fifteen minutes."

Turner's economies have acted upon research into his career because he was not one to advertise lavishly, not even on a par with his fellow showmen. Therefore, evidence of his travels is in short supply and not until others were active in the management of his circus - about 1835 - do we find many references. He does not seem to have ventured out of New England until 1833 and Dingess ascribes to him the habit of saying, "'Somebody go stop that agent, we're getting too far from Danbury."

Turner's program in 1830 was listed as:

Grand display, six Arabian horses, A. Turner, riding master, Charles Bacon, clown.

Ground and lofty tumbling.

Horsemanship, Master Sands.

Horsemanship, Master Turner.

Performing Shetland pony.

Horsemanship, Master Raymond.

Sports of the ring.

Still vaulting.

Farce - "The Hunted Tailor."

Charles H. Bacon (b.1817) was in his sixth season as a

performer, having made his debut in August, 1825 with the Lafayette Circus in New York. His career went beyond the limit of this study. Master Sands was Richard Sands (1814-1861) a pupil of Turner's and a future manager. Sands was one of the most accomplished riders of his time. This was his first appearance on a bill, but he may have spent a season or two unadvertised. Master Turner was Turner's second son, Timothy (1820-1858) who eventually succeeded his father as manager of the Columbian troupe. He began performing at the age of eight. J. Raymond, an apprentice of Isaac Quick, was in his fourth season as a performer.

Only four notices have been located for Turner's 1830 travels, those for Dover, New Hampshire, Providence and Pawtucket, Rhode Island and Newburyport, Massachusetts. In Providence they appeared in the Westminster Circus, which dated from 1827 and was owned by H.P. Franklin. The Patriot* mentioned that Turner had leased the building for a year.

In Newburyport Turner rented the Charter Street building which first opened in 1826. Admission to the circus was twenty-five cents.

The 1831 season saw the addition to the Columbian company of Joseph Pentland (1816-1873) whose name appeared as Pendleton in some ads. In time, Pentland, a native of Boston, would achieve great success as a clown and head of his own circus, but in the early 1830's he performed as a "balancer," the contemporary term for a juggler.

* (Providence) Patriot, June 19, 1830.

Also new to the troupe in 1831 were Alec Jackson and John Andrews. Jackson had ended his apprenticeship to Ben Stoker and was in his first season as his own man, presenting a scenic act called "Indian War Dance." Andrews, from York, Pennsylvania, was a slack-rope performer for Turner

Richard Sands in this season appeared four times on the program, being clown, comic singer, scenic rider and in clown horsemanship. Such a performer was very valuable to his manager. Even more valuable, to Turner, were his very accomplished sons. Napoleon was of such a rank among riders that he didn't constantly work for his father, but Timothy was on the show every year and it was advertised that anyone who could duplicate his act would receive \$1,000. from the management.⁵

Again, advertisements for Turner's 1831 progress are rare, but two having surfaced as yet, one for Dedham, Massachusetts and one for Providence. For 1832 we have found but one.

A roster for 1833 is in the Hertzberg Collection⁶ and it lists Napoleon and Timothy Turner and John Reed, a cousin of Nathan Howes', William R. Derr (1809-1878), a clown, and his wife, a singer, and Master Ben Huntington, who spent most of his career as a clown, but 1833 being his first year in the business he likely appeared as a pony rider.

One advertisement for the Columbian Circus has been located for 1834, printed for a January stand in Philadelphia where it appears Turner joined a winter show already under way managed by C.R. Weeks. Derr and the Turners were joined

by William Myers, the vaulter, Mr. Hess, who leaped ten horses from a trampoline, Master William F. Stone, a rider, George Stone (no relation), clown, and George Blythe (d.1836) a rider. In addition to the circus performers a group of Winnebago and Oneida Indians were employed.

Turner was not alone among the older American showmen in practising a negative attitude toward newspaper advertising. As we have pointed out, the weekly newspapers in the small towns were not widely read. Turner and Howes and Sickles could save the cost of printing even handbills if they sent the clown into the center of the settlement to announce the company's arrival. In larger places, where other amusements competed with the circus, they usually made some outlay for advertising. It is difficult to argue with Turner's success; his was among the longest-lived shows we report here and in subsequent chapters.

Route: Columbian Circus Company, 1830
May: 31+, Dover, N.H.; Jun: 22-30, Providence, RI;
Jul: 3, Pawtucket, RI; Nov: 23-25, Newburyport, Mass.

Route: Columbian Company, 1831.
Jun: 17, Dedham, Mass.; Jul 29-Aug 9, Providence, RI.

Route: Aaron Turner, 1832.
Jun: 8-9, Pawtucket, RI.

Route: Columbian Circus, 1833.
Jun: 21-22, Lewisburg, Pa.

Route: Columbian Circus, 1834.
Jan: 7+, Philadelphia, Pa.

(see Chapter 27)