

GLOSSARY

The circus has a long and interesting history and, over the years, it has developed its own “language” which reflects its rich history and culture. Here are some words you might hear under the big top.

A

ABA- DABA- Any dessert served in the cookhouse

ADVANCE MEN- Men who go into towns ahead of the circus to put up heralds and posters publicizing the arrival of the circus.

ALFALFA- Paper money.

ALL OUT AND OVER- Entire performance is concluded

ANNIE OAKLEY- A complimentary ticket or free pass.

AUGUST CLOWN- A clumsy, slapstick clown who wears no traditional costume.

B

BACK DOOR- Performer’s entrance area to the Big Top

BACK YARD- Outside area behind the Big Top, not for the public

BALLY- A platform used by spielers to give the crowd an idea of the show to be seen inside

BALLYHOO- The spiel shouted in front of the sideshow to attract attention

BIBLES- Programs or souvenir magazines

BIG TOP- The main tent used for performances

THE BIG ONE- Ringling Bros. And Barnum & Bailey Circus

BLOWDOWN- When tents are blown down by a storm

BLOW OFF- The ending, kicker, or punch line to a clown gag

BLUES- The “cheap seats.”

BOSS CANVAS MAN- The man whose job it is to decide exactly where and how the tents should be put up at the new circus lot

BOSS HUSTLER- The one who traveled ahead of the mud shows to mark the way for the caravan

BUNCE- Profits

BUTCHER- Refreshments merchants, peddler of lemonade, candy, etc.

C

CALLIOPE- A musical instrument with steam whistles, activated by a keyboard.
(pronounced Kally-opy)

CARPET CLOWN- A clown who works either among the audience or on the arena floor.

CATCHER- A member of a trapeze act who catches the flyer

CATTLE GUARD- A set of low seats placed in front of the general admission seats to accommodate overflow audiences

CENTER POLE- The first pole of the tent to be raised. It's about 60' high, weighs about a ton, and holds the peak of the tent

CHARACTER CLOWN- A clown who usually dresses in a tramp costume

CHARIVARI- A fast paced demonstration of various circus skills by numerous artists; often an opening act

CHERRY PIE- Extra pay for extra work

CLOWN ALLEY- An area where clowns keep their trunks and props, usually near the back door, so they can make numerous easy entrances to the ring

CLOWN STOP- A brief appearance by the clowns while the props are being changed

CLOWN WALK- AROUND- A parade of clowns during which time they stop and do their acts

COME- IN (also the pre show)- The period before showtime when the public is let into the Big Top, and are informally entertained by the clowns

D

DOG AND PONY SHOW- A derisive term for a small circus

DONIKERS- Restrooms

DOORS!- A call meaning to let the public into the show

DOWN THE ROAD- At the end of the season, circus folk never say goodbye, it's always "see you down the road."

DRESSED- When tickets are distributed so that all sections are filled with no obvious empty areas

DUCAT GRABBER- Door tender or ticket collector

DUKEY OR DUCKIE- BOX LUNCH- The first circus cookhouse was known as "Hotel du Quai" When pronounced quickly it sounded like "dukey" and the name stuck

DUKEY RUN- Any circus run longer than an overnight haul

E

EN FEROCITE- The term used by European circuses to describe American wild animal acts, as opposed to their "tableau" presentations

ENTRÉE- A featured clown act, anywhere from eight to fifteen minutes in length

F

FINK OR LARRY- A broken novelty, such as a torn balloon

FIRST OF MAY- A novice performer, first season on tour; (Referring to a time of year the old truck and wagon shows would hit the road for a new season.)

FLATTIES- People

FLYERS- Aerialists, especially those in flying return acts

FLYING SQUADRON- The first section of the circus to reach the lot

FRAMING A SHOW- Planning a circus production

FUNAMBULIST- Rope Walker. From Latin: “funis”—rope, and “ambulare”—to walk

FUNNY ROPES- Extra ropes added to regular ones, usually at angles, to give extra stability and spread to canvas tent

FRONT END- The midway, ticket, and concession area

G

GAFFER- Circus manager

GALOP- Fast tempo band melodies used in certain exits and entrances

GILLY OR TOWNER- Anyone not associated with the circus. An outsider

GILLY WAGON- Extra small wagon or cart used to carry light bits of equipment around the lot

GRAFT- A piece of work, sometimes easy, sometimes hard

GRAFTERS- Gamblers who often trail a show

GROTESQUE- A type of clown who wears exaggerated costume and carries outlandish props

GUYS- Heavy ropes or cables that help to support high wire rigging

H

HARLEQUIN- A clown of the *commedia dell'arte* who dressed in a diamond-patterned costume and who wore a black mask

HERALDS- Circus advertisements, approximately 9X12 inches which can be posted or handed out. They are not in color and consist of type and pictures

HEY RUBE!- Traditional battle cry of circus people in fights with townspeople

HITS- Places such as walls, of barns, buildings, or fences on which heralds and posters were pasted

HOME RUN- The trip to winter quarters after the last stand of the season. (Bill posters often pasted the posters upside down.)

HOME- SWEET- HOME- The last stand of the season when bill posters usually pasted one pack of posters upside down

HORSE- One thousand dollars

HORSE FEED- Poor returns from poor business

HORSE OPERY- Any circus (jokingly)

HUMAN ODDITY- Sideshow of abnormal persons

I

IRON JAW TRICK- An aerial stunt using a metal bit and apparatus which fits into the performer's mouth. Thus suspended s/he performs the trick

J

JACKPOTS- Tall tales about the circus

JONAH'S LUCK- Unusually bad weather or mud

JUMP- The move between towns

JUMP STAND- An additional booth near the front door used to sell extra tickets during a rush by spectators

K

KICKING SAWDUST- Joining up with or following the circus

KID SHOW- A sideshow

KIESTER- Wardrobe trunk

KINKER- Any circus performer. (formerly only an acrobat)

L

LACING CANVAS- Joining the large sections of canvas on the ground, before the tent raising. (Canvas is still the term, although modern tents are made of fireproof vinyl.)

LAYOUT MAN- The lot superintendent who decides the location of the various tents

LOT- Land leased by the circus for performances

LOT LICE- Local townspeople who arrive early to watch unloading of the circus and stay late

LUNGE (ALSO MECHANIC) - The mechanic is the safety belt worn for dangerous tricks. It is attached to the Lunge rope, which is held slack by an assistant outside the ring. It does not aid in the performance of a trick, but will catch the performer in the event of a "miss."

M

MARCH, THE- The street parade

MIDWAY- The area near the main entrance where the sideshows are located and concessionaires sell refreshments and novelties

MUD SHOW- Circuses that traveled by wagon, referring to the muddy dirt roads between towns and circus lots. Also derogatory term for a modern circus considered sub-standard.

N

NANTY- Nothing

O

ON THE SHOW- Performers and all others connected with the circus

OPPOSITION PAPER- Advertising posters which were put up by competing circuses

P

PARLARI- Circus people talking

PERCH ACT- A balancing act involving use of apparatus which one person is performing while being balanced by another

PICTURE GALLERY- A tattooed person

PIE CAR- The dining car on a show train. (Also a fond term for the cookhouse on the road)

PITCHMAN (PITCHER)- One who sells merchandise, with flamboyant demonstrations

PLANGES- Aerialist's body swing over in which on hand and wrist are placed in a padded rope loop

PONGER- An acrobat

POSSOM BELLY- An extra storage box attached underneath a work wagon or railway car

R

RAISING THE TOP- The Big Top goes up

RAT SHEETS- Advance posters or handbills with negative slant toward the opposition

RAZORBACKS- The men who load and unload railroad cars

RED WAGON- Box Office wagon, main office of the circus. Also the money wagon. This was usually painted red, but could be any color

REPRISES- Short two-minute clown acts to cover rigging setups or costume changes

RIG-To put up aerial rigging

RIGGING- Apparatus used for aerial acts

RING BARN- Regulation-sized circus ring for practice at winter quarters

RING CREW- Assistants who move props in and out for each act

RING CURB (ALSO RING FENCE)- The wooden ring establishing the performance area

RISLEY ACT- Three acrobats lying on their backs who toss a fourth acrobat from one to another

ROUSTABOUTS- Circus workers and crew

RUBBERMAN- One who sells balloons

S

SHANTY- The person who works the lights

SHILL- A circus employee used as a decoy, he stands in line to make the box office look busy

SKY BOARDS- The decorated boards along the top of cage wagons used in parades

SLEDGE GANG- The crew of roustabouts who pound in the tent stakes

SMIRKO- Any Circus Smirkus trouper, camper or staff member.

SOFT LOT- A wet or muddy lot

SPEC- Short for spectacle. A colorful pageant which is a featured part of the show; formerly used as opening numbers, now presented before intermission

SPIELER- An announcer

SPLASH BOARDS- Decorated bottom edge of cage wagons used in parades

STAND- Any town where the circus plays

STAR BACKS- More expensive reserved seats

STRAW HOUSE- A sold-out house. Straw was spread on the ground for spectators to sit on when all the seats were sold

SWAGS- Prizes

T

TROUPER- A circus performer

TRACK GAGS- Quick gags performed by clowns, usually in front of one section of seats, while on the track (open area between the seats and the ring.)

U

UNDER CANVAS- A tent show. Even though modern tents are made of vinyl, taking the tent on the road is still "going out under canvas."

W

WALK- AROUNDS- Clown gags often based on a comic prop or costume; a sight gag with no story-line

Z

ZANY- An impish clown; the comic foil to a Mountebank (or snake-oil salesman).