

Barnum Museum tips its hat to Barnum Festival

Originally published in the Connecticut Post July 1, 2007

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P.T. Barnum's legacy as one of the greatest American entertainment entrepreneurs of the 19th century is celebrated in an annual regional festival and at a historic Bridgeport museum that both bear his name.

Yet, the two organizations have had traditionally little overlap. Until now. For the first time ever, the Barnum Museum is paying tribute to the Barnum Festival's contributions to the community with a permanent exhibit that opens today.

The unveiling has been designed to coincide with today's Barnum Festival Great Street Parade, beginning at 11 a.m., along North, Park and Capitol avenues. "Come One, Come All!" is "a natural for this museum," says Kathleen Maher, museum executive director and curator. The exhibition, which is on the museum's third floor, is one that Maher has worked on developing for the past two years — ever since taking the helm at the downtown landmark.

The museum, which has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1972, honors the life (1810-1891) and Victorian times of the circus impresario and former Bridgeport mayor. The building, which opened on Feb. 18, 1893, was Barnum's gift to his adopted city; it is owned by the city of Bridgeport. The museum and festival are operated by separate nonprofit groups.

Although the museum's primary focus is the 19th century, Maher said its "mandate is to interpret Bridgeport history, and nothing else embodies Bridgeport in the 20th century or stimulates such broad community involvement — regardless of age, gender or ethnic background — more than the Barnum Festival."

Founded in 1949, "the festival is emblematic of Bridgeport's history over six decades involving representatives from local businesses and industry, thousands of volunteers from throughout the region, schools and children . . .," she explains.

"And that the festival is run annually by devoted volunteers is extraordinary," Maher says.

"It's long overdue," adds assistant curator Stephanie Cutrone regarding the museum's project to preserve festival history for future generations.

"The festival is so important to Bridgeport and the community, and really is an icon for the city of Bridgeport."

It was in early 1949 that local Bridgeport business leader Herman W. Steinkraus came up with the idea of a festival that would boost the morale of a city that was struggling to make the adjustment from its World War II boom years to a peacetime economy.

The idea, wrote Steinkraus at the time, "came as I was thinking about Bridgeport and its people, and what might be done to help our citizens appreciate the city more and at the same time help the rest of the country realize the importance of Bridgeport."

The goal of the festival is much the same today as it was then, Maher notes.

The 58-year history of the Barnum Festival is captured through vintage photographs and newspaper articles, commemorative plates and decanters, clothing, souvenir programs, posters, buttons, patches and other memorabilia.

Showcased are such festival events as its annual parade, fireworks display, Roadshow to area facilities for the elderly, Champions on Parade drum corps competition and Jenny Lind concert for winners of the American and Swedish competitions for sopranos. (Lind was a Swedish soprano that Barnum successfully promoted on a tour of the United States.)

Featured are reproductions of 21 charcoal portraits of past Barnum Festival ringmasters (volunteer community leaders who head the festival for one-year terms) done by the late cartoonist Ray Dirgo in the 1970s. Dirgo, born in Bridgeport, was renowned for his work with Charlton Comics on such Hanna-Barbera creations as "The Flintstones," "Yogi Bear," "The Jetsons" and "Huckleberry Hound."

As part of the festival project, both Maher and Cutrone are gathering oral histories from all 25 living ringmasters (the title is a tip of the hat to Barnum's circus background); comments from each will eventually be incorporated into the exhibit. "Dealing with [subjects] who are alive is something we usually don't do at a history museum, so it's been a real pleasure," Maher says, laughing.

Also among the noteworthy items on view are two gowns that were recently transferred from the Fairfield Museum and History Center to the museum's collection. A cream-colored satin gown, with an attached brownish gold lace cape, was worn in 1952 by Mrs. William Carlson to her husband's "coronation" ball as ringmaster.

A green satin gown, with black lace trim, shoes and parasol, was the costume used by the Carlsons' daughter, Ruth Carlson-Horn, in that year's Great Street Parade.

Also on display is the traditional ringmaster's outfit — jacket, vest, pants, tie, top hat and leather riding boots — that was worn to all official events by Steinkraus, who served as head of the 2nd annual festival in 1950.

Items are from the museum's collection (most were in storage), the Bridgeport Public Library, the Fairfield Museum and History Center, the Barnum Festival and individuals associated with the festival. The exhibition was made possible through grants from the city of Bridgeport, the Greater Bridgeport Area Foundation and a donor (who wished to go unnamed).

Says Maher, "Come One, Come All!" is much like the festival itself.

"It's pure fun."

The Barnum Museum is at 820 Main St. in downtown Bridgeport. For additional information, visit

www.barnum-museum.org or call 331-1104. Museum hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Sundays noon to 4:30 p.m.; and, through Labor Day, the museum will be open Thursdays to 7 p.m. Admission is \$5, \$4 for senior citizens and college students and \$3 for children 4 to 17 years of age. For additional information on Barnum Festival activities, visit www.barnumfestival.com.