

Collection #
P 0533

**COLE BROS. CIRCUS PHOTOGRAPHS
CA. 1935–1949 (PRINTS MADE AS LATE AS 1960S)**

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Processed by

Barbara Quigley
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Manuscript and Visual Collections Department
William Henry Smith Memorial Library
Indiana Historical Society
450 West Ohio Street
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

www.indianahistory.org

COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION: 81 black-and-white photographs

COLLECTION DATES: Ca. 1935–1949 (many of the photos were printed in the 1950s and 1960s, but taken in the 1930s and 1940s)

PROVENANCE: Purchased from Nest Egg Auctions in Meriden, Connecticut, in February 2008

RESTRICTIONS: None

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ALTERNATE FORMATS:

RELATED HOLDINGS:

ACCESSION NUMBER: 2008.0073

NOTES:

HISTORICAL SKETCH

William Washington Cole (1847-1915) began his career in show business in 1865 and became a sideshow proprietor in 1867. He launched "W. W. Cole's Colossal Circus" in 1871 in Quincy, Illinois. His show grew and began travelling by railroad in 1873. Cole's was the first circus and menagerie to travel to the Pacific coast entirely by rail. His circus traveled to New Zealand and Australia in 1880 and 1881. In 1904 Cole sold his circus to Canadian showman Martin Downs and his son, James, and the name changed to "Cole Bros. Circus." During the 1920s the circus was owned and operated by brothers Floyd and Howard King, who took the Cole Bros. Circus to military bases, mining camps, and remote boomtowns in the West.

The Great Depression nearly put an end to the Cole Bros. Circus, but in 1934 two veteran circus managers -- Jesse Adkins (1886–1940) and Zack Terrell (1879–1954) -- teamed up to save it. Each had plans to take their own circuses on the road in 1935. Adkins, a native of Van Buren in Grant County, Indiana, planned a 20-car railroad circus and Terrell had plans for a 15-car railroad circus. They formed a partnership still planning to run their separate circuses. Due to financial problems they decided to combine their efforts and produce a 35-car railroad circus. They acquired the Cole Bros. name and formed a circus that rivaled Ringling Bros., the largest American circus of that era. At times Cole Bros. combined with other circuses such as the Robbins Bros. and Clyde Beatty.

At that time there were only a few railroad circuses still in operation. On 11 October 1934, *The News Sentinel* newspaper of Rochester, Indiana, reported that the newly formed Indiana Circus Corporation would establish its winter headquarters in Rochester. The corporation had purchased the land and buildings of the Rochester Bridge Company located in the northeast section of town at the Erie and Nickel Plate railroad crossings. The Erie Railroad ran from Chicago to New York City and the Nickel Plate ran from Indianapolis to Michigan City, Indiana; thus the site provided a convenient location for a traveling circus. The Cole Bros. Circus wintered in Rochester from 1934 to 1940.

In 1935 Adkins and Terrell moved the circus on 35 double-length railroad cars, treating townspeople to a giant street parade from the railroad yard to the circus grounds. The tour extended from New York to Oklahoma, from Georgia to Nebraska, with points in between and into Ontario, Canada. That same year famed animal trainer Clyde Beatty (1903–1965) joined Cole Bros. Other notable performers with Cole Bros. at various times included clown Emmett Kelly (1898–1979), animal trainer Allen King, the Zacchini "Human Cannonball" act, the Cristiani Family bareback riders, the Great Wallendas high-wire act, cowboy actor Ken Maynard (born in Vevay, Indiana), and actor Burt Lancaster on the flying trapeze. The 1936 tour extended to the West Coast, and by 1937 New England and Quebec were added to the schedule as well.

On 20 February 1940 a fire in the hay-filled quarters in Rochester killed about 150 of the circus's wild animals. In addition, about 300 horses, twelve camels, eleven elephants, and twenty mules, monkeys, and ponies freed by their keepers stampeded the town of 3,500

residents and scattered over the countryside. The fire also destroyed twenty parade wagons, five tractors, and other circus equipment. Despite an estimated \$150,000 loss, the circus still toured that summer. Adkins died during that year's tour on 25 June in Massachusetts. Terrell became the sole owner of the circus until he sold it in 1948 to Jack Tavlin.

In 1956 Ringling Bros. Circus gave up its tents and began performing only in arenas. Cole Bros. joined with the Clyde Beatty Circus around this time to maintain the tradition of the tented circus. In 1957 Clyde Beatty–Cole Bros. Circus converted from railcars to trucks and moved to new winter quarters in DeLand, Florida. The Beatty-Cole circus flourished during the 1960s and 1970s under the ownership of Frank McClosky and Jerry Collins. In 1981 the circus was donated to Florida State University, home of the FSU Flying High Circus. FSU sold the circus to Cole Bros. veteran John W. Pugh, who established Cole Bros. Circus, Inc. in 1982. Today the show continues to tour as Cole Bros. Circus of the Stars, the world's largest circus under the big top.

Sources:

Circuses and Sideshows. "Circus Owners, Managers and Staff" (<http://www.circusesandsideshow.com/owners.html>). Accessed 2 April 2014.

Circuses and Sideshows. "Famous Circus Performers" (<http://www.circusesandsideshow.com/performers.html>). Accessed 2 April 2014.

Cole Bros. Circus of the Stars. "Cole Bros History" (<http://www.gotothecircus.com/index.php/cole-bros-history-sp-1020991886>). Accessed 1 April 2014.

Leavitt, Michael Bennett. *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management*. New York: Broadway Publishing Co., 1912: 130–132 (<http://books.google.com/books>). Accessed 2 April 2014.

Sanders, Francis E. *The Cole Bros. Circus from Rochester, Indiana: A Complete History from 1934 to 1940 (Wintering in Rochester)*. Bourbon, Ind.: Printed by Harmony Press, ca. 1986. General Collection: [GV1821.C6 S3 1986](#)

United Press. "Caged Beasts Die in Agony as Fire Ravages Circus." In *the Pittsburgh Press*, 21 February 1940: 29 (<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1144&dat=19400221&id=TE0bAAAAIABAJ&sjid=UUwEAAAAIABAJ&pg=6066,4366178>). Accessed 2 April 2014.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This collection consists of 81 black-and-white photographs of the Cole Bros. Circus in the 1930s and 1940s. The photographs have very little identifying information, but primarily show the circus on the circus grounds, being set up or torn down. They show animals, performers and other circus staff, wagons, floats, tents, cages, railroad cars, and parade scenes.

Many of the photographs are snapshots and some are blurry or otherwise of poor quality. Many of the photos were printed in the 1950s and 1960s, but taken in the 1930s and 1940s.

The collection is arranged based on what little identifying information accompanied it with regard to date or location.

Series 1 includes photographs that arrived in an envelope marked "Cole Bros. Clyde Beatty Combined Circus / 1935 / 1st year out / Guelph, Ontario, Canada." Photos show elephants, zebras, horses, camels, tigers, wagons, train cars, tents, performers, nursery rhyme floats, parade.

Series 2 consists of photographs that were received in an envelope marked "Cole Bros. / 1938." Photos show wagons, tents, circus grounds, workers.

Series 3 is composed of photographs that came in an envelope marked "Cole Bros. Circus / 1947 / South Bend, Ind." Photos show wagons, railroad cars, nursery rhyme floats, performers, horses, elephants.

Series 4 is comprised of photographs with dates written on the back from 1941 to 1949. Photos show wagons, tents, elephants, zebras.

Series 5 includes photographs that arrived in an envelope marked "Cole Bros. Circus / Misc. Years / Kitchener, Ontario, Canada." The photos that appear to be of Pennsylvania (series 6) were in this envelope, and one of the photos in this series can be identified as Jackson, Michigan. It cannot be determined whether the other photos that came in this envelope were really taken in Kitchener or elsewhere. Photos show wagons, animal cages, tents, lions, elephants.

Series 6 is composed of photographs stamped on the back "Circus Snaps / Robert D. Good / Allentown, PA." Photos show circus grounds, tents, horses, hippopotamus.

SERIES CONTENTS

Series 1: Cole Bros. – Clyde Beatty, 1935 – Guelph, Ontario, Canada

CONTENTS	CONTAINER
Three 3x5-inch photos showing elephants, zebras, horses, wagons, nursery rhyme float of children in and on a large shoe.	Box 1, Folder 1
Two photos printed in August 1961 (3 1/2 x 4 3/4): Cole Bros. Circus train car with a first-aid cross on it; two nursery rhyme floats showing Mother Goose and children in and on a large shoe.	Box 1, Folder 1
Seven photos printed in August 1959 show uniformed men with camels, horses pulling wagons in front of circus tents, the circus grounds, a woman with a camel, three women in a car with signs that appear to say "Lizzie of the [unreadable]" and "Rolls-Rotten," animal cages being pulled by horses, tigers in a cage labeled "Clyde Beatty's Trained Animals."	Box 1, Folder 1
Fifteen photos printed in September 1959: a horned bovine tethered to a wagon; wagon for Jumbo, the "Only African Elephant Exhibit With Any American Circus," with "Cole Bros. Circus," "Clyde Beatty," and "Allen King" also mentioned on its sign; ornate wagons; train cars (one with "Cole Bros. World Toured Circus"); posters advertising the Cole Bros. Circus with Clyde Beatty in Guelph on Thursday, 27 June 1935; elephants; circus tents.	Box 1, Folder 1
One photo printed in October 1959 showing the circus parading down a street and people on the sidewalk.	Box 1, Folder 1
One photo printed in February 1960 of a woman on a horse near a circus wagon.	Box 1, Folder 1

Series 2: Cole Bros., 1938

CONTENTS

One photo (2 3/4 x 4 1/2) shows a team of horses hitched to a wagon, a tent in the background, and workers setting up or tearing down.

CONTAINER

Box 1, Folder 2

Eight photos printed in September 1959: wagons and tents on circus grounds, entrance for Cole Bros. – Clyde Beatty Combined Side Shows -- "Congress of Human Oddities," cowboys on horses.

Box 1, Folder 2

Series 3: Cole Bros. Circus, 1947 – South Bend, Indiana

CONTENTS

Five 3x4 1/2-inch photos show ornate wagons on train, men working by Mother Goose float on train, railroad cars, horses boarding train, float of children in and on large shoe on train.

CONTAINER

Box 1, Folder 3

Six photos printed in February 1960: circus banners advertising performances and events such as Punch and Judy, Harlem Swing Band, Jitterbug Contest, etc.; clown standing by nursery rhyme float of children on large shoe; wagons; cowboys on horses; women on elephants.

Box 1, Folder 3

Two photos (5 3/4 x 3 1/2): man holding what may be a whip for training animals and wearing a hat that might say "Zoological Director." Woman in a long gown with circus tent, man with horses, and another female performer in the background.

Box 1, Folder 3

Series 4: Cole Bros. Circus, 1940s

CONTENTS

Joe M. Heiser, Jr., of Houston, Texas, by the Columbia wagon in Springfield, Illinois, on 22 July 1941. Identification written on back of photo.

CONTAINER

Box 1, Folder 4

Circus tents and Cole Bros. wagons. Photographed by Arthur Stensvad of North Platte, Nebraska. Kodacolor print of black-and-white photo made on 23 July 1942.

Box 1, Folder 4

Nine photos with "1949" written on back, printed in February 1958: circus tents, wagons, elephants, zebras.

Box 1, Folder 4

Series 5: Cole Bros. Circus – Kitchener, Ontario, Canada / Jackson, Michigan

CONTENTS

CONTAINER

Six photos (3 1/2 x 4 3/4) printed in August 1961: wagons, tents, two elephants pulling a wagon down a street. "Cole Bros. Wild Animals" wagon by railroad tracks and the Sparks-Withington Company building in Jackson, Michigan.

Box 1, Folder 5

Five photos (3 1/2 x 5) printed in May 1960: lions in a cage, animal cages, wagons.

Box 1, Folder 5

One photo printed in August 1959 shows a man standing by railroad loaded with Cole. Bros. wagons.

Box 1, Folder 5

Two photos: Asia wagon, ornate wagon with carvings of lions.

Box 1, Folder 5

Series 6: Cole Bros. Circus – Pennsylvania

CONTENTS

CONTAINER

Four photos stamped on the back "Circus Snaps / Robert D. Good / Allentown, PA": team of horses pulling hippopotamus in a cage past a billboard advertising the York Fair (Pennsylvania's Biggest Fair); circus grounds with crowds and workers setting up or tearing down the tents.

Box 1, Folder 6

CATALOGING INFORMATION

For additional information on this collection, including a list of subject headings that may lead you to related materials:

1. Go to the Indiana Historical Society's online catalog:
<http://opac.indianahistory.org/>
2. Click on the "Basic Search" icon.
3. Select "Call Number" from the "Search In:" box.
4. Search for the collection by its basic call number (in this case, P 0533).
5. When you find the collection, go to the "Full Record" screen for a list of headings that can be searched for related materials.