

Clyde Beatty:
Wild Animal Trainer Supreme
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Picture a lion tamer you may have seen in the movies or on old TV shows or in a comic strip, and you are picturing Clyde Beatty. (*Beatty* rhymes with *matey*). It was Beatty who, in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, would enter a cage in a circus's center ring alone with some dangerous wild animal- lion, tiger, bear- armed with only a chair and a whip and maybe a pistol that fired blanks. For three decades, Beatty was so popular across media, in live shows, movies, radio, and early television, that he is single-handedly responsible for defining what a circus wild animal act is supposed to look like.

Clyde Beatty (1903-1965) ran away and joined the circus as a teenager (at age 15, 17, or 18, depending on the source). He got an early job as an assistant to the show's wild animal trainer. Later, he trained with Peter Taylor, who had the leading big cat act of the day. In 1930, for the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, he began the act for which he would be known. He faced a dozen or so large wild cats at a time, with an occasional polar bear thrown in for good measure. Eventually, Beatty was the lead act in his own traveling show, The Clyde Beatty Circus.

After a first marriage ended in divorce, Beatty married Harriett Evans, a fellow circus performer, in 1933. She switched from the trapeze to working with her own big cat act and found independent success. Clyde had a 2-year-old daughter, Albina, from his first marriage, and she, too, was trained in lion taming from an early age. Harriett died from heart disease in 1950. Clyde remarried (Jane Abel) and remained married until his death.

Clyde Beatty was a master of all entertainment media from the 1930's through 50's. He appeared in several movies, mostly quasi-documentaries as himself or in fictional films as "the lion tamer". He published a popular book about his exploits in 1933, *The Big Cage*, with Edward Anthony, which became a motion picture that year. Other books followed. He appeared in an Abbott and Costello film in 1949 and then a couple of jungle movies in 1953 and 1954. The 1949 movie role may have renewed interest in Beatty, as *The Clyde Beatty Radio Show* began in 1950 and ran until 1952. The roles of Beatty and his wife Harriett were played by actors (in fact, Harriett had died before the show began), but a few episodes were based on real events in Beatty's life. For the most part, though, the show was a heavily fictionalized account of the life of a wild animal trainer, similar to other radio shows supposedly about real people such as *Blackstone*, *The Magic Detective* and *The Adventures of Babe Ruth*.

Beatty continued to perform on television and in circuses through the mid-60s. Even after being diagnosed with cancer in 1964, he did his act for another year. Finally, his health forced his reluctant retirement. Beatty died at his home in California in 1965.