

'Victim' of circus game provided some levity

"There's a sucker born every minute."
Phineas T. Barnum (1810-1891).

Barnum didn't have any way of knowing Peter Ballenger when the impresario uttered his now famous truism, but he might as well have been talking about Ballenger. As the *Bloomington Saturday Courier* of Sept. 23, 1893, put it, "He would have staked his life that he knew where that little ball was, but it cost him \$30 to learn that it will not do to bet even on a certainty."

The "little ball" was supposed to be under one of three shells, but it may have been palmed by the operator of the game. It certainly wasn't where Ballenger thought it was.

When some people lose a lot of money gambling, they feel and act sheepish about it. No so the victim of the shell game.

The *Courier* noted that Ballenger "swore out a warrant" for the manager of the circus, charging him with exhibiting gambling devices, but he concluded that was not a



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

good way to get his money back, so the warrant was not served."

Choosing to a different legal direction, Ballenger next considered putting himself between the circus manager and his profits. This caused considerable amusement at the *Courier* office, and there is a strong possibility that many members of the staff contributed to the levity.

Here are some examples. "He (Ballenger) first thought he would levy on the elephant's trunk, but the elephant wouldn't have it that way. He next tried a camel, but

that animal got his back up about it, so that was abandoned. The next move was to take the leopard, but the cussed thing changed his spots so often that he couldn't be reached."

The reporters' jokes continued for six inches worth of column, concluding with, "Then if he undertook to levy on the lemonade stand, that would be throwing cold water on the whole business . . ."

According to the *Courier*, about that time, a stranger approached Ballenger and "suggested that he might fix the matter up by refunding \$10 of the money lost. A compromise couldn't be made for so small an amount, and the stranger raised it to \$20, which was accepted." For his services, the stranger took \$2.

Ballenger was not the only Monroe Countian taken in by the visiting circus con artists. The *Courier* described another money-making scheme.

"A man was buying a ticket to the side

show at the door when a gentlemanly fellow stepped up and asked him if he would trade a \$10 bill for small ones. When the "sucker" produced the \$10 bill from his wallet, the other man snatched it and disappeared under the canvas of the big tent.

For the benefit of naive readers, the *Courier* explained how it worked. "'Cappers' were sent outside the side show to pick out victims and invite them inside free. When a man opened his pocket book to buy a ticket to the side show, if he showed considerable money, the ticket seller would call out a signal so that the workers inside (the tent) could spot the visitor for a victim."

Heavy losers to the shell and roulette games were given free tickets to the big show, an act which probably forestalled any legal action. When interviewed, one of the circus clowns explained a new twist on the golden rule: "Do unto others or they will do you."

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