

"First Electric Light Exhibition in Westminster"

Carroll County Times Article for 1 September 1996

By Jay A. Graybeal

Throughout August 1879 readers of the Westminster Democratic Advocate newspaper read large advertisements for W. W. Cole's Famous New York and New Orleans Circus, Museum, Menagerie & Congress of Living Wonders which was coming to Westminster on September 3rd. The circus filled three special trains owned by Mr. Cole. Admission was 50 cents for adults and 25 cents for children.

The top of the ad proclaimed that the event would be the first exhibition of the electric light in the city and noted that, "THE TENTS WILL BE ILLUMINATED with this new and greatest invention of the age. THE ELECTRIC LIGHT is now in use in Paris, France, and London, England, and it is only a question of time when it will supplant gas and other illuminating agencies in this and all other countries. We use Ten Electric Light Chambers, yielding a volume of light equal to 30,000 gas jets." The ad also featured a woodcut of a crowd of people cheering the display of an electric light and the four-wheeled engine that provided the electricity.

The remainder of the advertisement extolled the other wondrous things to be seen, in the "congress of bewildering attractions." Mr. Cole boasted that he was bringing "10,000 separate and distinct novelties" representing the earth, sea and sky displayed in a "wilderness of exhibition tents." There would be, "The Wonders and Beauties of Nature! Ocean Marvels! The Gaucho Horsemen of the Pampas! Superb Display of Arenic Prowess! Monarchs of the Rivers and Jungles of India, Africa and South America! \$100,000 Worth of Golden Tableau Cars and Chariots, like mountains of burnished gold in sunlight."

Mr. Cole also offered to exhibit Capt. and Mrs. M. V. Bates whom he claimed were the tallest man and woman on earth. Both were said to be eight feet tall (lacking half an inch) and together weighed over half a ton. An accompanying woodcut showed the couple towering over guests at a reception held by Queen Victoria.

Live animals formed a large part of the circus. There were "living Alaska Oceanic Lions, Baby Elephants, Baby Dromedaries, Baby Leopards, Baby Lions, Baby Camels, Baby Monkeys, Baby Tigers Baby Sea Lions, the Walrus, Den of Monster Serpents, Drove of Bactrian Camels, Herd of Elephants, Trained and Performing Wild Beasts, etc."

Six trick stallions had apparently just been added to the show and Cole claimed that they were, "the most wonderful and performing Stallions in the world. They Waltz in three couples. The March Erect on their hind feet. They Drill like Soldiers. One jumps over the backs of the other five. They see saw upon a board. Their performances are astonishing,..."

Mr. Cole went on to note that his circus was suitable for a family to attend. "This grand and classic entertainment is wholly exempt from the inelegances and coarseness too frequently permitted in most tent exhibitions. In this Great Show there is nothing ever presented that a gentleman would hesitate to bring his family to witness, or the most exacting take exception to."

Following the departure of Cole's Circus, a less than glowing review appeared in the Democratic Advocate in the "Local Brevities" column:

"Cole's circus exhibited here on Wednesday, the audience at both entertainments being large. The street parade was fine, as was the circus and menagerie. The peanut, candy and lemonade venders should be abolished, and the clowns should be suppressed. The concert after the circus was a fraud, and the sooner Cole gets rid of it the better, as it will soon ruin the reputation of his show."

Although Mr. Cole may not have pleased everyone he was right about one thing. The electric light would soon supplant gas. The Westminster Gas Light Co., in operation less than a decade when Cole came to town, would fail in the first decade of the new century as city residents turned to electric lighting.

Photo caption: Woodcut of "The Electric Light" from W. W. Cole's August 1879 circus advertisement.
Historical Society of Carroll County collection.