

Syracuse University

SURFACE

The Courier

Libraries

Spring 1987

Freak Show Images from the Ron Becker Collection

Robert Bogdan

Syracuse University, rcbogdan@syr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/libassoc>



Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), and the [Folklore Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bogdan, Robert. "Freak Show Images from the Ron Becker Collection." *The Courier* 22.1 (1987): 45-54.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Courier* by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY ASSOCIATES
C O U R I E R

CÆTERAS

HAC ARTES



ILLVSTRO

VOLUME XXII, NUMBER 1, SPRING 1987

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY ASSOCIATES
COURIER

VOLUME XXII

NUMBER ONE

SPRING 1987

- Leopold von Ranke, His Library, and the
Shaping of Historical Evidence
By Edward Muir, Associate Professor of History,
Louisiana State University 3
- Ranke's Favorite Source: The *Relazioni* of the Venetian
Ambassadors
By Gino Benzoni, Professor of History,
University of Venice 11
- Ranke and the Venetian Document Market
By Ugo Tucci, Professor of Economic History,
University of Venice 27
- The Imperishable Perishable Press
By Terrance Keenan, Syracuse University Libraries 39
- Freak Show Images from the Ron Becker Collection
By Robert Bogdan, Associate Professor of Special Education,
Syracuse University 45
- The William A. Hinds American Communities Collection
By Mark F. Weimer, Syracuse University Libraries 55
- News of the Syracuse University Libraries and
the Library Associates 65

Freak Show Images from the Ron Becker Collection

BY ROBERT BOGDAN

During the period 1840 to 1940, Americans witnessed the rise and fall of freak shows—the formally organized public exhibitions, for amusement and profit, of people with real and alleged physical, mental, or behavioral differences. By 1840 ‘human curiosities’, who up to then traveled and were exhibited independently, were joining burgeoning amusement companies, such as circuses and dime museums. In the early 1840s P. T. Barnum, the major figure in the nineteenth-century popular entertainment business in the United States, took over the American Museum in New York City. This Disneyland of Victorian America featured human curiosities.

The last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth constituted the era when freak shows were most popular. They were to be found at city, county, state, and world fairs, amusement parks, circuses, dime museums, and carnivals. By the hundreds they traversed the country, affording viewers ample chance to gawk at people we would now call disabled, as well as people who were abnormally tall, or short, or fat, or thin; people who swallowed swords, charmed snakes, performed any sort of novelty act; people who marked their bodies with strange tattoos; and people from the non-Western world who were presented as savages.

By 1940 economic hard times, technological and geographic changes, competition from other forms of entertainment, the medical correction of human abnormalities, and changed public taste resulted in a notable decline in the number and popularity of freak shows. Although they continued through the 1950s and 1960s (and vestiges exist even today), by 1940 they were in rapid decline.

I would like to thank Ron Becker, whose research on Charles Eisenmann and Frank Wendt is used in this paper.

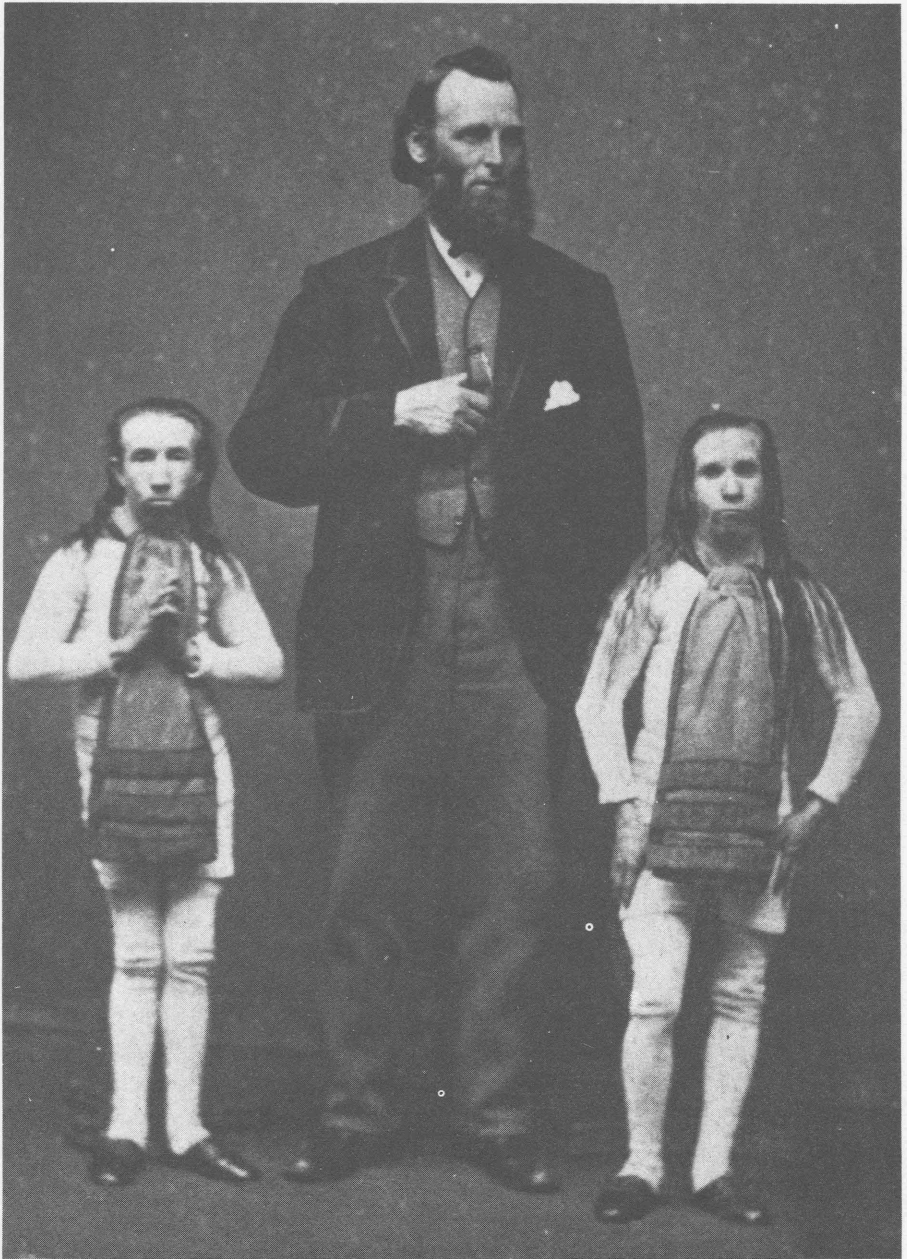
All photographs accompanying this article are from the Ron Becker Collection in the Syracuse University Libraries.



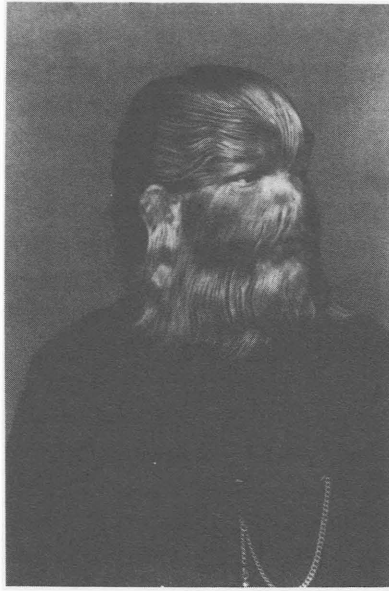
P. T. Barnum, photo by Eisenmann, 1886, on a cabinet card.

In one way or another, every exhibit was a fraud. This is not to say that 'freaks' were without physical, mental, or behavioral anomalies. Many had profound imperfections (severe disabilities in today's terminology); but, with very few exceptions, every person exhibited was somehow misrepresented. In order to enhance their appeal to patrons, showmen misrepresented or exaggerated the nature of their condition and fabricated the circumstances of their backgrounds and current lives.

The Davis brothers are a case in point. Extremely short as well as mentally retarded, they were exhibited from 1852 until 1905 as the 'Wild Men of Borneo'—although they actually grew up on a farm in Ohio. Their employers claimed that after a desperate struggle they had been captured in the 'distant Pacific' and finally domesticated. Similarly, the five-year-old, Connecticut-born Sherwood Stratton became the eleven-year-old, English-born Tom Thumb when Barnum



The Davis brothers with manager, photo by W. S. Warren, ca.1872.



Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy, photo by Eisenmann, ca.1885.

first exhibited him. Stratton later married Lavinia Warren. Although they never had children, they were displayed with a baby that was presented as theirs. A baby Thumb, it was hoped, would stimulate business.

Starting in the 1860s and continuing throughout the history of the freak show, the exhibited personalities sold their own photographic portraits as a way of promoting their careers and supplementing their incomes. These images were carefully posed, and employed backgrounds and props that were consistent with the fraudulent presentations that the showmen concocted. It is these photographs that offer the most complete record of the freak show in America.

The Ron Becker Collection, a new addition to the George Arents Research Library and one of the largest holdings of freak show souvenir photographs in the United States, is comparable to the extensive collections at the Harvard Theatre Collection; the Ringling Circus Museum in Sarasota, Florida; the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin; and the Hertzberg Collection in San Antonio

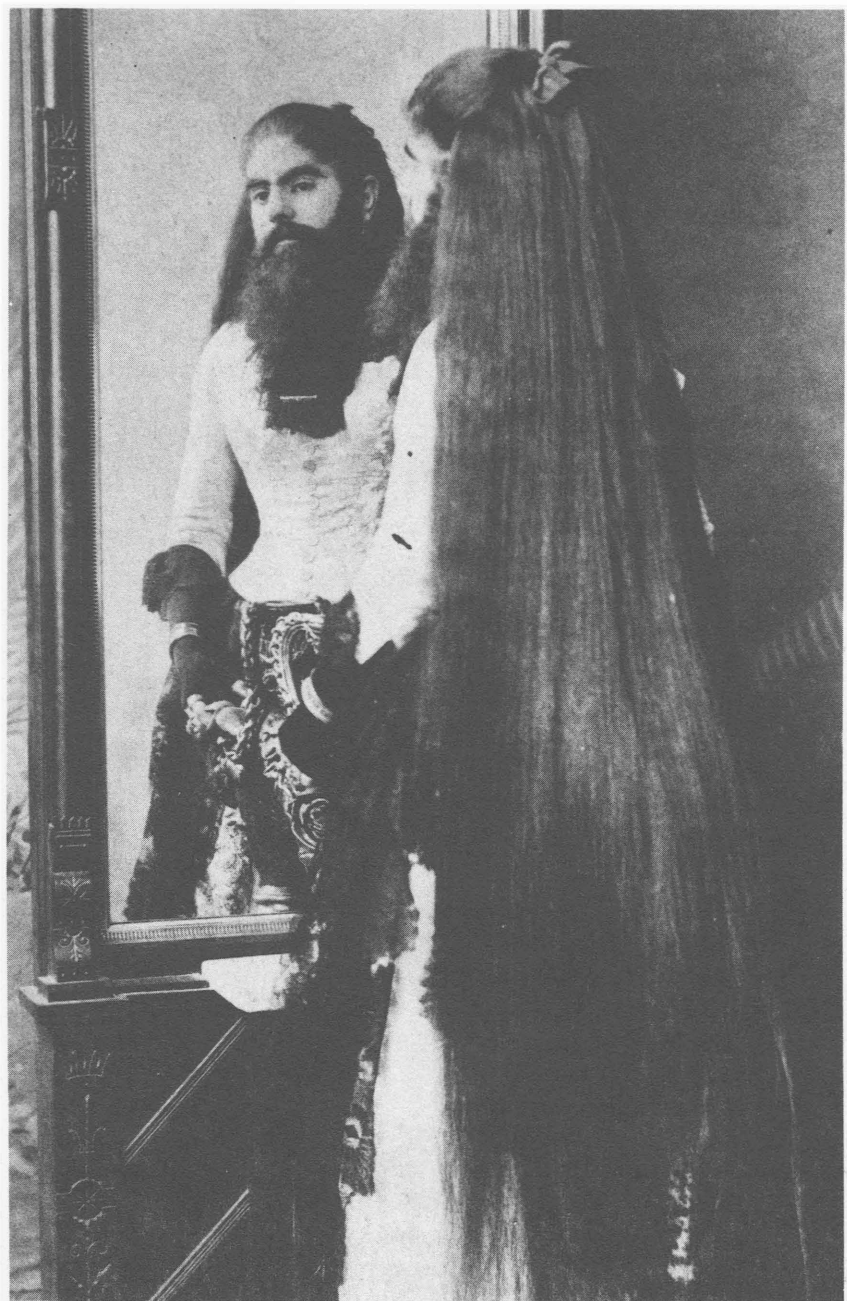
Lady; Anne Leake Thomson, *The Armless Wonder*; Isaac Sprague, *the Human Skeleton*; and Fiji Jim, *the Island Cannibal*.

Mr. Becker started amassing his unusual collection of American popular-culture artifacts over a decade ago while on vacation with his wife in New England. In a small, out-of-the-way antique shop in Maine, he happened by chance to open the drawer of a night table. There, looking up at him, was a nineteenth-century, cabinet-style photograph showing a woman with a large snake wrapped around her neck. He bought it. Later, at another antique shop, he found a second freak image and bought that. By the end of his holiday he had purchased about a dozen images and had committed himself to collecting this genre of photograph.

Though he was not indifferent to the subject matter of the pictures, Ron Becker's specific interest lay in the photography involved, most particularly in that of two late-nineteenth-century photographers, Charles Eisenmann and his colleague Frank Wendt. The collection as it now stands contains 403 images that can be attributed to Eisenmann (between ca.1875 and 1903) and 147 marked with the logo of Wendt (from ca.1890 to 1905). The work of these two photographers makes up the core of the collection, but there are 452 images by other photographers as well, many of whom had their shops in the entertainment districts of New York City. In addition, there are over 100 items of sideshow memorabilia.

Charles Eisenmann, like so many of his nineteenth-century photographer contemporaries, left few traces for a biographer to work with. Born in 1850, he was one of the many German immigrants who flocked to New York City, where, never straying far from the German tenements, he was granted his naturalization papers in 1868. As a young man he learned the skills of a printer as well as those of a photographer. First listed in the New York City business directory as a photographer in 1876, he opened his first studio in 1879. The following year he married and became the father of a daughter. The photography work evolved into a family business with his wife, Dora, an active participant in the enterprise. In census reports of the period she is listed as a photographer herself. Beginning in 1881 the Eisenmann gallery was located at 229 Bowery. It was in this studio, in the heart of the city's entertainment district, that he produced most of his work.

The area around Eisenmann's studio was bustling with beer gar-



Annie Jones, the Bearded Lady, photo by Eisenmann, ca.1885.

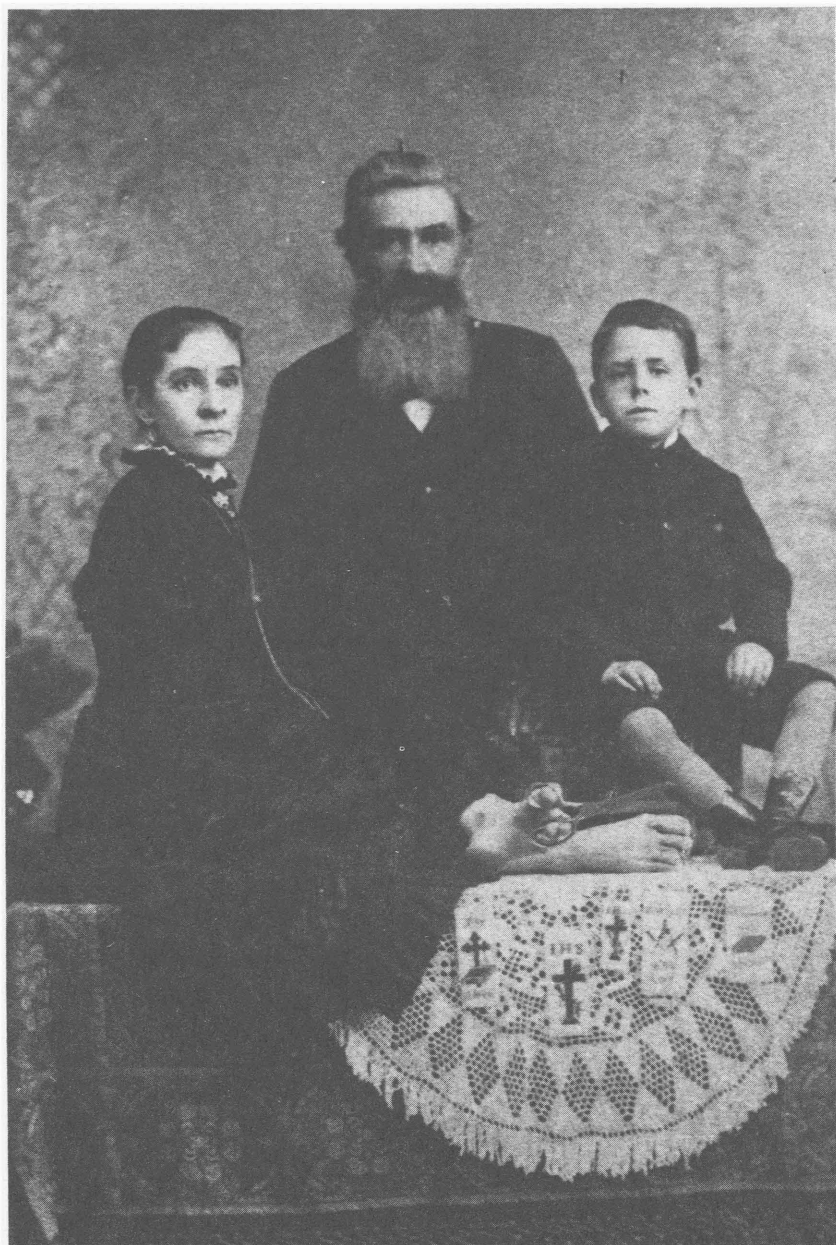
dens, inexpensive photographic studios, dance halls, and dime museums from where so many of his clientele came. These dime museums were fashioned after P. T. Barnum's American Museum, which had exhibited various human curiosities as well as many unusual scientific exhibits. Freaks who were playing the dime museums or were in town with one of the many traveling circuses came to Eisenmann's studio to pose for their promotional souvenirs, which they sold in conjunction with their professional appearances. Why this clientele was attracted to Eisenmann or why Eisenmann was attracted to them is unknown. In any case, these people became his specialty, the main source of his income, and it was Eisenmann who left the most complete record of them.

The wet-plate albumen process was the preferred method of photography during the 1870s and 1880s. Albumen prints were beautiful sepia-toned images. Working in both the 2¼" x 3½" carte-de-visite and the 4" x 6" cabinet formats, Eisenmann was a master at this craft, producing prints that were sharp, clear, and well posed.

Eisenmann could not have been in a better place or lived at a better time to practise his specialty. In the 1880s both pictures and actual exhibits of human curiosities were extremely popular. Photographing both the famous and the obscure, he quickly established himself as the premier photographer of freaks. As his subjects took to the road with their touring companies, they sold the images that he had taken, and in cities and towns across the country, even today, Eisenmann images still turn up.

In 1890 Eisenmann moved from the Bowery on the Lower East Side to West 190th Street. He remained there for seven years, but this was not a period of photographic productivity. In 1899 he moved to Plainfield, New Jersey, and although he continued as a photographer, the quality and number of images that he produced never approached those of his 1880s period. Of the over 400 Eisenmann photographs in the Becker Collection, only eight are from Plainfield and none of these are of freaks. There is no record of Eisenmann after 1903, when he disappears from the Plainfield directory.

The biography of Francis Frank Wendt is even more difficult to establish than Eisenmann's. He first appears in the New York City directory in 1892. He was listed as a photographer whose place of work was West 190th Street near Eleventh Avenue, which was probably the shop Eisenmann ran after leaving the Bowery. The follow-



Anne Leake Thomson, 'The Armless Wonder', with husband and son, photo by Eisenmann, ca. 1885. On the back of this carte-de-visite is written: "Hands deprived / Toes derived / Anne L. Thomson / Born without arms / Dec. 23, 1839 Ga. [Georgia]".

ing year and through 1897, his address was listed as 229 Bowery, Eisenmann's old location. The nature of the business arrangement between the two men is unknown. Wendt might have worked for Eisenmann, or in some other way come to have taken over Eisenmann's business. However it happened, Wendt continued to deal with the clientele of freaks. Toward the end of Wendt's Bowery days, he married Eisenmann's daughter.

After 1897 Wendt moved to Boonton, New Jersey, where he completed the bulk of his work with freaks. It is not known what percentage of the images bearing Wendt's logo were actually taken by him. Some seem to be reprints of other photographers' images.

Wendt's photographs are fascinating but inferior in craft to Eisenmann's. Their composition and quality of printing do not measure up. Unfortunately, the major part of Wendt's work, done with the gelatin dry plate and albumen paper, has suffered from sulfiding deterioration, resulting in the familiar gelatin green tone with poor contrast.

While Eisenmann and Wendt were the most prolific photographers specializing in freaks, there were others who were popular too. In New York M. B. Brady, C. D. Fredricks, E. Anthony, J. Gurney, Obermuller, Ollivier, J. Mora, A. Bogardus, and Kern made photo cards for human exhibits to sell. Sword in York, Pennsylvania, Rich in Chicago, and Morris in Pittsburgh, as well as others across the country, included freaks among their clients. The Ron Becker Collection also contains examples of freak images by these photographers.

Scholars in many fields will find the Becker Collection important. In addition to its relevance to the history of photography, the images help to document the development of popular culture in the United States. Since human exhibits were displayed at a wide range of amusement enterprises, the collection is a valuable resource in understanding the growth and nature of those organizations. For sociologists,* the collection provides a rich quarry for the study of the relationship between popular culture and evolving attitudes towards people with disabilities.

* Dr. Bogdan's book, *Freak Show: Sociological Encounter with History*, which will be richly illustrated with images from the Becker Collection, is scheduled for publication in the spring of 1988 by the University of Chicago Press.