

ALL SORTS OF DOMESTIC OCCUPATIONS:

Early Twentieth-Century Media Portrayals of Female Circus Workers

Rebecca N. Reid Faculty Mentor Dr. Jane Pederson History Department University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire



"Last week I met the circus woman. And she isn't the circus woman at all. She's a child: a simple, unaffected, amiable little creature, pleased at a small compliment as a child would be, and lacking – delightfully lacking – in the veiled, sophisticated sarcasm with which the clever actress meets her natural enemy, the interviewer, or the unbounded, fatuous vanity which the stupid one displays.... As a sensation, I warn you, the circus woman is a failure."

- "The Circus Woman" *The Billboard*, Oct. 6, 1900



"No manager of a circus, especially if his show be a first-class one, will engage a female performer in any capacity unless she is accompanied by some male relative."

- *The Woodland Daily Democrat*, Thursday, May 11, 1905

"Suggestions and Rules" pertinent to female employees of Ringling Bros. Circus, vital in regard to "the impression [made] on the public:"

- Male performers are not to visit the ballet girls. The excuse of "accidental" meetings on Sunday, in parks, at picture shows, etc. will not be accepted.
- Do not sit "cross-legged" on floats or tableaux wagons.
- Button up coats, etc.

Additional rules for the conduct of Ballet Girls:

- Do not dress in a flashy, loud style; be neat and modest in appearance.
- You are required to be in the sleeping car and register your name not later than 11 P.M. and not to leave the car after registering.
- Girls must not stop at Hotels at anytime.
- You are not permitted to visit with relatives, etc., in cities where show appears without permission from Ballet Master.
- You are not permitted to talk or visit with male members of the Show Company, excepting the management, and under no circumstances with residents of the cities visited.
- The excuse of "accidental" meetings will not be accepted.



Why was the image of circus women so tightly controlled?

The wages, independence, safety and prestige of female circus performers versus other female wage earners threatened the status quo of male domination and female dependence.

Comparative wages, 1910-1915:

- Top billed circus performer \$165/week, plus private stateroom and board
- Ballet Girl \$8/week for twelve performances, plus shared room and board
- Average performer \$18-\$20/week, plus room and board
- Store clerk (Superior, WI) \$9/week, working six days
- Glove factory seamstress \$6/week
- Telephone operator \$7/week
- Prostitute \$15-\$40/week



"Their natural desire for neatness, from force of habit, if from no other cause, enables them to decorate their berths with little articles of fancy work, slipper cases, a tiny pair of silken curtains at the window, a little cabinet with a lock upon the door, toilet in racks above the bulkheads, snowy counterpanes – everything, in fact, found in a well-appointed sleeping apartment in a home."

Moberly Weekly Monitor, Thursday, Aug. 8, 1901.



"I was older now- past twelve – and the word modesty began to be an important one.... When I was getting ready for my act in the women's dressing room, my mother always buttoned a long skirt tightly about my neck until the tights and trunks were on my tiny frame.... It seemed to me even then a silly thing, since here I was in a dressing room with only the women I knew about me, and yet out there in the ring I rode and danced with only tights and a little tunic to cover me.... Yet there all the world might look at me."

-Josie DeMott Robinson, *The Circus Lady*, 1925