PART TWO

CIRCUS & ENTERPRISE

The circus business is not very much different, in essentials, to any other business in Australia.\(^1\)

\(^1\) G Wirth, 15 May 1933, p. 407.
Figure 13

Full page advertisement for Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Great International Allied Shows, Circus and Menagerie, announcing its forthcoming visit to 'Hobart Town'.

New wagons of a very superior build ... have superseded the more roughly constructed and jolting vehicles of the olden times.¹

The circus entrepreneur in Australia was relieved of the task of inventing the circus. This Astley had already done in London in the 1770s. Rather, the task of the Australian entrepreneur was to transpose the art, form and management of the circus, already well developed in England and elsewhere, to its new antipodean setting. The colonial entrepreneur had to address the logistical challenges and possibilities - and therefore the financial risks - of introducing and adapting a ready-designed labour and capital-intensive form of entertainment to its new environment.

Understandably, the early entrepreneurial efforts were imitations, on a lesser scale, of the circus entertainments seen in England. But, circus is not a static phenomenon, either as an art form or as a

¹ Riverine Herald, 20 Sep 1871.
business proposition. Furthermore, over the entire period of circus in Australia, unrelenting technological progress in Europe and America continued to revolutionise communication and travel and generate improvements in living and working conditions. These changes contributed to modifications in the nature of circus arts and management while leaving their fundamental rationale unaltered. Allowing for inevitable time lags, these changes eventually manifested in Australian circus, modified as necessary to local circumstances and tastes. Circus proprietors kept abreast of advances in technology to either lower the cost of production, improve its revenue generating capability or both. Technological improvements in the areas of accommodation, lighting and transportation were of consistent interest.

What forms did innovation take? How was circus adapted to its new antipodean environment?

**Novelty**

Audiences, like markets generally, demand novelty in what is delivered, in how it is delivered, or both. The fully peripatetic circus was novelty enough for remote settlements. The inadequacy - even non-existence - of connecting roads did not deter the early circus men from probing the land beyond the major coastal settlements. Burton was almost ‘an explorer so various were the tracks by which he and his human and equine party travelled from Bathurst to the Victorian diggings’.2 Ashton ‘pushed through unexplored scrub’.3 After a brief season in Brisbane in 1876, the St Leon circus visited Beenleigh for three nights, the first circus to visit the township. So

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2 Salomon.
3 Fernandez, p.15.
From a global perspective, American circus man, Joseph Andrew Rowe, set a precedent for other American showmen by sailing across the Pacific in 1850-52, eventually to reach Melbourne, with his circus troupe. Another American circus man, William Washington ‘Chilly Billy’ Cole was ‘obsessed’ with finding new territories for business:

... He habitually found them in advance of his competitors. Having found them, he used billboard and newspaper advertising and other forms of publicity lavishly. Cole was the first to take a circus to California and back entirely by rail ... During 1880 when the Ringling brothers were still rural concert people, he sailed with his circus from San Francisco, played a phenomenally profitable season in Australia and New Zealand and returned to California in 1881.

The development of domestic shipping services enabled circuses to visit areas that otherwise looked unpromising: by 1888, St Leons Circus had extended its activities as far north as Cooktown, and the new goldfields at Normanton and Croydon on the Gulf of Carpenteria, Queensland; circuses of Australian origin visited New Zealand as early as 1855 and with almost annual frequency by the turn of the century. The Wirth circus relied on steamers to visit New Caledonia in 1888 and New Zealand and Tasmania in 1889 - 90.

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4 Queenslander, 2 Sep 1882.
5 Dressler, p.13.
6 May, pp.178-79.
7 New Zealand Star, 17 Nov 1855.
8 G Wirth, 1925, pp.37ff.
9 G Wirth, 1925, pp.43ff.
While the peripatetic circus improved chances of economic viability, it also reduced the imperatives for originality in artistic programming. As with the entertainers who travelled early modern Europe, it was easier to change audience than repertoire and to change audience they had to travel from town to town.\textsuperscript{10} As on the American frontier, the early itinerant circus companies lightened their loads of all but the most essential paraphernalia necessary to present equestrian-based performances. In this way, they not only sustained their revenues but minimised any need for artistic innovation.

Since many of these troupes were rather small, this rapid movement from place to place reduced the pressure on them to produce constant innovation in the nature and variety of the entertainments presented.\textsuperscript{11}

As in English provincial circus, Australian circus settled into routines of established repertoires of generic acts and set pieces, troupes rising and falling with the economic tide and performers drifting from troupe to troupe as opportunities arose. Elaborate equestrian-based pantomimes, such as ‘Richard Coeur De Lion’, which Radford presented in Launceston in 1848 after two months’ preparation, with specially written music and elaborate period costumes, were simply out of the question for an itinerant circus.\textsuperscript{12} In any case, any aspirations towards novelty were severely constrained by the cost if not the difficulty of procuring it from places as far away as London or New York.

\textsuperscript{10} Burke, p.97.
\textsuperscript{11} Stoddart, p.22.
\textsuperscript{12} Cornwall Chronicle, 15 Jan, 11 Mar 1848.
... The expenses of a travelling circus such as this are far greater than one would imagine and when such remarks are uttered as ‘why don’t they get this’ and ‘why don’t they get that’ the thought perhaps does not strike one that ‘this’ and ‘that’ represent perhaps £50 a week additional expenses. [St Leons Circus, Gundagai, N S W, 1878].

In due course, we read patronising comments such as ‘the circus performance could not of course be expected to contain many novelties’ (my italics). Even in a large city such as Melbourne, the absence of novelty was politely overlooked.

It was a very good circus, for although they did nothing that everybody had not seen many times before, what they did do was very good of its kind, and the large audiences, which thronged the tent, appeared very much to enjoy what they saw. [St Leons Circus, Melbourne, 1880].

Inevitably, the increasing availability of choice in the metropolis invited comparison. To more critical eyes, a circus programme executed with ‘zest and completeness’ only partly compensated for the absence of startling novelty. Upwards of 400 people were ‘highly delighted’ with the evening’s entertainment given by the ‘60 men and horses’ of Burtons National Circus when it visited Windeyer near Mudgee, N S W, in 1861 but, in Adelaide, only eighteen months

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13 Gundagai Times, 18 Dec 1878.
14 New Zealand Herald, 9 Oct 1885.
15 Australasian, 7 Feb 1880.
later, Burtons performances were described as ‘mutton and damper’.\textsuperscript{16}

When circus companies played in direct opposition or in close proximity to each other, journalists contemporaneously compared offerings. During May and June 1880, four circus companies (Ridges Royal Tycoon, Walhalla & Barlows Great American, Hayes & Benhamos English, and St Leons) visited the central western New South Wales towns of Young, Grenfell, and Bathurst in quick succession. For the town of Young this was a ‘turn of circus companies in town, all good of their class’\textsuperscript{17} while Grenfell received ‘quite a plethora of equestrian exhibitions’.\textsuperscript{18}

Eventually, the absence of novelty began to spark condemnation even in the backblocks while the steadily increasing availability and variety of toured entertainments inevitably invited even broader comparisons. Although the performances given by Ashtons Circus at Queanbeyan, N S W, in 1863 ‘did not quite rival’ those of Burton’s company, its feats ‘in many respects were more daring and wonderful while their excellent brass band was decidedly better’.\textsuperscript{19}

Although Burton was the ‘king of the ring’ during the 1850s, ‘60s and ‘70s, his success appears to have owed more to formulaic repetition of stock repertoires rather than any systematic pusuit of novelty. After the visit of his company to Wagga Wagga, N S W, over four nights in 1875, a correspondent remarked that Burton’s crowded audiences:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Bell’s Life in Victoria, 31 Jan 1863.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Burrangong Chronicle, 29 May 1880.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Grenfell Record, 5 Jun 1880.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Queanbeyan Age, 8 Jan 1863.
\end{itemize}
never seem to tire of a round of performances they have been looking at for years. The public might, without being unreasonable, look for a little enterprise on [Burton's] part. Something fresh ought to turn up occasionally looking at the liberal patronage he receives.  

[Burton & Taylor's Grand United Circus Company, 1875].

When Harmstons, a circus organised in San Francisco under English management, opened in the Crystal Palace Ring in Sydney's York Street on 15 May 1890, it presented the daring rider Gilbarto [the nom d'arena of an English rider, Gilbert Eldred] who performed ‘remarkable’ backward and forward somersaults on horseback, a novelty in Australia for which the vast audience loudly cheered the skilful and daring performer. But within a decade of Gilbarto’s feats, the tastes of Australian circus audiences had moved beyond these:

riding and ‘hurrah’ - or quick flying acts ... Now they do not care so much for the riding. They want more gymnasts and aerial acts, in short, music hall turns. Somersault riders they will not stand at any price, no matter how clever the performers might be.  

[FitzGerald Brothers Circus, 1901].

Like theatre, circus action disappears as it is performed but, unlike theatre, the circus ‘text’ is rarely written down. Professional circus knowledge - of acts and techniques, of audiences and routes - was accumulated from experience and observation, embodied in

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21 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 Mar 1890. In fact, the American equestrian George Holland had executed the first colonial forward somersaults in Chiarinis Royal Italian Circus in Sydney in 1873.
22 Anon, 1901.
memory, shared in speech, acquired through association. For generations, Australian circus families passed their learned managerial and performing skills and experience down from generation to generation, ownership from son to son and 'nobody has ever written down anything'.

[...] literature is not a major part of their [traditional circus people’s] culture. Early itinerant performers in Europe, like Aboriginal people in Australia maintained a tradition of passing on 'business', within the family, typically father to son, mother to daughter. There were never any written histories nor do-it-yourself manuals either for making boomerangs or for flying trapeze. This lack of literary communication among circus folk could be due to secrecy, or illiteracy or to the pointlessness of transmitting complex physical skills through the written word.

Much professional knowledge was informally codified along family lines. When the acrobatic progeny of the Colleano, Perry and St Leon circus families happened to meet for a 'yap' on the street outside Sydney’s Bijou Theatre in 1922:

the discussion was [about] doing full twisting somersaults. You should throw your arms to the left if you turn to the left or whichever way. The St Leons had a reputation of teaching you to do full twisting somersaults with your hands right above your head. They were called ‘St Leon’ twisters. [The] Perrys used to do their own style [from] which they could do other tricks. The Colleanos had another method still.

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Different circus families developed different organisational approaches such as alternative methods for erecting their tents. The St Leons set up their circus king-poles on ‘a three-rope method’, two ‘dead’ ropes and one ‘let-out’ rope. In the 1930s, after several years with Perry Brothers Circus, Mervyn King took the job of boss tentman with Wirth Brothers Circus to find that Wirths operational system was ‘a different system altogether than the smaller shows but it was a good system’. These sentiments were echoed by one of the Perry family who was employed by Wirths as a musician during the 1920s:

> [W]hat a circus that was and how it was run! I was with them for two years, Wirths. The organisation in that show was marvellous. Old Philip Wirth was a marvellous organiser.  

Throughout Australia’s circus history, new troupes sprang from the old, intent on doing things in their own way. Near Kilmore, Victoria, in May 1875, the St Leon family left Burton to form their own travelling troupe. By October 1878, the St Leon circus had grown to become ‘as familiar as Burtons and by all accounts more popular’, its performances ‘more varied than we sometimes meet with in the ordinary travelling circus’. Indeed, St Leon appears to have been stirred to tackle the issue of novelty head-on, claiming his circus to be:

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27 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.162.
28 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 5.
29 M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.198.
30 Kilmore Advertiser, 10 May 1875.
31 Gundagai Times, 23 Nov 1877.
32 Bathurst Times, 27 Oct 1877.
the only one that, for the season of 1878, actually presents something new; quite often and with sufficient reason, we hear the remark, particularly from middle aged persons and those past the prime of life, that ‘Circuses are all alike, see one and you have seen them all’. Determined that no visitor to my establishment shall have reason to make a remark similar to the one above, I have made a new departure in the mode and manner of exhibiting a circus.\textsuperscript{33} \textit{[St Leons Circus, Newcastle, N S W, 1878]}.

The nature of the ‘new departure in mode and manner’ rested largely on the engagement of several principal performers from visiting American circuses, sufficient to allow the new circus to be soon judged ‘the largest and about one of the best’ to have visited Cowra, N S W,\textsuperscript{34} and ‘by far the best ... seen in Victoria’.\textsuperscript{35} Whatever St Leon’s intentions, his circus, ‘fully peripatetic’ like others before, could not sustain this freshness indefinitely. By the time of its 1883 Adelaide season, we read that the St Leon performances were ‘of the usual kind’ and in most cases were ‘nothing extraordinary’,\textsuperscript{36} their ‘zest and completeness’ only partly compensating for the absence of ‘startling’ novelty.\textsuperscript{37}

In 1853, the French circus proprietor Franconi had presented recreations of the great Egyptian, Greek and Roman games, gladiatorial combats and chariot races in his Hippodrome in New York.\textsuperscript{38} Although the word ‘hippodrome’ was casually employed in

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Newcastle Morning Herald}, 4 Nov 1878.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Cowra Free Press}, 14 Dec 1878.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Hamilton Spectator}, 20 Mar 1879.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{South Australian Advertiser}, 5 Mar 1883.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{South Australian Advertiser}, 6 Mar 1883.
\textsuperscript{38} Hoh and Rough, p.58.
colonial circus advertising as early as 1855, the first genuine ‘Roman’ hippodrome in an Australian setting may have been the one presented by Thomas Bird and Robert Taylor in Sydney on 24 May 1871.\textsuperscript{39} It attracted an estimated 6,000 spectators\textsuperscript{40} and consisted of a large open-air fete, complete with a fun fair, circus performance under the open sky, and chariot races, acts of horsemanship, Roman flat and hurdle races on the quarter mile course. In Adelaide two years later, another hippodrome was to be the means by which Bird and Taylors Great American Circus unsuccessfully challenged Henry Burtons National Circus for the circus premiership of the colonies, a milestone in Australia’s circus history. Before about 1,800 spectators, Burton’s performers won four of the seven set races and his company declared the winner of the contest.

People have often remarked that ‘There is seldom anything new now in circuses;’ but the sight in the Exhibition Grounds on Saturday, May 24, was novel to Adelaidians at least; for although we have had a hippodrome before citizens have not previously seen two circus companies pitted against each other in a test of agility and daring.\textsuperscript{41} [Burtons National Circus and Bird & Taylor’s Great American Circus, Adelaide, 1873].

The first Australian tour of the American circus Cooper, Bailey & Co. was an ‘experiment trip’, only ‘one quarter’ of the shows since it was substantially lightened of excess stock and equipment.\textsuperscript{42} While some of Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s exhibitions were ‘equal to the standard to of the ring’ or only ‘good of their kind’,\textsuperscript{43} others were clearly new to

\textsuperscript{39} Sydney Morning Herald, 23 May 1871.  
\textsuperscript{40} Sydney Morning Herald, 25 May 1871.  
\textsuperscript{41} South Australian Register, 26 May 1873.  
\textsuperscript{42} Anon, 1884.  
\textsuperscript{43} Pfening Archives: unsourced clipping.
colonial audiences. These novelties included the presentation of a large African elephant, Titania, which obeyed the words of command to mount pedestals and waltz round the ring; the bareback rider, James Robinson, who carried his young son round the arena balanced on his head; and Madamoiselle d’Attalie, who had ‘a brass-gun of tremendous weight’ fired from her shoulder.\(^{44}\)

Many visiting circus performers remained in Australia and joined local companies or even fronted local companies of their own. After its second Australian tour (1877 - 78), Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s expert leaper and gymnast, J S Leopold, joined St Leon as ‘the undisputed champion double somersault thrower of the world’.\(^{45}\) Leopold also acted as the St Leon business manager during 1879 and may have been responsible for introducing the American styles of circus management and promotion that became apparent at this time. From the same tour, Cooper, Bailey & Co. also lost the acrobatic Walhalla brothers to Burtons Great Australian Circus.\(^{46}\) Early in 1880, when Burton was bankrupted, the Walhallas formed a partnership with William Barlow in a circus styled Walhalla & Barlows British-American Circus and travelled the colonies for a few years in the early 1880s with moderate success.\(^{47}\) Before returning to the United States in 1892, Sells Brothers lost two musical clowns, Rexo & Reno. Melbourne’s Gaiety Music Hall engaged the pair at a reputed weekly salary of $500, approximately £200 per week at the time.\(^{48}\) With

\(^{44}\) *Australian Town & Country Journal*, 14 Apr 1877.
\(^{45}\) *Wagga Wagga Express*, 20 Sep 1879.
\(^{46}\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 Aug 1879.
\(^{47}\) *Western Independent*, 26 Apr 1880.
\(^{48}\) *Bulletin*, 28 May 1892. Presumably, the reported salary was in American dollars.
Probascos Circus in 1899, the rider Dixon exhibited ‘every fresh Yankee equestrianism’. 49

From each of his three tours of Australia (1873, 1880, 1884-85), Signor Guiseppi Chiarini lost valuable artists to local companies. His German bandmaster, Carl von der Mehden, ‘the famous cornet virtuoso, piano, violin and xylophone soloist’, remained behind after Chiarini’s last tour. 50 After he had toured the colonies with the Faust Family of Entertainers, the FitzGerald brothers engaged von der Mehden as bandmaster for their circus and he eventually became a partner in ‘the firm’. 51 Before returning to the United States in 1905, von der Mehden enriched musical standards in Australian circus, often a target of ridicule, contributed to the training of circus musicians and left behind original compositions - such as ‘Tarador’ and ‘Bucephalon’ - and original arrangements of circus music. 52

In the last decade of the 19th century, a new generation of Australian circus entrepreneurs moved steadily but purposefully beyond the limited pools of family and local talent to import, with increasingly regularity, novelties from other parts of the world, especially England, Europe and America. During the Wirth Brothers’ tour of New Zealand in 1890, the company laid up:

in Auckland for the winter while Harry [Wirth] and [its manager, George] Alexander went to America to organise a wild west show and hippodrome. They brought back cowboys, Indians and concert

49 Naranderra Ensign, 5 May 1899.
50 Lorgnette, 8 Nov 1884; Queanbeyan Age, 9 Oct 1886.
51 Bulletin, 9 Mar 1895; FitzGerald, J D, Papers.
52 The quick march ‘Bucephaleon’ was published c.1900 by T E Bulch, Melbourne according to an undated clipping taken from The Intercolonial Brass and Military Band Journal.
singers and the show played for five months in Auckland.\footnote{M Martin, in St Leon, 1984, p.22.} [Wirth Brothers Circus & Wild West Show, New Zealand, 1890].

Visiting the United States in 1895, Dan FitzGerald found that America was:

... the greatest place in the world for the circus ... The railway companies offer such facilities, and the lighting, loading, etc., are so easily arranged. Barnum’s of course, is the biggest show in the world. It is quite a marvellous sight to see it loaded and unloaded. There are 100 wagons and cages some 30 feet long.\footnote{Bulletin, 10 Nov 1895. Carefully observed during its 1899 tour of Germany, Barnum & Bailey’s rail-based logistics inspired the German Imperial General Staff plans for the mass troop movements put into motion at the outbreak of war in 1914. Vide: North and Hatch, 1960, pp.34-5.}

From American circus, the FitzGeralds garnered new ideas of circus management. In America the brothers were:

... treated royally. The word Australia is an open sesame there ... [There] are ten acts going on in the ring at once; and twenty-four elephants, eight in each of three rings, performing at the one time ...

The show travels at night, and gives two performances each day.\footnote{Anon, 1895, ‘A circus proprietor’s career: A chat with Mr Dan FitzGerald’, in The Sunday Times, 10 Nov 1895, p.5.}

A large Australian circus such as Wirth Brothers replicated many of the technical innovations and examples to be offered by American circus, but not all. When, in the United States in 1948, Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey used portable steel grandstands for the first
time, Henry Ringling North claimed that ‘never was money better spent’ than on this innovation.\textsuperscript{56} The suitability of this seating system was soon tested on Australian soil when, lacking executive staff in the aftermath of World War II:

... a couple of Americans came out to try and run the show for the Wirths. Didn’t they make a mess of it! They tried to introduce American ideas to the show, but this is Australia. For the haulage of the circus, they done away with the elephants and replaced them with tractors. It was an all day put-up and a damn-near all night pull-down. The Americans brought out this iron seating wagon thing that was no good. Our railways were too small for them. They cost the Wirths a fortune. They finished up just bulldozed into the ground.\textsuperscript{57}

Lacking the supply of performers and artistic ideas constantly generated on both sides of the Atlantic, Australian circus entrepreneurs found that ‘novelty’ was easily achieved by procuring ready-formed troupes and individual artists in possession of - to Australian eyes at least - originality, rather than by developing local apprentices beyond a certain degree of competence. This meant the importation of contemporary artists, initially from the circuses of England but later other places as well. Allusions to a company brimming with imported talent, making ‘positively their first appearance in the colonies’,\textsuperscript{58} appeared in the circus advertising from time to time.

\textsuperscript{56} North and Hatch, 1960, p.345.
\textsuperscript{57} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 21.
\textsuperscript{58} Newcastle Morning Herald, 4 Nov 1878.
From their trips abroad, the FitzGeralds arrived at a new formula for their circus operations in Australia: organised along the lines, albeit smaller, of an American railroad circus, an Australian ‘firm of management’ that drew on the major circuses, vaudeville and music halls of Europe and America for the substance of each year’s programme. From London’s music halls, the FitzGeralds engaged the artists for their New London Company of 1895-96. Was this innovation or merely business? It could be argued that the FitzGeralds had assumed the role of a visiting circus from America or elsewhere in regularly introducing novelties to Australian audiences. ‘The firm’ was delivering what the people wanted, thereby overturning the unstated notion that the foreign owned circus was alone capable of satisfying ‘the key exacting demands of Australian patrons’.\(^59\)

With annual importations of circus artists by both the Fitzgerald and Wirth companies, the development and promotion of domestic circus talent, especially equestrians, ceased to be a priority. Whatever the strengths of the imported portion of FitzGerald Bros New London Company, the conventional aspects of the programme were considered weak by a Nowra, N S W, critic:

> The riding was a very poor apology for what the public have seen even in smaller concerns, while the acrobats merely filled in a gap in the programme. The clowns too were very antiquated in their gags.\(^60\)

After the demise of FitzGerald Brothers Circus, Wirth Brothers’ was left to dominate the domestic circus scene until the 1950s. Its imported programmes and regularised annual circuits of Australian and New Zealand cities and towns, by rail and sea, confirmed its

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59 Sydney Morning Herald, 10 Sep 1900.
60 Shoalhaven Telegraph, 1 Oct 1896.
status as Australia’s pre-eminent circus. Wirths engaged principal acts each year, chiefly through its close association with the Ringlings and the Frank Wirth agency in New York, while Australian acts, if employed at all, were relegated to a supporting role on the programme or surreptitiously dressed as foreign importations. As early as 1908, it had been observed that many of the:

... early and attractive features of the circus in horsemanship have dropped out, and a revival of many of them would be quite a novelty to the present generation ... most of the old feats have been dropped, elbowed out to make way for gentlemen who dive into tanks of water, or ladies who insert their lovely heads into the jaws of ferocious lions. 61

While Dan FitzGerald observed that ‘the people here crave for novelty and you must give it ... to keep abreast of the times,’ 62 his contemporary George Wirth considered that a novelty ‘must be something entirely new, and not merely a new way of doing [old] things’. 63

It is critical and precarious work [the] engaging of artists abroad. Theatrical managements have found that out again and again. How can one man know the kind of act or entertainment the public will respond to? Or what will be their reaction to any given performer’s work? 64

61 Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.97.
64 G Wirth, 15 Jul 1933, p. 89.
Interviewed during Wirth Brothers’ tour of New Zealand in 1907, George Wirth explained how:

We are now in treaty for a magnificent spectacular act from America ... that will absolutely paralyse [the public] ... [T]he items which figured so largely on [our] circus programmes in the nineties, and were so popular with canvas habitues, would now be howled out of the ring as unmitigated rubbish. We have to keep pace with the times ... by importing the very best talent else we would quickly find ourselves stranded."  

Innovation: accommodation

The early amphitheatres enjoyed something of a monopoly privilege since there was little entertainment to offer competition. As increasing numbers were entertained and seating capacities reached their limits, these venues had to be periodically reconfigured. In August 1851, for example, less than one year after its opening, John Malcom ‘considerably enlarged and roofed’ his Royal Australian Circus in Sydney’s York Street, expanding the pit to accommodate 1,000 people by eliminating a gallery at its rear. A fixed location enterprise was subject to the benefits and limitations imposed by the cyclical and structural characteristics of the local economy. With the increasing diversity of entertainment during the goldrush period, together with the redistribution of settlement, circus troupes replaced indefinite seasons in the amphitheatres with lengthy sojourns on the goldfields, the beginnings of the fully peripatetic

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65 Referee, 31 Jan 1907.
66 R Thorne, Theatre buildings in Australia to 1905: From the time of the first settlement to the arrival of cinema, Two volumes. Sydney: Architectural Research Foundation, University of Sydney, 1971, p.125.
circus. Economies of scale - the maximisation of revenues from paying audiences and the minimisation of the costs of production - would now be achieved by touring and showing under tents so as to reap the commercial benefits that different localities had to offer. In Sydney and Melbourne, as ‘the novelty of circus and equestrian performances palled’, amphitheatres were transformed into more conventional theatrical venues. No purpose-built circus buildings were erected in Australia again until the early 1900s due not only to the itinerant nature that Australian circus assumed after 1850 but also, it would appear, to the priorities that a ‘capital starved society’ had to give to the provision of housing and the creation of ‘social overhead capital’ – such as schools, connecting roads, bridges and railways – demanded by the rapid growth in population and economic activity.

The first peripatetic circuses relied on transportable but cumbersome pavilions or ‘booths’, semi-permanent timber structures as used on the English fairgrounds. These were ‘erected’ and dismantled at each location. But, as circus proprietors on the American frontier had already found, tents were more easily transported, raised and lowered. By the summer of 1853 - 54, we have clear evidence of the regular use of circus tents, the first major adaptation that circus underwent in its assimilation into its Australian context. It was Ashtons ‘tent’ that sustained damage during a strong squall at Singleton late in 1853. The sketch of the Ballarat Flat, Victoria, in February 1854 by the German artist von Guerard shows the large

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69 *Maitland Mercury*, 28 Dec 1853.
circular tent of Jones’ Circus in the foreground. By the summer of 1856, there were several colonial circus companies in operation - Burtons, Jones, La Rosieres, Ashtons and Foleys, all of them itinerant, family-based, conducted by professional circus men and all of them showing under tents.

The early circus tents were single pole structures, meaning that the centre pole supporting the tent – the ‘king’ pole in circus jargon - was placed in the centre of the ring, necessarily limiting the amount of action during the performance. As the leaper Harry Leopold turned a somersault over the backs of nine horses in St Leons Circus at Buninyong, Victoria, in 1879, he struck the centre pole, the resulting injuries disabling him for the rest of the evening. Two king poles, on the other hand, positioned at each end of the circus ring, left the ring – typically forty two feet in diameter – free for action. The arrangement also allowed more extensive apparatus – for a trapeze act, for example - to be erected within the ring.

The calico - later canvas - tents, in comparison to the earlier amphitheatres and semi-permanent pavilions, were a flexible, transportable and adaptable form of circus accommodation. They could be configured in such a way as to suit the exigencies of the location and exploit economies of scale as occasion required.

We are often amused at criticisms in some small town, to the effect that we don’t bring all the show with us to such towns. In fact we bring the show, the whole show and nothing but the show ... The only difference is that with the variation of the population, the size of the tent varies. In small towns we put up a round-top; in large cities

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71 Buninyong Telegraph, 5 Feb 1879.
we have to put up big tents with huge middlepieces, in order to accommodate the enormous crowds. In the former we may have to accommodate 600 people; in the latter 6,000. The show is just the same, and the audience gets as much for its money.\footnote{Anon, 1905.} [FitzGerald Brothers Circus, 1905].

But even in a relatively small town such as Berry, N S W, thirty men were needed to erect the tents of FitzGerald Bros on a paddock opposite the showground in June 1899. These consisted of the main tent for the performance, 170 feet by 120 feet with a central elevation of 41 feet, and a menagerie tent, 170 feet by 110 feet.\footnote{Shoalhaven Telegraph, 4 Jun 1899.}

A tent’s size and configuration was also a symbol of prestige and a source of pride. In 1878, St Leon claimed that his ‘new and costly’ canvas circus tent accommodated 3,000 people\footnote{Sydney Morning Herald, 15 Oct 1878.} although only the colonial capitals and major provincial centres offered audiences of this size. The dimensions, in fact the very layout of the St Leon tent, give rise to some confusion, possibly because it was configured as a single-poler or two-poler (with the use of a middlepiece) as occasion required. At Bendigo, Victoria, in February 1879, the ‘canvas tent in which the performances take place’ was described as being of only ‘colonial dimensions’,\footnote{Bendigo Advertiser, 17 Feb 1879.} 100 feet in diameter, hardly sufficient to accommodate an audience of 3,000 people. An Adelaide newspaper report, in 1883, described the St Leon tent as 310 feet in circumference, roughly confirming a 100-foot diameter. The same report mentioned that the tent held 1,200 people.\footnote{South Australian Register, 5 Mar 1883.} Bringing his circus to Nowra, N S W, in April 1916, Gus St Leon erected ‘new and
waterproof’ tents covering an area of 150 feet by 135 feet with seating for 2225 people. In stark comparison, FitzGerald’s main tent in Sydney in 1900 measured 250 by 150 feet, suggesting a capacity of 5,000 people or more. Of the eight tents used by Wirths in 1933, the largest measured ‘170 feet across’, contained a stage as well as a ring, and seated 3,000 people.

In 1937 Perry’s showed in opposition to Wirths at Brisbane and put on display the biggest spread of canvas ever put up in Australia – a 95ft top with 52ft centre big top, and 65ft top with 28ft centre menagerie tent, and a 60ft round top for stock. [Perry Brothers Circus, Brisbane, 1937].

The FitzGeralds’ ‘great tent’ of 1893 was put up and taken down with ‘marvellous celerity’. Within three hours of its arrival by train in a country town, FitzGeralds’ tent was erected and everything readied for the performance. The ‘tear down’ actually began as soon as the performance commenced when the menagerie was removed to the waiting train. Within three hours of the end of the performance, the circus tent and other properties were packed and loaded on to the train, ready to depart, with the company, for the next town. With Wirth Brothers Circus in the 1930s, the special train typically pulled into a town at seven in the morning. After breakfast, the train was unloaded and the first wagons were on the lot at a quarter-to-nine, as Mervyn King recalled in 1974:

77 Shoalhaven Telegraph, 19 Apr 1916.
78 Sydney Morning Herald, 15 Sep 1900.
79 P Wirth, 1933, Foreword, n.p.
80 Outdoor Showman, Jan-Feb 1961.
81 Bulletin, 20 May 1893.
By half-past eleven you were finished. You had the two tents and menagerie and seating accommodation for three and a half thousand people. You’d leave three men on watch. The men had nothing to do then until the show started. You had a half-past six roll call. The show opened at seven, started at eight. You’d be finished at ten-thirty, right on the dot, and at eleven-thirty there wouldn’t be a thing on the ground. By twelve the train would be loaded. That was the old system. They done away with elephants ... They brought tractors in ... It would be an all day put-up and damn-near all night putting down to get to the next place.  

The erection of Cooper, Bailey & Co. was evidently a much more complex affair. It took a week to complete the necessary arrangements for its grand Sydney opening in its ‘new and commodious building’ in 1876.  

Steel tent poles do not appear to have come into general use before the 1930s. Their adoption did away with wooden tent poles which, although lighter, exposed both audience and performers alike to danger.  

[T]he tent got blown down at Cessnock. Tent poles were usually made of Oregon timber, but this Baker had ours made of heavy Tasmanian bluegum! There were six hundred people in the tent at that time but no one was injured.  

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83 M King, in St Leon, 1984, pp.264-65.  
84 Anon, 1880.  
85 A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.75.
In those days the poles were made of timber, sometimes tallow wood which was quite strong. But in sliding down the pole, one of the girls had this enormous splinter go straight through her leg ... She was absolutely stricken with pain and crying bitterly in absolute agony. And a doctor had to operate on her to remove that very large piece of wood right through her leg and up through her thigh.  

[Berry Brothers Circus, Queensland, c.1928].

It was not unusual for strong winds to demolish circus tents or prevent their erection. A whirlwind split the tent belonging to Burtons circus at Parkes, N S W, in 1875.  

At Corowa, N S W, twenty years later, the FitzGerald circus company suffered a similar fate. In 1920, the St Leon opening in Wellington at the commencement of its New Zealand tour was prudently delayed.

We had a lot of bad weather and that is a problem with New Zealand. You can get caught in six or eight weeks of bad weather and of course you can’t do anything under canvas. I’ve been over there as a foreman with Wirth’s, over there as a performer with Wirth’s, and we put the tent up in sixty mile an hour gales - up it goes and down it goes - but those days it was a different proposition. They didn’t seem to be able to handle them. They couldn’t afford to because they were using calico tents for a start.  

[St Leons Circus, 1920].

86 N V St Leon, 1991, interview, Tape 17.
87 *Australian Town & Country Journal*, 27 Nov 1875.
89 M King, in St Leon, 1985, p.244.
Innovation: lighting

Until the introduction of electric systems, circus proprietors struggled to find a system of lighting that was both safe and effective. When George Croft opened his short-lived amphitheatre at Moreton Bay, N S W, in April 1847, his enclosure was well lit with candles called ‘float lamps’. Opening his circus on the goldfields of Sofala in only ‘side-walls’, John Jones fashioned lights from ‘fish tins filled with mud and some fat and rags in the centre ... [which] were stuck around outside the ring’. In its early traversals of the Australian bush, Ashtons was illuminated with lamps made of old socks that burned in tins of fat. These candles were made of tallow and dozens were needed to adequately illuminate the ring.

In 1873, Burton illuminated his circus ‘brilliantly and odourlessly’ with two circular gasoliers that were fuelled by naphtha, an inflammable constituent of asphalt and bitumen. A passing description of Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s lighting system during its tour in 1876 - 77, suggests the use of American kerosene-powered lamps that appear to have come into vogue in Australian circus soon after. Between the 1870s and the early 1900s, descriptions of circus lighting systems refer to ‘gassaline’, ‘kerosene’ and ‘acetylene’. A ‘plentiful supply of gaslight’ illuminated the entrance to the St Leon tent at Bendigo, Victoria, in 1879, while the interior was also ‘brilliantly’ lit, presumably by the same method. In Sydney in the same year, a large gas lamp lit the main entrance to the English Circus with a

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90 Thorne, p.124.
91 Bulletin, 9 Mar 1895.
92 Fernandez, p.15.
93 Mercury, 4 Mar 1873.
95 Bendigo Advertiser, 18 Feb 1879.
‘brilliance’ equal to 200 candles, while the interior was lit by ‘about 400 gas jets’.\textsuperscript{96} In 1904, a square of burner pipes fed with kerosene was raised to the roof of the tent to illuminate the St Leon performance in outback Queensland.\textsuperscript{97} By 1916, acetylene gas was going ‘out of vogue’ due to the difficulties of transporting hundredweight drums and of procuring replacement burners in the country towns.\textsuperscript{98} At Taree, N S W, later that year, the Gus St Leon circus purchased a Gloria lighting system. The weekly cost of lighting was immediately reduced from £12 to 18 shillings.\textsuperscript{99}

It consisted of a copper tubing, an eighth of an inch in diameter running from a tank, just like a compressor tank. We had six, three on either side of the ring. They were incandescent ... and that lasted right throughout the night ... You’d say it was a candle by today’s standards but ... it was the equal of acetylene gas, probably a little bit better, and it confined its light to the ring so the audience was completely in the dark.\textsuperscript{100} [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, c.1916].

Electric lighting, or a crude form thereof, was used in Australian circus as early as 1884 when Jenny Woodyear and her husband promoted their circus, appropriately, as Woodyears Electric Circus.\textsuperscript{101} By 1887, Gus and Alf St Leon boasted for their circus ‘the latest American sensation, the New York Beacon Light’ which was not only ‘superior to gas’ but ‘nearly equal to the great electric light’.\textsuperscript{102} In the early 1900s, large circuses such as Wirth Brothers and FitzGerald

\textsuperscript{96} Sydney Morning Herald, 26 Jul 1879.
\textsuperscript{97} G Lewis, in St Leon, 1984, p.148.
\textsuperscript{98} A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.152.
\textsuperscript{99} Richmond River Herald, 13 Oct 1916.
\textsuperscript{100} A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.152.
\textsuperscript{101} Bulletin, 30 Aug 1884.
\textsuperscript{102} Ballarat Star, 19 Jan 1887.
Brothers used town-generated electric power for their city seasons, and the electric lights placed outside their tents were ‘pretty glamorous and very well presented’. In Melbourne, the Olympia building used, at first, by the FitzGeralds and later by the Wirths, was supplied with city electricity as early as 1902. Wet weather which waterlogged Wirth Brothers’ ‘electric light connection’ prevented the scheduled opening in Melbourne in 1903. In 1920, the small Holden Brothers Circus, after using kerosene lighting until 1914, then acetylene, switched to electricity. Produced from a generator attached to an old King car, ‘the farm people came from miles around to see this new type of lighting’.

The travelling theatrical companies, such as Newton Carroll and Philip Lytton, were the first to use electric lighting systems powered by small, two-stroke petrol engines. By the 1920s, circuses began to use portable petrol-driven generators such as The Wizard:

They were a good light ... They were hard to get. I think the way [the] St Leons got them was [when] some town would change over to some sort of an oil lighting plant. [St Leons Circus, c.1928].

A further innovation took place in the 1930s when Major W T Conder used diesel powered lighting in his short-lived Ivan Brothers Top of the World International Circus. Mervyn King recalled:

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103 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.176.
104 A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.80.
105 Age, 30 Mar 1903.
107 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 8.
We used to laugh. We knew they’re not as smooth running as a horse and a car engine but he put Lister diesels in and never had a bit of trouble with them ... From then on every circus I think used diesel engines. Nobody ever went back to petrol lighting plants, only the odd one that might have picked one up cheap ... Just advice from engineers or something told Conder it would work.\[i\]

Although effective lighting enhanced the performance, early systems were often crude and unreliable.

Of course, some of the people who used to run this equipment didn’t really have any training. They just learnt these things as they went along and they were quite skilled in various areas. It was amazing how they used to untangle the wires for running the lights in the circus and after a one-night stand, they’d string them up again. Of course, they used to have their failures, too, and quite frequently the lights would fail during performances.\[ii\]

Old Gus St Leon would be talking clown, or something like that, and then all of a sudden the gas for the lights would go "pzzz...!" and he used to go mad because you couldn’t hear him talking!\[iii\]

The electric light failed while Afrikaander Meekin was putting his lions through their act ... Though the audience nearly panicked, expecting to see the trainer mauled to pieces before headlights from

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109 N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, pp.319-20.
110 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.234.
a car could be rushed into the arena, the animals never left their places.  

Figure 14

An early motor vehicle – actually, a motorised caravan - of Perry Bros Circus, c.1928. Author’s collection.

Innovation: rail transport

Although a large Australian circus could not be operated on the scale of a large American circus, it could at least replicate aspects of American innovations in circus organisation and management. Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s tours of 1876-77 and 1877-78, may have inspired the first demonstrable examples of railway usage by Australian circuses in the years following. St Leon used rail between Creswick and Ballarat, Victoria, in February 1879 and travelled by ‘special train’ from Launceston to Hobart in February 1884. In 1885, the Wirths sent ‘all the tents, boxes, poles and paraphernalia’ by train across the ninety miles of desert that lay between Murray Bridge, Victoria, and Bordertown, South Australia, and then drove the empty wagons for ‘four or five days’ across the ‘dreary, monotonous desert’ that comprised the Mallee. In 1888, Wirth

\[111\] *Everyone’s*, 25 Apr 1928.
\[112\] Stoddart, p.20.
\[113\] *Burrangong Chronicle*, 17 Feb 1879.
\[114\] *Launceston Examiner*, 7 Feb 1884.
\[115\] G Wirth, 1925, pp.33-4.
Brothers Circus made the final transition from wagon to rail, the decision driven by reasons of economy and comfort:

After our Tasmanian tour, we returned to Melbourne ... and after playing a few suburbs, we took to the railway while some new wagons were being built. We played Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Castlemaine and Dandenong, where our horses and wagons were waiting for us, and then toured Gippsland with the wagons. Once again, however, the same discontented feeling came over us all and we decided to take to the train for good, so we sold our working stock, horses and wagons ... and took the train for Ararat en route for Adelaide. This time we stuck to the railway and thus begun a new phase in our life. 116 [Wirth Brothers Circus, 1888].

Wirth Brothers Circus relied on rail consistently for its Australasian tours until its closure in 1963. By 1898, but possibly earlier, FitzGerald Brothers, had also made the transition to rail. When FitzGeralds toured New Zealand in 1901, its two special trains hauled ‘32 trucks for our animals, one sleeping car for the performers and a large 2nd class and brake van for the workmen’. 117 Reliance on rail transport significantly altered the customary daily circus routine:

The train has its own timetable: it moves, as it were, upon a line of its own. At night after the performance, when everything is packed, the people go to sleep, and the train moves on to the next town, where it is run on to a special siding, until the people wake to go about the unpacking and erecting of the tent. 118 [FitzGerald Brothers Circus, c.1901].

116 G Wirth, 1925, pp.41-4.
117 New Zealand Mail, 21 Mar 1901.
118 Anon, 1900.
Western Australia’s remoteness and small population long discouraged visits by circuses and other companies from the eastern seaboard, the arrival in Fremantle of Stebbings Intercolonial Circus from Adelaide in 1869 being the first known.\textsuperscript{119} Until the railway across the Nullarbor Plain was completed in 1917, circus companies had to rely on steamers to travel from the eastern states across the Great Australian Bight to Perth. Wirth Brothers Circus was the first circus to cross the Nullarbor by train in 1919 on a ‘westbound special’, its five elephants housed in modified cattle wagons.\textsuperscript{120}

Although the use of rail enabled a circus to cover more territory, it also confined the circus to routes defined by the available rail lines. Furthermore, in order to make the most effective use of rail, a circus needed elephants or tractors for loading and unloading, low-wheeled vehicles and a dedicated body of working men. The English showman E H Bostock, who toured Bostock & Wombells Novelty Circus and Complete Menagerie through several states by rail during 1906, left his impressions of Australia’s rail systems:

All our wagons for transporting our huge show by rail were too high for the Australian lines and to meet the situation the wheels had to be taken off the wagons for each journey a difficult and somewhat dangerous process ... The show had frequently to be transferred from broad to narrow gauge and back again during a single journey, and this entailed no end of worry, labour and delay.\textsuperscript{121} [Bostock & Wombells Novelty Circus and Complete Menagerie, 1906].

Smaller Australian circuses used rail on a limited basis to achieve specific objectives. When the Eroni and Sole families (progeny of the

\textsuperscript{119} Inquirer, 23 Jun 1869.
\textsuperscript{120} Burke, p.250.
\textsuperscript{121} Bostock, pp.178-80.
Perry family) combined for a short-lived partnership during 1912-13, the resulting circus was probably the largest horse-drawn circus Australia ever saw, but even this circus was put on the train when it was brought to Broken Hill from Adelaide in 1912. In the 1920s, a ‘railway special’, comprising two carriages, three flat tops and a guard’s van, could be hired for £15 a day. Colleanos All-Star Circus travelled by train in 1918. St Leons relied on rail for a profitable seven-month long tour of New Zealand during 1920-21.

We took most of the wagons that they required. We didn’t have [the] elephants which [were] essential for loading circus trains in those days. We had no tractors. You wouldn’t see a tractor about then, only very rarely. If you did see one it’d probably have big iron wheels, some big size thing that you couldn’t use anyhow. So, [over] there, we only loaded with manpower. You put horses onto the [wagons], up onto the loading bank. Then the men’d be pushing them on and off. That was pretty hard work. [St Leons Circus, New Zealand, 1921].

Returning to Australia in 1922, St Leons reverted to its former system of travelling by wagon which was ‘far more convenient and cost less’, but by 1927 the company had motorised. By about 1934, ten years after it made the transition to motorised transport, Perry Brothers was travelling by rail and continued to do so until about 1942. The degree of reliance of major Australian circuses on rail transport at intervals over a period of 126 years is summarised in Table 4. The prestige and economic feasibility of using rail transport

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122 Barrier Miner, 26 Jun 1912.
123 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.275.
124 Australian Variety, 11 Oct 1918.
125 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 14.
126 Everyone’s, 27 Apr 1921.
in Australian circus on an ongoing basis were therefore limited to the largest circuses: Wirths, FitzGeralds and, during the 1930s, Perry Brothers (which rivalled Wirths in size if not in quality in this decade). The Wirth circus train in 1911 sometimes made ‘jumps’ of as much as 150 miles in a day and in 1933 typically covered 200 miles a week and sometimes as much as 500 miles.127

For those circuses that regularly used rail, its ever-increasing cost was a constant threat to viability. In 1901, FitzGerald Brothers’ annual rail costs amounted to nearly £5,000,128 and in 1905 Dan FitzGerald conceded that ‘in the old days, when we ran a wagon show, we actually pocketed more money; but there is no turning back now’,129 sentiments similar to those expressed by George Wirth in 1907.130 In 1911, when Wirth Brothers proudly toured its All New American Double Circus Company, a two-ring circus, by two special trains, the company’s rail costs were ten shillings per mile.131 In 1912, Wirths' rail costs rose to £1 per mile. To ‘make things pay’, management was forced to raise admission prices but ‘the country people ... continued to patronise us splendidly until the beginning of the [Great War]’.132 Although Wirths lost money on its operations during World War I, it was prosperous enough to tour N S W in 1920 by ‘two special trains’.133 In September 1922, the senior Con Colleano complained of railway freight charges ‘as high as £70 a day while £40 is a general thing’ and warned that smaller circuses would have to curtail operations if the maximum charge was not reduced to £25 a

127 P Wirth, 1933, pp.107-08.
128 Anon, 1901.
129 Anon, 1905.
130 Referee, 30 Jan 1907.
131 Western Star, 29 Jun 1911; Anon, 1911.
132 P Wirth, 1933, p.107.
133 G Wirth, 1920.
Within a few months, Colleanos All-Star Circus closed for the last time. During the summer of 1928–29, Wirth Brothers’ single train of twenty-nine cars, a quarter of a mile long, hauled some 130 tons of people, animals and equipment, well beyond the capability of even a large motorised circus of the day. In 1933, Wirth Brothers Circus travelled on a single train of ‘8 coaches and over 20 trucks’ and its annual rail costs exceeded £10,000.

**Innovation: motorised transport**

A circus requires a wide range of vehicles for the range of functions – such as haulage, carrying, living, livestock, advance work and power generation - with the amount of carrying space to be maximised overall. In the United States, experiments by road-based circuses with motorised transport, as early as 1918, were successful. In Australia, as early as 1911, Ashton’s advance agent, Mr Jack, travelled ahead of the circus in his own motor car, a hint of the motorisation to come. Early in 1913, Bud Atkinson’s American Circus & Wild West Show proceeded overland from Sydney to Melbourne with several motor cars as well as its American built horse-drawn wagons. During a great drought (1916), the Gus St Leon Great United Circus ‘hired a big motor truck and a driver to cart this horse feed along with us because you couldn’t buy it in the towns’.

During its tour through provincial Victoria early in 1922, Colleanos

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134 *Everyone’s*, 20 Sep 1922.
135 G Wirth, 15 Jul 1933, p.27.
136 P Wirth, 1933, pp.107-08.
139 *Molong Express*, 31 Jan 1913.
140 S St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.139.
All-Star Circus acquired ‘a large traction engine’ to power the electricity generation plant and for haulage.\textsuperscript{141}

Automobiles were still a rarity in Australian country towns as late as 1924-25.\textsuperscript{142} In the 1920s and early 1930s, most Australian roadshows motorised, the switch driven by prestige as much as expediency. Ridgways Circus & Menagerie evidently moved on wagons when it visited Nowra, N S W, in February 1923 but was promoted as Ridgways Motor Circus when it visited the same town in May 1924.\textsuperscript{143} City-based motor vehicle distributors recognised the promotional potential of a motorised circus and offered generous discounts to circus proprietors to proudly display their vehicle brand through the bush and outback.

I think they bought the Reo off a salesman at an agricultural show at Peak Hill in New South Wales. In those days there were usually several truck and tractor salesmen flogging their stuff to the farmers at these agricultural shows.\textsuperscript{144} [St Leons Circus, c.1928].

In 1930, with its Reo and Chevrolet trucks, the St Leon circus travelled overland to Adelaide to play during the city’s first Industrial Exhibition. The ‘big Reo’, carrying ‘four or five tons’ of circus tents and equipment:

was a bit of a novelty too because it was a big truck and people used to come and look at it. It had a big front on it. If you’d seen it now you’d laugh at it. It had a wooden cab on it ... I’d take a load and

\textsuperscript{141} Everyone’s, 29 Mar 1922.  
\textsuperscript{142} Churchward, p.113.  
\textsuperscript{143} Shoalhaven Telegraph, 21 Feb 1923, 7 May 1924.  
\textsuperscript{144} M King, 1989, notes from telephone conversation.
two boys with me to the next town after the show as soon as we’d pulled down.\textsuperscript{145} \textit{[St Leons Circus, 1930]}.

From Adelaide, the St Leon circus and its vehicles were put on the ‘Tea and Sugar’ train and taken across the Nullarbor for an abortive tour of Western Australia. The crossing took seven days as the ‘Tea and Sugar’ stopped periodically to offload provisions for the rail fettlers along the line. The Western Australian tour was ‘the end of the good show’. Soon the family was ‘just paying wages’ and no other expenses. The money ran out and, the country already enveloped in depression, the show broke up.\textsuperscript{146} Their Reo truck repossessed on returning to Melbourne, the St Leons once again fell back on the smaller but reliable Fords.

\textit{[W]e only had at that time the two Ford trucks. Now and again we did use a railway truck and load up after the show. The two Fords would be run down and the contents loaded into a box wagon or a wheat truck and the stuff [was sent] into the next town. It was a bit more work to do … ‘Gillie loads’, that’s how we used the railway. That happened practically right through to Melbourne. What they call ‘Gillie loads’ is running the stuff down to the railway and back. It didn’t take that much, only about two trips. You’d probably be finished at half past twelve at night.}\textsuperscript{147} \textit{[St Leons Circus, Victoria, 1931]}.

Horse-drawn wagons nevertheless remained in use in smaller circuses until the 1930s and the transition from horse-drawn to a fully motorised circus for many was a gradual process. Kodamas

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\textsuperscript{145} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 17. \\
\textsuperscript{146} M Joseph, in St Leon, 1984, p.292. \\
\textsuperscript{147} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 17.
\end{flushleft}
United Circus used ‘part horse-drawn wagons and motors’ in 1926 but became fully motorised in 1930 when it combined with Lennons Circus. In 1932, the St Leon and Gill circuses combined at Moonee Ponds for each other’s security and headed north. At that stage, Gills still had horse-drawn vehicles while St Leons had a T-model Ford and several other Ford vehicles. In 1934, the Aboriginal circus proprietor Bob West, his wife and their nine children took their circus across the Nullarbor Plain by wagons, with horses, donkeys and mules tailing, possibly the last epic journey by a wagon-based Australian circus.

**Summary**

Australian circus entrepreneurs, although lightened of the fundamental task of ‘inventing’ circus as a medium of entertainment, nevertheless had to meet the ongoing challenges of adapting this medium to its new antipodean setting, itself an evolving frontier, in order to establish and sustain economic viability. While remaining recognisably ‘circus’ in form and substance, circus in Australia underwent subtle incremental adaptation by reacting to - and participating in - the surrounding social, economic, technological and cultural changes. Adaptation beckoned artistic novelty and operational innovation. Novelty – or at least the appearance thereof - was achieved through adventurous routing and programming. Operational innovation was achieved in the key areas of accommodation, lighting and transportation. Of course, none of these key areas was entirely independent of each other, nor of what

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the outside world demanded (in the way of entertainment) nor had to offer (in the way of advances in technology).

**Figure 15**
The covered wagons of the Gus St Leon Great United Circus, pulled up on the road, c.1914. *Author’s collection.*

**Figure 16**
The famous ‘greys’ of Sole Brothers Circus transported by motor lorry over a mountain range in New Zealand, c.1936. *Author’s collection.*
Figure 17
Personnel of FitzGerald Brothers Circus alongside the circus train, outback Queensland, c.1900. Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. 95/298/213.

Figure 18
The lorries and decorated caravans of Ashtons Circus on the road, c.1950. Author’s collection.
Figure 18a
The Wirth Circus train, South Australia, c.1952. State Library of South Australia, Image B58892.
The routes followed by the shows, is a good indicator of the general movement of commerce.\(^1\)

Of the few settlements established along Australia’s coastline prior to 1850, Launceston held the least promise as the site for Australia’s first successful circus. Its population of 7,500 was much smaller than that of Sydney, Hobart Town or Adelaide. It was a minor port, a remote place that owed its existence to its penal purpose. Yet, by the late 1840s, the conditions existed there for the establishment of Australia’s first successful circus enterprise: a willing and capable entrepreneur (Robert Avis Radford); the availability of performers; and a central location in the midst of a horse-oriented settlement where matters of entertainment were typically non-intellectual in character. During 1848, Radford and his company even trundled overland several times between Launceston and Hobart Town, providing Australia’s first example of a touring company, circus or otherwise.

\(^1\) S Thayer, 1974, ‘Why show routes evolved as they did’, in Bandwagon, Vol 18, No.1, Jan-Feb, p.16.
The fire of circus activity was subsequently lit in Port Philip (Hayes in 1849), Sydney (Malcolm in 1850) and Adelaide (Taylor in 1851). All of these early ventures were conducted as fixed location enterprises. Of them all, Malcolm’s amphitheatre in Sydney’s York Street proved to be the most enduring. Malcom and his company made limited excursions to localities around Sydney such as Botany Bay, Homebush and Parramatta during 1851 - 52 but, whether through lack of foresight or sheer economics, Malcolm’s ambitions did not extend as far as the creation of a permanently peripatetic company. It would take a career circus man - Malcolm’s ringmaster, Henry Burton - to recognise the possibilities of a completely itinerant circus and, by February 1851, he had taken to the road with Australia’s first company organised for this purpose with his opening of an inaugural season at Curran’s Glasgow Arms, Parramatta, before moving on to Maitland, N S W, and, with the discovery of gold, the remote Turon River region in May 1851, the lack of a formed road notwithstanding. The human frenzy of gold activity kept Burton and his company anchored to the goldfields for more than a year. When, in September 1852, Burton and his company returned to Sydney, the first significant touring ‘loop’ by an Australian circus was completed. Early in 1853, he and his company travelled overland from Sydney to the Victorian goldfields of Bendigo, possibly the first complete company to journey almost the road’s entire length, a road that became Australia’s single most important circus route.

The gold-rushes attracted large numbers of fortune-seekers to the colonies, producing audiences that were larger, more affluent and more cosmopolitan, and which strengthened the demand for

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2 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 Feb 1851.
3 Salomon.
4 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 Sep 1852.
5 *Argus*, 21 Apr 1853.
entertainment in the colonies. Their arrival and presence also generated a significant shift in the spatial distribution of the population, away from the few urban centres, towards the interior regions. In the 1860s and 1870s, vast areas of Australia’s interior were rapidly and successfully colonised as a result of pastoral and agricultural expansion, a period that coincided with a sequence of above-average rainfall seasons.\(^6\) Between 1851 and 1861 the population of all Australia nearly trebled, growing from 405,356 to 1,145,585, but this was still less than 4% of the population of the United States at that time.\(^7\) As rural towns emerged, so also did the need to link them to each other and the metropolis. The goldfields - or, more particularly, the diggers and their newfound wealth - were therefore the progenitors of the first significant touring circuits. For more than a century until the 1950s, the travelling show, including circus, was the principal medium by which Australians were entertained, a potpourri of popular culture that moved between city and town, through the bush and across the outback.

Seemingly trivial events such as a local agricultural show, race week or gold discovery ‘pulled’ a touring circus in one direction while a drought, flood, bushfire or the threat of competition from a rival company ‘pushed’ it in another. The ability of a showman to successfully negotiate these often contradictory forces might mean the difference between commercial success and failure. What were these ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors?

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Distribution

From the commencement of regular touring, circus entertainment began to be distributed economically and periodically rotated over the areas of settlement. Circus proprietors were at least vaguely aware of their position in relation to each other as well as to other travelling entertainments and methodically avoided competition by servicing areas overlooked by other companies. A major provincial circus between the 1890s and World War I, Hylands Circus specialised in entertaining the more remote mining communities of the outback, such as Broken Hill, N S W, and Mount Isa, Queensland. Many of these places were rarely visited by other circuses or other travelling entertainment troupes. By 1914 Hylands Circus had moved permanently to Western Australia and, touring the interior settlements as far north as Broome, it soon became established as the state’s de facto resident circus.

By the early 1900s, New Zealand was integrated into the Australasian touring routes of the largest Australian circuses, FitzGerald Brothers and Wirth Brothers, and held promise of ‘a feast of money’ for any other circus that could afford the fares across the Tasman and back. Speaking in 1907, George Wirth said:

> New Zealand is a wonderful show colony [sic], though as far as we are concerned, the heavy cost of transit, notably in regard to railage, makes heavy inroads on our banking account.  

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8 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.181.
9 Referee, 30 Jan 1907.
With a touch of irony, Mervyn King said:

[New Zealand is] like another country. If your show clicks you can pick up a pretty good bank. Most of the shows around Australia were not getting so much money because the towns were further apart and there was opposition here and opposition there. There was about four circuses travelling around but in New Zealand there was two local circuses, Jerry Baker[s] and Webb’s Circus. They were well known by the public over there but they didn’t affect shows coming from Australia to New Zealand because you’d go with a bigger programme and your business would be pretty good. They [are] good circus people [in New Zealand]. They liked the circus over there ... If your show clicked there you could pick up money very quick.  

[St Leons Circus, 1924]

... occasionally a circus would go to New Zealand and disappear from the Australia scene. This would allow somebody else to make a tour of Queensland who normally couldn’t make it.

Magnets

Occasionally, some unusual event exercised a magnetic ‘pull’ that attracted a number of travelling shows in its direction, obstacles of distance and the prospect of intense competition notwithstanding. The brief anchorage of the Great White Fleet of the United States Navy in the deep sea port of Albany, Western Australia, during its visit to Australia in 1908, drew at least four itinerant shows to the

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10 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 15.
11 N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.331.
town, including two circuses (Mrs Tom FitzGeralds and St Leons) and one buckjumping show (Skuthorpes).\(^\text{12}\)

Races at Alexandra, New Zealand, were an incentive for E L Probasco to bring his circus to the township in 1897, the company having to travel without a night’s sleep ‘to get into Alexandra by mid-day in order to hold a band parade at the race-course’.\(^\text{13}\) About 1918, the imminent opening of the annual show at Inverell was an incentive for Gus St Leon and his company to make an early start from Tingha, N S W, some thirty miles away, at four o’clock one morning. A pretty big ‘jump’ for horses and wagons, the show reached Inverell at about three in the afternoon.\(^\text{14}\)

**Location**

The emergence of numerous provincial towns during the 1860s and 1870s challenged itinerant showmen to follow ever more lengthy and ambitious touring routes. Strategic location, as well as accessibility (or the lack thereof), determined the feasibility of visiting a town, a series of towns, a region or even an entire state. The frequency of show visits to two major, but contrasting, townships over a twenty-one year period from 1881 to 1891 inclusive, Wagga Wagga, N S W, and Rockhampton, Queensland, is summarised in **Table 5**. Despite Rockhampton’s larger population and its proximity to the Palmer River goldfields and the Mount Morgan mines, Wagga Wagga clearly attracted a larger number of toured entertainments, a large proportion of them circuses, over this period. Wagga Wagga was strategically located between Melbourne

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12 *Albany Advertiser*, 5 Sep 1908.

13 *Onlooker*, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.86.

14 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.254.
and Sydney, accessible by road and, from 1878, rail.\textsuperscript{15} Lying at the heart of the prosperous Riverina district, Wagga Wagga offered several different routes by which the itinerant showmen could approach and depart the town. Rockhampton, on the other hand, although the commercial hub of central Queensland, posed a logistical challenge. For most companies, coastal steamer was the preferred means of touring the coastal ports of Queensland until a continuous rail line as far north as Cairns was completed in 1924.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, the town offered little choice of touring possibilities beyond heading north to Mackay and Townsville and returning overland by the same route. As single rail lines were constructed from the coastal ports into the interior of Queensland in the early 1900s, touring options were somewhat increased but still subject to severe limitations in the absence of completed rail ‘loops’ and formed roads:

You’d go right up north and then they’d do [a direct return] ... run from there into Brisbane for the Brisbane show. Instead of playing back they’d do the long run back. That’d be all day and half the night or all night travelling.\textsuperscript{17} [Perry Brothers Circus, Queensland, c.1936].

**Weather**

Weather factors critically dictated the direction in which a circus headed. Henry Burton returned suddenly to Victoria as the winter of 1870 approached ‘on account of the floods in the north’.\textsuperscript{18} On the

\textsuperscript{15} P Adam-Smith, *When we rode the rails*, Sydney: Landsdowne, 1983, p.232.
\textsuperscript{16} Adam-Smith, p.237.
\textsuperscript{17} M King, 1989, interview, Tape 21.
\textsuperscript{18} *Albury Border Post*, 3 May 1870.
other hand, as the 1873 rainy season passed, Ashton was encouraged to continue his trek into North Queensland.

... The troupe left here for Charters Towers, a distance of 300 miles northwards with the good wishes of Clermont and Copperfield. The weather is beautiful, plenty of grass and water everywhere. The district as a whole is in a flourishing condition. [Ashtons British-American Circus, 1873].

In 1920, George Wirth described how Wirth Brothers Circus had to:

... miss Narrabri three seasons running because of bad weather. Not so much do we mind the rain, or the resultant sodden state of the ground. It is the winds that beat us: the blow that simply defies you to erect your canvas, or tears it to pieces if you do contrive to get it up. [Wirth Brothers Circus, 1920].

Adverse weather might prolong a company’s stay in a town, as was the case with Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s visit to Ballarat, Victoria, in 1877:

Owing to the rain that prevailed that day, the tents could not be erected and properly fitted in time. The opening matinee performance had to be deferred until the following day, Thursday, by which time all the necessary arrangements could be completed. The circus management resolved to remain on Friday as well, so as

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19 Australian Town & Country Journal, 3 May 1873.
20 G Wirth, 1920.
to give their advertised number of performances in Ballarat.\footnote{Pfening Archives: unsourced clipping.}

[Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Great International Allied Shows, 1877].

As well as wet weather, natural disasters, such as droughts and bushfires, interfered with circus operations and financial viability. At Lawrence on the Northern Rivers in 1886, there had been only enough rain during the month prior to the visit of St Leons circus ‘to dampen a pocket handkerchief’. As a result, less than 150 people attended the circus the evening it visited the township.\footnote{Clarence & Richmond Examiner, 22 May 1886.}

The equine temper ‘was quite as susceptible to atmospheric conditions as humanity’.\footnote{Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, pp.72-3.} Not only did drought impact upon the local prosperity crucial to a circus’s commercial viability but upon the availability of grasses and feed necessary to sustain its horsepower. From Nowra, N S W, early in 1907, Mrs Martini, the proprietress of a buckjumping show, wrote to \textit{The Referee} to complain of local charges of 6d for a bucket of water, £8 for a ton of chaff – normally about 30s a ton - and 6s 6d for a bushel of cracked corn during these ‘days of drought’.\footnote{Referee, 22 Jan 1908.} During the great drought of 1916, the price of chaff soared from ‘two bob’ to a pound a bag:

The ‘16 drought was the worst one. Chaff was about two bob a bag, I think, [but] when the drought was on it would [get] expensive. The price of chaff went up in the drought ... The circuses were moving everywhere to try and get where there was feed for their horses. It was hard to feed your stock. They used to try to just keep a lot of them on the grass because they were using over a ton of chaff a day,
Cold or wet winter weather was turned to advantage by winter camping if a circus could not reach the warmer climates of Queensland or Western Australia. Norman St Leon remembered:

The family went to Hawera, where the show [laid] up for the winter months. But they were not idle months. During that time there were acts to prepare, training to be done, and horses to break in and all the multitude of jobs which befall a circus when it goes into recess for the winter.  

**Competition**

Competition meant the division of a town’s limited discretionary spending on entertainment. The ‘host of Bohemians’ who descended on Casino, N S W, in 1880 evoked concerns as to how they could all ‘obtain patronage ... seeing the existing depression’.  

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the competition faced by itinerant shows was limited since cinemas were still something of the future, while music halls, theatres and other forms of entertainment were confined to the larger centres of population. Nevertheless, the prospect of competition, especially from another circus or other itinerant entertainment, was a major push factor that influenced the choice of circus routes. Anticipating Burtons intention to visit Hobart Town in the spring of 1853, J S Noble thwarted his rival’s plans by

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26 N St Leon, quoted in Anon, 1961.  
27 *Clarence & Richmond Examiner*, 7 Aug 1880.
reserving the Murray Street amphitheatre well in advance for the use of his own troupe. The opening of Astleys Amphitheatre in Melbourne by G B W Lewis in spring of 1854 may have encouraged J A Rowe to close the North American Circus and return to San Francisco.²⁸ St Leon brought his circus to Sydney late in 1883 ‘so as to be beforehand’ with Chiarinis Royal Italian Circus which was about to commence its third Australian tour in the city.²⁹ St Leon then shipped his company to Melbourne, anticipating Chiarini’s next port-of-call by several months.³⁰

Circus companies competed not only with each other but with other genres of entertainment, two kinds of competitive ‘conflict’ prevalent in the early development of the popular entertainment industry.³¹ Circus companies and other travelling shows therefore endeavoured to secure monopolistic positions, however temporary, by avoiding, eliminating or colluding with the competition. Mervyn King remembered:

They used to take their opposition seriously, or they combined and they were all friends for probably two or three months ‘til there was a row. Then they split up. ‘You go your way and we’ll go ours again’.³²

On the other hand, the sustained concentration of a number of travelling shows maximised the custom to be gained along a given route, their collective spending power smoothing negotiations with town clerks and local business people along the way.

²⁸ Argus, 29 Aug 1854.
²⁹ Bulletin, 24 Nov 1883.
³⁰ Sydney Morning Herald, 10 Jan 1884.
³¹ Briggs, p.6.
Quite often, particularly on show dates, there might be one or two circuses in town, as well as four or five tent shows such as Philip Lytton’s Drama Theatre, Sorlie’s and Mack’s, especially on the run from Bathurst. Then, all those tent shows and circuses would make their way across country until they came to the coast and then together they would head north to Queensland.\(^\text{33}\)

But not always. Altering road signs to point a rival in the wrong direction, ‘sniping’ the advertising of an opposition circus under cover of darkness and billing a town with misleading announcements were some of the underhand methods employed by the less scrupulous competitors.\(^\text{34}\)

Arriving in Adelaide with their circus and Wild West show in December 1890, after their tour of New Zealand, the Wirths encountered a ship lying at anchor. The ship carried ‘Doc’ Carver, a former protégé of Buffalo Bill, and his own wild west show newly arrived from Europe. Philip Wirth recalled:

He was astonished on his arrival in Adelaide to find another show of the same type as his own advertised all over the city. This had deterred him from landing, so we made an arrangement there and then to play the various cities that we would not clash with one another. They were to have Melbourne, we were to have Adelaide and Brisbane, and we were to share Sydney.\(^\text{35}\)

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\(^{33}\) A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.186.  
\(^{34}\) Fernandez, p.124.  
\(^{35}\) P Wirth, 1933, p.53.
Proceeding by rail from Adelaide to Sydney with an imported company of European performers in November 1897, FitzGerald Brothers Circus countermanded its customary annual visit to Melbourne en route to allow ‘an English circus’ (Harmstons) the undivided attention of the Melbourne public. The favour allowed the FitzGeralds a monopoly of Sydney circus audiences for the coming season.\textsuperscript{36} This restrictive agreement mirrored the anti-competitive ‘territory deals’ that regulated the activities of large American circuses for their collective benefit during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

When, in 1902, the large FitzGerald Brothers Circus was divided into two companies, the impression was mistakenly conveyed to rural audiences that ‘only half of the old circus’ was coming.\textsuperscript{37} Wirth Brothers Circus, the underdog since returning to Australia from its seven-year world tour, capitalised on the misunderstanding.

\textquote{The Wirths straightaway said ‘We Never Divide’. FitzGerald’s only had half their circus. People used to say, ‘They only bring half their circus because they’re running two circuses’. Well, that was the rock that FitzGerald’s perished on I think ... [The] Wirths always advertised ‘We Never Divide - Wirth Brothers Circus - The Greatest Show on Earth’.}\textsuperscript{38}

As the competition between Australia’s two largest circuses intensified, there was surprise expressed ‘that the two shows should

\textsuperscript{36} Sydney Morning Herald, 27 Nov 1897.  
\textsuperscript{37} Bulletin, 24 Oct 1907.  
\textsuperscript{38} M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.264.
be continually clashing’ since Australasia provided ‘such an extensive
country [sic] to exploit’. 39

Despite Australia’s increasing population, motorisation and
infrastructural improvements, the minimisation of competition was
still a key factor in circus management for Australia’s four

They are careful to keep their tracks well apart. People who go to a
circus even once a year are rare and while a big city like Sydney
might, maybe, profitably support two circuses at the same time,
different circuses in the same country town within six months of one
another almost inevitably means a financial disaster for the second
trier. 40

Routing

The gold discoveries in Western Australia in the 1890s provided a
cushion against the full impact of an economic depression. The
extraordinary wealth extracted from mines of Coolgardie,
Kalgoorlie and other places, and the swelling of population and
prosperity made access by sea from the eastern seaboard feasible for
large circus companies. With improvements in access to Western
Australia, by ship, and its interior mining centres, by rail, during the
1890s, the FitzGeralds put the remaining link in a touring circuit that
embraced all six Australian colonies, and New Zealand as well. This
circuit capitalised not only on Australasia’s increasingly
comprehensive transportation infrastructure but the anecdotal
knowledge of touring economics and conditions that Australia’s

39 Referee, 20 Jan 1904.
40 P Cornford, ‘The circus lives’, in The National Times, magazine section, Nov
itinerant showmen had accumulated and shared in nearly half a century of touring activity.

The basis of this route rested on a circuit of the major Australasian cities and provincial centres. The route was carefully synchronised with each region’s period of warm weather but coinciding wherever possible with local agricultural shows or race festivities. Tours of either Western Australia or Queensland were thus undertaken during the winter months, while any – or all - of Tasmania, New Zealand and South Australia were typically covered during the summer months, between seasons in Melbourne and Sydney. Therefore, after its Exhibition Week season in Brisbane in August 1898, FitzGerald Brothers Circus toured the provincial towns of Queensland, N S W and Victoria in its own ‘special’ trains, eventually to reach Melbourne in time to open its season during the Cup Week in November. By early March 1899, the circus opened in Hobart and, in late March 1899, in Sydney to coincide with the city’s Royal Easter Show. The FitzGeralds’ successors, Wirth Brothers, and, much later, Bullen Brothers, followed similarly structured routes.

The size and prestige of these large circuses drove competition from their paths. Visiting Molong, N S W, in the mid-winter of 1916, Wirth Brothers attracted ‘quite an influx of country residents to the event and the townspeople turned out in force’ despite the bitter cold. Said Mervyn King:

> Everybody kept out of Wirths way. They were the big show and nobody got near them. They travelled by train and all the other

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41 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 Sep 1899.
42 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 Mar 1899.
shows travelled by road. You’d be playing in a town fifty miles away and they’d be running special trains to see Wirths Circus. They’d always cater for big houses ... Wirths always had elephants, travelled by train and imported acts. Well, all the other shows were family acts and they had to stay small to survive.\(^{44}\)

For the smaller provincial circuses, regional routes were well formed and travelled by the early 1900s. One of the most extraordinary and financially rewarding - a so-called ‘goldmine’ of Australian show business - ran along Australia’s eastern seaboard, from Bega on the south coast of New South Wales, through the prosperous districts of the Northern Rivers, N S W, and the Darling Downs, Queensland, to finish as far north as Cairns.\(^{45}\) Shows of all descriptions - circus, variety, buckjumper and so on - positioned in Bega in the summer and then rolled northwards for the winter before turning inland to make the return journey southwards.

You could only go as far north in the early days as Gladstone. They had a dead end there because you couldn’t [move any further], no trains, no roads. You’d get the road to Gladstone, then you’d have to play your way back.\(^{46}\) \[Eroni Brothers Circus, Queensland, c.1914.\]

However systematic the approaches taken to routing by these smaller shows, an element of flexibility was also important. The largest wagon circus in Australia, Eroni Brothers, would freely ‘go anywhere at all’ despite its size.\(^{47}\) In the Gus St Leon circus, ‘the route

\(^{44}\) M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.264.
\(^{45}\) A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.186.
\(^{46}\) M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.199.
\(^{47}\) M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.194.
would be worked out for practically the whole season’ in advance but the practical detail was completed along the way.

[Month to month really ... They’d have special routes, where you know, if things went bad, say on the Western run, to head straight for Bega ... and then we’d head right up the coast to Grafton ... where you’d take a lot of money ... We made a special route most times from Bega up to Brisbane and then a back route to come back to that same circuit again for the next part of the season, ending in the winter up in the southern part of Queensland ... It almost became mechanical so that you did not have to ‘route out’ a route ... It would take a year from, say, Bega back to the Sydney suburbs.  

Predictability

For some showmen, the circuits of agricultural shows and race weeks provided some predictability for their activities, yielding audiences from not only the town but from its surrounding districts as well. The Wirth family, in the early days of its travels, about 1884, ‘always made a point’ of visiting the far-western township of Bourke, N S W, during its ‘carnival week’ when the population was swelled ‘by about 10,000’ to enjoy ‘two days’ horse racing, two days of agricultural show, followed by dog fights, cock fights, boxing and sports of every kind for the rest of the week’. By the 1950s, there were almost 600 agricultural societies in the four eastern mainland states and Tasmania, each with its own annual shows, most of which had been active since the 1880s.

48 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.170.
49 P Wirth, 1933, p.29.
50 Broome with Jackomos, p.21.
Push & pull

In the hey-day as I remember it, we would show all the New England [N S W] towns during their agricultural show times. There would be lots of other travelling shows such as George Sorlie’s and we’d show right next to each other.  

The risk involved in this strategy was that, finding itself in competition with a number of shows, circus or otherwise, a circus might not receive its share of custom. When St Leons Big Show and Ashtons Anglo-Saxon Circus both played Wagga Wagga, N S W, for the town’s 1879 race week, some evenings’ audiences were ‘very poor indeed’ despite the obvious merits of each company. In Brisbane, the Gus St Leon circus once found itself competing ‘tooth and nail’ against Eroni Brothers Circus for patronage. Repartee and one-upmanship were the order of the day:

Eroni’s Circus came out and said in one edition of the newspaper that, ‘We advertise our programme because we have one’. That was pretty convincing advertising. The next edition St Leons came out with a reply to that advertisement which said, ‘St Leon Circus doesn’t have to advertise their programme. Their programme advertises itself’.  

When the Sole family, a branch of the Perry family, started its own circus in 1917, it followed the agricultural show circuits at first. Within

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51 M Joseph, in St Leon, 1984, p.293.
a few years, however, Sole’s management dropped the strategy as the agricultural shows ‘was too much opposition’.54

**Luck**

After all these factors were exhausted, the operations of a circus might be decided by luck alone, good or otherwise. After a tour of New Zealand, the English circus of Bostock & Wombells opened in Sydney on 7 July 1906,55 intending to tour through New England region of N S W, before moving into Queensland. In his 1927 autobiography, E H Bostock wrote:

[B]ut a recurrence of the tick plague upset our plans ... So the visit to Queensland was cancelled, and the show worked back to Sydney and Melbourne. To these cities we returned too soon and the result was that business was not as good as it had previously been. I accordingly decided to disband the show ... [T]he entire show, with the exception of a few picked zoological specimens, [was] auctioned in Melbourne ... [T]hat was the end of Bostock and Wombell’s Circus and Menagerie for South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.56 [Bostock & Wombell’s Novelty Circus and Complete Menagerie, 1906].

A coal strike that crippled shipping facilities during Wirth Brothers tour of Tasmania late in 1916 forced the cancellation of ‘the usual trip’ across the Tasman to New Zealand ‘for the first time in the history of the organisation’. Instead, the circus returned to Melbourne.57

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54 M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.104.
55 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 Jul 1906.
56 Bostock, pp.178-80.
57 *Mercury*, 27 Dec 1916.
The influenza pandemic that swept the world in the aftermath of World War I reached Australia when returning soldiers brought home strains of the viral infection. The impact on places of public entertainment, including circus, was immediate:

Theatres and everything were closed down. So we just went out and camped at a place called Bowen Gap ... Bushfires broke out and we had to move down to clear country ... We were closed down for quite a long time I think, two or three months. [Gus St Leons Great United Circus, Wangaratta, Victoria, 1919].

In Sydney, the customary Easter opening of Wirth Brothers Circus was cancelled. Some of the country municipal authorities continued to place restrictions on travelling shows for several months afterwards and, as Colleanos Circus made its way from Glen Innes, N S W, by road towards Brisbane, many towns had to be skipped en route as a result.59

During World War II, vehicle requisitioning, lighting restrictions and the rationing of fuel affected the touring operations of most travelling entertainments although not always to their detriment.

We were with Perry’s when the Japs entered the war. They were lucky, the Perrys. Sole’s had booked all the land up from the beaches and Perry’s didn’t bother ... We were forced up to the Blue Mountains with Perry’s and of course the Blue Mountains was crowded with people and we turned them away nearly every night. Sole’s were blacked out and had restrictions on their lighting.60 [Perry Brothers Circus, 1942].

58 S St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, pp.132-33.
59 Australian Variety, undated clipping.
When the rail transport to which Wirth Brothers was long accustomed proved difficult to requisition during World War II, its management vainly made self-interested representations to Prime Minister John Curtin, in January 1942:

We require to go from Pinnaroo on the Victorian border to ... Adelaide to appear there for two weeks returning via Bordertown to Victoria. As this requires the hire of a S.A. engine for three nights ... the Commissioner has advised that he cannot make the engine available in view of his undertaking to conserve coal ... [The] elimination of Adelaide from our present tour will ... incur the loss of profits of between £1,500 and £2,000 and, while we are ever ready to do our bit and make essential sacrifices, we take the view that it is just as essential that the morale of the population should be maintained with bright and healthy amusement programmes ... With regard to the classification of ‘Special Trains’, we take the view that we do not come within this scope having conducted a permanent business operated from a train for more than sixty-five years. [Wirth Brothers Circus, 1942].

Forced to lay up their circus at Yeppoon, outside Rockhampton, Queensland, the Bullen family found thousands of American soldiers camped in the vicinity with money to spend and little to do to pass the time. In canvas sidewalls, the Bullens entertained the troops, several times a day, and amassed the fortune necessary to finance their return to active touring after the end of the war. On the other hand, the Second World War forced the complete closure of Ashtons Circus for the duration. Its proprietor, Joe Ashton, worked as a

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metal carrier until he and his family managed to reopen their circus in 1947.\(^6^2\)

**Summary**

Australia’s circus routes did not spring into existence fully formed with the first bursts of touring activity. The circus people were explorers who constantly pushed at the frontiers of human settlement, gathering a breadth of knowledge of life and social conditions throughout the settled parts of Australia in their travels. During and after Australia’s great gold rush period of the 1850s, circuses and a variety of other travelling shows started to follow - and possibly even define at times - the trade routes that began to emerge to connect the new settlements.\(^6^3\)

There were a wide range of competing logistical factors to be negotiated by the itinerant circus. These were the push factors – such as adverse climate, recessional economies, competitive threats, bushfires and floods – which deflected a circus away from a route or region; and the pull factors – such as population, prosperity, accessibility, agreeable climate, landmark local events, pre-existing reputation and the absence of competition which lured a circus in a particular direction. Over time, recognisable routes and touring directions and preferences were developed by trial and error. These were gradually massaged into, if not more or less formalised routes, then more or less defined seasonal touring areas.

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\(^6^2\) Fernandez, pp.1-7.

\(^6^3\) St Leon, 1993, p.3.
Figure 19
Poster for Wirth Bros Royal Circus and Wild Animal Exposition, c.1901.
Tasmaniana Library, State Library of Tasmania.
Figure 20
CHAPTER VIII

Visits & visitors

[M]any men in the city ... never tired of recounting tales of the wealth and liberality which they had encountered in Australia. ¹

Astley toured the Continent with a circus company as early as 1772. Circus performers, circus troupes and even a few circus companies travelled between Europe and North America, delivering novelties and enriching the arts and management of circus on both sides of the Atlantic. John Ricketts, an English circus men ventured across the Atlantic to visit the new United States in 1792, while an American circus company, Sands, toured the British Isles in 1842 under canvas. ²

But, until the onset of the gold rushes of the 1850s, the remote penal colonies of Australia, offered few prospects for visiting entrepreneurs or artists. The dearth of British circus companies to visit Australia in the latter half of the nineteenth century suggests that the economics of such visits, in any case, were prohibitive. The early Australian circus was nevertheless fundamentally English in character since performers and repertoires were largely drawn from


the circuses of England. Even the visits of the first Americans in the 1850s were steeped in the tradition of Astley and Ducrow, the same sources from which Australian circus had drawn its initial inspiration.

But, as early as the 1830s, Australians had already begun to look to the United States as an alternative to Britain, a tendency that was strengthened during the gold rushes of the 1850s. Australia’s first link with American circus, albeit oblique, was forged as early as 1848 when the colonial-born rope-walker John Quinn walked along the forestay to the main topmast of the American sailing ship Junior lying at anchor in Hobart Town’s harbour. Considerations of race, a common language and cultural similarities strengthened the relationship between these two communities, on either side of the Pacific.

There is an implicit assumption in national histories that their primary task is to discover what makes a nation, a people, distinctive, rather than to reveal what is shared and often casually interconnected with histories and societies elsewhere. The destiny of Australian circus not only reflected but also was strongly determined by seemingly unconnected events across the seas. The failure of the ‘liberal dream’ in central Europe in the years prior to the Australian gold rushes caused many to seek new lives in other lands, among whom were the musical Wirth brothers, whose progeny formed Wirth Brothers Circus in the 1880s, to become Australia’s major circus in the period 1906 – 63. When the Japanese Government revoked the edict which had prohibited subjects from leaving the

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3 Churchward, xxiv-v.
5 A Curthoys, ‘Cultural history and the nation’, in Teo and White, Cultural History in Australia, p.29.
country, jugglers and acrobats recruited by foreign impresarios in the Treaty Ports were the first to avail themselves of the opportunity. By the end of 1867, two Japanese troupes had arrived in Melbourne, the beginning of several decades of Japanese involvement in Australian circus. With the establishment of a regular steamship service between Sydney and San Francisco in the early 1870s, American cultural penetration of Australia began in earnest, as did more than a quarter century of tours of Australia by large American circuses.

To what extent was Australia served by imported circus activity and what was the impact of this activity on the domestic circus industry?

**Englishmen**

British supremacy in world markets for goods and commodities was almost unchallenged until 1870, but only one complete English circus company – Cookes - visited America, making the crossing of the Atlantic in 1835. The only major English circuses to tour Australia, Harmstons (1890, 1897) and Bostock & Wombells (1906), reached Australia from intermediate staging points. Harmstons in any case was permanently active in the vicinity of South East Asia and its company more cosmopolitan than specifically English. Cost and the denial of revenue generating opportunities during the period of transit were mitigating factors.

Although I greatly reduced the circus company by bringing some of the artists back to England, it was still too big and expensive. The cost of freightage and fares to Australia was actually £2,084. The

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6 Churchward, p.78.
7 Cole, p.69.
voyage from Cape Town to Fremantle, Western Australia ... occupied three and a half weeks.\textsuperscript{8} \textit{[Bostock & Wombells Novelty Circus and Complete Menagerie, 1906].}

The recollections of George Wirth of travelling in England in 1897 further suggest that there was little to entice English circus men to forsake the well-formed comforts and character of home:

I think England the ideal country for travelling circuses by road and in good weather the going is delightful ... The towns are closer together and the roads splendid. I bought a caravan, or living wagon, a huge affair that could not possibly travel on the Australian roads.\textsuperscript{9}

\textbf{Americans}

American circus men stood in closer proximity to Australia - some thirty days sailing time from San Francisco to Sydney compared to fifty or more between London and Melbourne - and bore lighter shipping costs and sacrifice of revenue during the period in transit. The American circus man was a much more adventurous spirit than his British counterpart and eager to explore new territory. Both America and Australia were new, frontier societies.

In general, the American circus reflected many aspects of American society. The spirit that opened up the West was identical with the spirit of the early mud shows, battling their way across difficult and sometimes hostile territory. The American genius for inventiveness

\textsuperscript{8} Bostock, pp.178-80.
\textsuperscript{9} G Wirth, 15 Jul 1933, p.25.
was shown in the development of innumerable devices for erecting and dismantling tents and transporting them with remarkable speed from place to place ... Free competition and monopoly tugged against each other in the circus world as they did in the world of big business elsewhere.\textsuperscript{10}

In 1851, the little company of John Sullivan Noble landed in Adelaide from Capetown and marked the commencement of American circus activity on Australian soil. The most intense period of American circus activity in Australia occurred between 1873 and 1900, as shown in Table 6. Hardly a year passed in this period when Australia was not visited by a major circus or Wild West show. Their menageries, extravagant advertising, lavish parades, circus trains and other features gave colonial audiences a taste of American culture. They gave the local profession glimpses of systematised methods of circus management, enterprise and cleverness. Indeed, one of the proprietors of Cooper, Bailey & Co., James A Bailey, was ‘the outstanding circus operator in history’.\textsuperscript{11}

For the earliest American visitors, word-of-mouth appears to have been the major source of information about the Australian colonies. In the northern spring of 1851, the American circus man, J A Rowe, departed San Francisco for the Sandwich Islands [Hawaii] with his company ‘whence it would go on to China’.\textsuperscript{12} When news of the Australian gold discoveries was received, Rowe’s ‘novel route’ was altered to embrace the new opportunities. Sailing by way of the Society Islands [Tahiti] and Auckland, Rowe and his company

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Speaight, p.151.
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Thayer, 1971, p.24.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} San Francisco Herald, 16 Dec 1850.
\end{itemize}
disembarked in the volatile gold city of Melbourne in June 1852.\footnote{Argus, 14 May 1852.}
Rowe remained with his circus in the city more than two years, having learned from his Californian experience that he would enjoy better returns there than on the goldfields. While the lure of gold pulled other showmen onto the diggings, Rowes North American Circus remained in Melbourne to service - at inflated prices - the city’s population and diggers eager to spend their newfound wealth. Returning to California in October 1854, reputedly with a treasure of £40,000, Rowe’s firsthand knowledge of Australia was sought by other American players many of whom, upon reaching San Francisco, speculated on a tour of Australia.\footnote{Bulletin, 17 Feb 1900.} But the Australian economy shrank after the recession of 1857 while the United States soon became embroiled in the Civil War (1861 - 65). American interest in trans-Pacific steam communications waned and only slowly recovered after the end of hostilities.\footnote{Churchward, p.63.} When J A Rowe returned to Australia in 1873, it was as one of the advance agents for Chiarinis Royal Italian Circus,\footnote{New York Clipper, 29 Nov 1873.} the first genuine tour by a major American circus through regional Australia.

The American circus catered for an expanding American population that generated enlarged audiences, growing railroad networks that enhanced its mobility, and increasing prosperity that raised the demand for entertainment. The population of the United States doubled between 1860 and 1890 and trebled between 1860 and 1914,\footnote{Cole, p.82.} precisely the period in which the American circus achieved its artistic and organisational zenith.

\footnote{Argus, 14 May 1852.}
\footnote{Bulletin, 17 Feb 1900.}
\footnote{Churchward, p.63.}
\footnote{New York Clipper, 29 Nov 1873.}
\footnote{Cole, p.82.}
They increased the size of audiences by cutting out stops at small towns [and] by ferrying in the small town audiences with special ‘day tripping’ trains. Time efficiencies were achieved as the circuses travelled by night allowing performers to sleep on the train’s passenger cars rather than in hotels.¹⁸

American circus managements also became more ruthless in their billing of the larger towns and cities to which they were committed to visit according to a strict rail timetable, as there was no second chance.¹⁹ The unification of America’s eastern and western states by rail in 1869 facilitated the visits of eastern-based circuses to America’s western seaboard, an obvious springboard for an Australian tour. After ‘the panic of 1873’, the America economy entered a period of ‘low ebb’ that lasted until the early 1880s. Half of some thirty five shows that set out in the northern spring of 1875 did not survive the season.²⁰ When Cooper, Bailey & Co. reached San Francisco in 1876, it began to make preparations for an Australian tour. Its forty two rail cars, each fifty feet in length, were shipped back to Philadelphia for storage.²¹

It was an undertaking that few would care to invest time and capital in; for notwithstanding the number of rumours afloat, its success or failure could only be determined by trial.²²

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¹⁸ Stoddart, p.23.
¹⁹ Stoddart, p.53.
²⁰ Thayer, 1971, i, p.3.
²² Shettel.
Cooper, Bailey & Co. undertook its first Australian tour as a series of separate tours to each of five of the Australian colonies (New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and Tasmania), using rail within each colony but shipping by steamer between the colonial capitals and the major ports of Queensland. Cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and a few interior centres were the only places that would yield audiences of the size to which Cooper, Bailey & Co. was accustomed in the United States.

So diligently did the several advance agents of Cooper, Bailey & Co. carry out their work in adorning Sydney with bills that a crowd of between ten and fifteen thousand people assembled along the shores of Sydney Harbour to witness the arrival of the ‘Yankee Wild Beast Show’ in 1876. The colonies’ ‘unequalled’ port facilities enabled expeditious loading and unloading of the Cooper, Bailey & Co. circus properties. Operational costs such as newspaper advertising and ‘railroading’ were comparatively light. The cost of billing of some towns was nothing more than the expense of paper paste and a few complimentaries. A circus lot cost little to rent, sometimes nothing. Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s press agent, W G Crowley, enthused that a circus could be run in Australia just as in America.

In his personal memorandum book, J A Bailey left a detailed but only partially reconciled accounting of the first twenty-six weeks of the thirty week Australian tour of 1876 - 77 tour. Reconstructed as presented in Table 7, Bailey’s accounting suggests that the first tour was comfortably profitable. But for the heavy expenses of

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23 Anon, Around the world in three years, replete with romantic incidents, thrilling adventures and startling episodes, USA: Cooper, Bailey & Co., 1880.
transportation across the Pacific (by the mail steamer *City of Sydney*), shipping between the colonial capitals, and the sacrifice of revenue during extended periods of transit, Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s first Australian tour may have proved even more so.

The Cooper, Bailey & Co. circus, presented four distinct shows in three large tents. The menagerie occupied the central tent. To its right was the main circus tent while to the left of the menagerie tent was a sideshow tent. This tent was divided into a ‘museum of curiosities’ at one end and a concert show at the other. Admission to each of these entertainments was a shilling.

During the first Melbourne visit, the privileges did ‘a rushing trade’ while five nights out of twelve people were turned away because the tent, a 120-foot round-top with a 50-foot middle-piece, would hold no more. In twenty-one out of twenty-four performances extra seats were needed. The average daily receipts were nearly $4,000 [approximately £1,650], although on one particular day the concern netted $5,850 [approximately £2,450]. These revenues were achieved on seat prices of 75 cents [approximately 6s], and $1.25 [approximately 10s] while the expenses of ‘making’ the towns was very light.

Since the standard price to a ‘good’ American circus at home was fifty cents in the same era, this data suggests that Cooper, Bailey & Co. inflated their Australian prices over their American equivalents by as much as 150%. Before the end of this first Australian tour, J A  

25 Pfening Archives: unsourced clipping.  
26 Pfening Archives: unsourced clipping.  
28 Speaight, p.149.
Bailey resolved to undertake a second. He returned to New York to obtain new attractions while the company spent a brief period in Java. Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s second Australian tour opened in Sydney on 26 November 1877 to a full house. As the ‘new and greatest show on earth’ it was an even larger company than on the previous visit, a two ring affair, probably the first time Australians saw this peculiarly American feature of circus and one they took a liking to despite the misgivings of some critics. Although J A Bailey intended returning to Australia for a third visit, nothing came of these plans.

One of Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s chief competitors in the United States was William Washington Cole (1835–1915), a grandson of the British showman, Thomas Taplin Cooke (1782-1836). In the late 1870s, W W Coles Great New York & New Orleans Zoological and Equestrian Exposition was a major railroad circus.

New spots were his obsession. He habitually found them in advance of his competitors. Having found them he used billboard and newspaper advertising and other forms of publicity lavishly. Cole was the first to take a circus to California and back entirely by rail. As early as July 1876, Cole had begun to make discreet enquiries about a tour of Australia, observing that ‘a menagerie would hit ‘em hard there as I understand they have not had it in many years’. The following month he wrote to his ‘friend Davis’:

29 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 Nov 1877.
31 May, p.178.
Evidently Cole was reacting to the same economic imperatives that drove Cooper, Bailey & Co. out of the United States for nearly three years. More than four years would pass before - on 23 October 1880 – W W Coles Concorporated Shows departed San Francisco for Auckland by the City of Sydney. The ensuing tour of New Zealand and Australia lasted almost five months, commencing in Auckland on 29 November 1880 and finishing in Sydney on 15 April 1881. As with the visits of Cooper, Bailey & Co. several years earlier, the procession of Cole’s circus through cities such as Melbourne and Sydney created exceptional interest. Cole followed a similar itinerary to Cooper, Bailey & Co. for his tour, but took in forty-eight stands over 135 weekdays, in contrast to Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s 40 stands over 180 weekdays. The tour reputedly yielded ‘Chilly Billy’ a profit of US$150,000,\(^{34}\) or some £62,500. Leaving aside the cost of trans-Pacific shipping, the data presented in Table 8 suggests that Cole’s rail-based ‘foreign’ (Australasian) tour was not much less profitable than his American domestic circus seasons in each of the years before and after.\(^{35}\) The largest American circus tents accommodated two rings and up to 6,000 people for a single performance, at least twice as many as the very largest Australian circus tents of the day,

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\(^{35}\) Based on data from W W Cole’s 1882 Courier cited in Slout, p.293.
but comfort and value for money were duly sacrificed. In Sydney, Cole’s ring was:

too small for the tent, or the tent is too large for the ring. Distance does not lend enchantment to circus entertainments, and in this instance many spectators were placed too remote from the arena to properly see what was going on inside it.\(^\text{36}\)

As in America, the recipe for Cole’s commercial success was an itinerary, preceded by lavish publicity, that included no more than a brief stop at each town along the route. His mercurial business methods took both patrons and critics by surprise. The report of a Tamworth, N S W, correspondent for the *Australian Town and Country Journal* was representative:

A scene was exhibited at the selling of the tickets such as I hope never to witness again. There were three places where the five shilling tickets were obtainable, and but one where the three shilling tickets were sold. Around the latter was a swaying mass of human beings consisting of little children, tender girls, screaming women, and old men with scarcely a leg to stand upon, all squeezing amidst shouting and – [swearing]. Of course the five-shilling ticket sellers did well. Teach a Yankee anything if you can. The circus itself was a fair thing. It went rather speedily at the end, when the six or seven thousand persons quietly seated were informed that one shilling more was necessary from those who wished to stay and hear the concert. For some time this was believed to be a pleasant joke.\(^\text{37}\)

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\(^{36}\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 Apr 1881.

Despite his financial success, Cole did not tour Australia again. Within a few years of his return to the United States, J A Bailey entered into partnership with P T Barnum, in the circus that became known as Barnum & Bailey’s. In July 1888, it was reported in Sydney that ‘Barnum’s Menagerie [sic] visits the Australias [sic] in September’, but the plan did not materialise. A year later, there was again talk of a visit by Barnum & Bailey to Australia:

Buffalo Bill shows next in Paris, and contemplates a trip to Australia. Barnum often talks over a run to Sydney and Melbourne with a good show. His partner, Bailey, is thoroughly acquainted with the ground [i.e. Australia], through Cooper & Bailey’s show. Gaylord and others have kept him well posted on how this land shapes. Other smart Americans have spied it out with Wilson, Chiarini, Cole & c. Something good is coming, one way or another.

Evidently, Barnum’s advanced age weighed against the Australian visit. In any case, the winter seasons of 1889 and 1890 saw the complete Barnum & Bailey show shipped to London for performances at the Olympia. After Barnum’s death in 1891, J A Bailey continued to harbour ideas of an Australian tour as late as 1895 after which no more was heard on the subject. ‘Something good’ did come, but it was the circus of the Sells Brothers, Barnum & Bailey’s major rival, which undertook a six-month-long tour by rail between November 1891 and May 1892 on four ‘special’ trains,

38 Bulletin, 14 Jul 1888.
40 May, p.124.
41 Bulletin, 12 Apr 1895.
probably the largest rail-based circus ever seen in Australia.\textsuperscript{42} During this tour, Sells covered a distance of ‘over 6,000 miles’, visited ‘over 100 towns’\textsuperscript{43} and cleared £37,000 from the tour.\textsuperscript{44}

The difficulties Sells Brothers Circus encountered in negotiating colonial quarantine regulations on its arrival in Sydney in 1891 – it had to open on the city’s Moore Park without horses – may have dissuaded other American circuses from Australian tours. In any case, the Australian colonies were soon to enter into a period of economic depression while American circuses appear to have lost their earlier enthusiasm for touring far from home, whether to Australia or anywhere else. As Barnum & Bailey’s five year tour of Europe (1898 - 1902) demonstrated, a major American circus that temporarily departed its home territory was likely to find its competitive position severely eroded on its return.

Long after their visits, colonial journalists invoked the example and memory of the large American circuses as the benchmark by which to judge the local product. Travelling the western regions of N S W during 1898, Probascos Circus treated the people to performances that had never been witnessed since ‘the banyan days’ of Sells Brothers. The two ‘wild beast’ carriages that Cooper, Bailey & Co. ordered from a Sydney firm of carriage makers at the commencement of its second Australian tour gave rise to self-congratulation:

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Queensland Times}, 28 Apr 1892.
\textsuperscript{43} G Zorilla, quoted in Anon, \textit{Sells Bros route book}, Columbus, Ohio: Sells Bros, 1893.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Bulletin}, 25 May 1892.
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... judging from the finish, the lightness, and yet strength of the work, these carriages are quite equal to those made in America, and their ornamentation on the outside, is capitally painted, and very artistically designed; and moreover, the proprietor assured me that they cost him less than they would have done in New York city, so that I may once more congratulate Australia upon her advance in both art and manufacture.45

The Australian visits alerted American showmen to the wonders, human and natural, that the continent had to offer. Soon, Australian performers appeared in American circus rings, troupes of Aborigines in grotesque American circus sideshows, and Australian native animals in American circus menageries. To the great circuses of America, a small stream of Australian circus artists gravitated from the early 1900s onwards. These included the St Leon family (from 1898), the equestrienne May Wirth (from 1912), and the tightwire artist Con Colleano (from 1924).

On a much reduced scale, circus in Australia paralleled the ‘golden age’ of the American circus. Each reached their zenith in the first decades of the twentieth century.46 With J A Bailey’s death in 1906, America’s largest circus, Barnum & Bailey’s, was acquired by its former rivals, the Ringling brothers, the acquisition making the Ringlings – whose parents were German immigrants - the undisputed masters of American circus. In the same year, the deaths of the brethren circus proprietors, Dan and Tom FitzGerald, within a few months of each other, left the Wirth brothers – whose father was a German immigrant - by default, the dominant circus proprietors in Australia.

45 Australian Town & Country Journal, 1 Dec 1877.
46 May, pp.224 ff.
Between the visit of Bud Atkinson’s American Circus & Wild West Show (1912) and the first tour of the Great Moscow Circus (1964), there are no confirmed visits of large and complete circus companies, from the United States or elsewhere. In 1963, Perth-based entrepreneur, Eric Edgley, in partnership with the Bullen family, was sufficiently confident to charter an aircraft for £38,000 and outlay £50,000 for ‘fees, expenses and maintenance’ to import ‘the Russian Circus’.

Stafford Bullen is busy preparing a Big Top for Perth entrepreneur Eric Edgley, to house the Russian circus on its forthcoming visit next year – at a cost of between £21,000 and £25,000 ... It’s quite a statement of faith in Australian interest in circus, especially since there is talk of Edgley’s and Bullen’s Big Top housing more than 5,000 and the charge being £1 a head.47

**Troupes**

Individual performers and small troupes of artists, principally from England, America, Japan and Continental Europe, made other contributions to Australian circus. Many appear to have been engaged either directly by letter from knowing Australian entrepreneurs, through agencies in London and New York or by agents dispatched for the purpose. The presence of even locally engaged foreign performers justified claims of a colonial company to possess ‘the leading stars of both hemispheres, engaged on the score of ability alone, regardless of salary’.48

47 Higham.
48 *South Australian Register*, 3 May 1879.
The arrival of the self-styled ‘Professor of Gymnastics’, Signor Luigi Dalle Case, and his little troupe, in Sydney in 1841 marks the known commencement of foreign circus activity on Australian soil. Dalle Case had already ventured as far as Cape Town, Mauritius, Reunion and other ports-of-call for ships traversing the Indian Ocean. A Frenchman, Joseph Charriere, had visited Sydney with his little company in 1839 to perform drama, vaudevilles and opera and may have been Dalle Case’s prime source of information and encouragement. That Charriere was one of Dalle Case’s party landing in Sydney in 1841 strengthens this possibility.

The next major importation of performers occurred when three ‘drafts’ of circus artists arrived in Melbourne over the summer of 1854-55 from London under engagement to G B W Lewis for his colonial version of Astley’s Amphitheatre. Although the Melbourne Astley’s soon failed, many of Lewis’s expert performers remained in the colonies, finding employment with local companies or even establishing companies of their own. The Afro-British rope-walker Billy Banham (known in Australia by the appropriated nom d’arena of his more famous uncle, Pablo Fanque) and the equestrian Henry Adams each conducted colonial companies for a time, well beyond the precincts of Melbourne.

On not a few occasions, the engagement of foreign artists for Australasian tours ended in rancour, the visitors finding the terms of employment or travelling conditions well short of what they were led to expect. A family of Continental riders, the Bergs, successfully

\[49\] *Sydney Gazette*, 12 Aug 1841.
\[50\] Parsons, p.213.
\[51\] *Argus*, 15 Nov, 23 Dec 1854; *Age*, 1 Jan 1855.
sued G B W Lewis for terminating their contract when two of their number were injured during enforced rehearsals after 109 days at sea. Awarded damages of £500, the Bergs effectively triggered Lewis’s bankruptcy and the demise of his short-lived amphitheatrical enterprise.52 Probably in 1877, Henry Burton engaged the acrobatic clowns, Hayes and Benhamo, from London for an Australian tour. The two Englishmen broke their contract soon after arrival ‘furious at finding themselves being dragged away into the bush with a wagon show’.53 After Dan FitzGerald claimed the trick ‘talking’ horse Mahomet from his American trainer, E L Probasco, in settlement of a debt, during FitzGerald’s 1896 tour of New Zealand, Probasco parted company and within a few months had organised his own circus.54

The novelty of the trapeze, devised by the Frenchman Leotard in 1859, was soon put before colonial audiences with the arrival of the Wielands55 and, in 1864, the Lenton Troupe.56 Although these troupes arrived to fulfill theatrical engagements, each was soon engaged by a local circus company. Late in 1867, entrepreneurs landed the first troupes of Japanese acrobats in Melbourne - Buhicrosan’s troupe on 14 November and Lenton & Smiths Great Dragon Troupe on 16 December.57 These ‘queer people’ delivered colonial audiences an ethnic as well as acrobatic novelty. Other Japanese troupes followed and, within a few years, we find Japanese, whether individual artists or entire troupes, attached to colonial circus companies. The Japanese eclipsed Europeans ‘in all that pertains to sleight of hand or acrobatic

52 Argus, 14 May 1855.
54 New Zealand Mail, 3 Sep 1896.
55 Sydney Morning Herald, 13 Jun 1859.
56 Bendigo Advertiser, 13 Dec 1864.
skill’. Both Ashtons British-American Circus and St Leon’s Big Show turned up in Wagga Wagga, N S W, for the town’s race week in September 1879, each with its troupe of Japanese performers. St Leon’s boasted Australia’s ‘only troupe of Japanese wonders’ oblivious to the performances offered by the Japanese of the rival circus.

One visiting artist proved to have almost as much box office power - alone - as a major circus. This was the French outdoor rope-walker, Jean Francois Gravelet, better known as Blondin, who secured international fame in 1859 after walking a tightrope, 1,100 feet long and 160 feet high, over Niagara Falls before some 50,000 spectators. Brought to Australia by the entrepreneur H P Lyons, Blondin gave his first Australian appearance in Adelaide on 14 July 1874. When Blondin carried Lyons on his back across his rope for one evening’s performance, Lyons asked him what would happen if the rope broke, Blondin answered ‘a big thud and some remains and a magneeficent [sic] report in the papers’.

Blondin returned from London to undertake a second tour in 1875. He is supposed to have cleared £18,000 pounds from the two visits. He also spawned a host of colonial imitators. The most outstanding of these appears to have been Harry L’Estrange who, inevitably billing himself as ‘The Australian Blondin’, walked a tightrope across

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58 Empire, 13 Apr 1868.
59 Wagga Wagga Express, 17 Sep 1879.
60 Hippisley Coxe, p.165; Culhane, 1990, p.61.
61 South Australian Register, 14 Jul 1874; Australian Town & Country Journal, 15 Aug 1874.
63 Sydney Morning Herald, 26 Nov 1875.
64 Bulletin, 16 Feb 1905.
Sydney’s Middle Harbour on 18 April 1877.\textsuperscript{65} Public exhibitions of the calibre of Blondin and L’Estrange are not evident again until the appearances of another Frenchman, Philip Petit, almost a century later. In Sydney early one morning in 1973, Petit walked a tightwire (surreptitiously put in place during the night) between the southern pylons of the Harbour Bridge\textsuperscript{66} and reduced the peak hour traffic to a crawl.

**Importations**

Like FitzGerald Brothers Circus in its final years (1895 - 1905), Wirth Brothers Circus relied critically on imported artists rather than local talent. But, as George Wirth explained in 1920, the acts demanded by Australian audiences were difficult to obtain as ‘there is so much work for them without coming here’.\textsuperscript{67} In 1920 *Variety* reported the difficulty of securing passages for Australia as outgoing boats were few in the aftermath of war, some Australian circuses having relied on stock acts for four years.\textsuperscript{68} On the other hand, Wirth saw many highly paid performers in American and European circus who were ‘not worth their passage money to Australia’. While imported people commanded ‘good money’, the Australian received considerably less ‘even if he is more than the equal of the others brought from different parts of the world’.\textsuperscript{69} These comments were to some degree reflective of the shortages arising from the First World War and its aftermath. Many artists were called up for active service and,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[65] *Australian Town & Country Journal*, 7 Apr 1877.
\item[67] G Wirth, 1920.
\item[68] *Variety*, 16 Jan 1920.
\item[69] Jones, 1919.
\end{footnotes}
inevitably, some were killed or injured.\(^{70}\) Although a major source of acrobats before the war, only two out of some two hundred German acrobatic troupes survived the war intact.\(^{71}\) Shortages of artists and transport explain the preponderance of acts engaged during and immediately after the First World War from neutral countries, such as Spain, and places closer to home, such as India and Japan.

Wirths annual importation of superior international acts not only satisfied public demand but created a kind of ‘internal self-sufficiency’\(^{72}\) eliminating not only the need to import complete American or other circus companies but also the direct competition these visits would have posed for Australia’s largest and most prestigious circus. For Australian circus, importation reduced the incentives for nurturing and retaining local circus talent, even though the ‘boy riders’ in the smaller Australian shows were as good as in any other country.\(^{73}\) By early 1918, Wirth Brothers had opened offices in New York for the booking of circus attractions that promised artists a round-the-world tour embracing Australia, India and South Africa.\(^{74}\) In 1923, the longstanding working arrangements between the Wirths and the Ringlings were formalised to provide for the ‘mutually advantageous exchange of performers’. Acts were to appear in the circus of each country in the course of a year but in opposite seasons, the height of the Australian circus season taking place when American tented circuses closed up for the northern winter. While the Ringlings would continue to import most of their talent from Europe, more attention would be given to importing

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\(^{70}\) Hippisley Coxe, p.34.

\(^{71}\) *Variety*, 10 Jan 1919.

\(^{72}\) *Variety*, 18 Jan 1918.

\(^{73}\) G Wirth, 1920.

\(^{74}\) *Variety*, 18 Jan 1918.
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Australian acts considered suitable for American audiences. In reality, very few Australian performers appear to have benefitted from this arrangement. In any case, those that ‘made good’ in the United States had little incentive to return.

Summary

From the 1850s, immigration and natural population growth, economic prosperity and improved transportation all contributed to the development of a domestic circus industry, while Australia became feasible as a touring destination, distance and logistics notwithstanding for companies from overseas, chiefly the United States. By the early 1900s, Australia entertainment circuits were integrated into the touring circuits that girdled the earth, evidence of the world’s advancing economic globalisation that would not only ‘flatten’ space and time but begin to erode cultural and national distinctions. By the end of the 19th century, Australia had been visited by circuses and circus troupes from abroad, including some of America’s largest companies, while circuses and circus troupes of Australian origin had been seen on every inhabited continent.

The visitations of circus artists, troupes and complete companies generated a continuous updating of the circus arts and management by not only augmenting what the local industry had to offer, but diversifying and enriching it in the process. We have seen how (Chapter VI) American approaches to circus management and promotion impressed local circus proprietors and how (Chapter VII) the presence of an American circus deflected domestic circuses from their accustomed routes and ports-of-call. Shared English historical

75 New York Clipper, 3 Aug 1923.
76 Cavallaro, p.128.
roots aside, the impact of American circus on Australia and Australian circus has been more pervasive than circus of any other country. The presence of these examples of American popular culture naturally affected the development of local circus. With no other country have Australian circus artists consistently enjoyed the professional exposure as they have in American circus.

Figure 20a
Poster for Woodyears [Australian] Circus produced during its visit to Japan, 1889. Copy image, Author’s collection.
Figure 21
A view of the large tent of Chiarinis Royal Italian Circus in Melbourne, 1873. The building at left once housed the ‘Astley’s Amphitheatre’ of G B W Lewis. Royal Historical Society of Victoria.

Figure 22
A rare view of an American circus on an Australian lot, Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Great International Allied Shows, in Sydney, 1877. McCaddon Collection, Department of Rare Books & Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.
CHAPTER IX

Risk & return

Of all the speculations connected with the amusement of the colonial public, a circus demanded the hardest work and the greatest risk for its proprietors.¹

The earliest colonial circus entrepreneurs were commercial opportunists drawn from the local merchant class, motivated by personal profit, albeit somewhat altruistically. Radford, Hayes and Malcom had accumulated the capital for their circus enterprises after periods spent as publicans. To varying degrees, these entrepreneurs devolved matters of artistic performance and direction to their professional lieutenants. Having pursued their commercial objectives as far as possible, successfully or unsuccessfully, and having unleashed circus activity in a colonial setting, they retired to leave the field to professional circus men, women and their families. The family-based circus merged ownership, operational and artistic interests. From the early 1850s until the present time, circus companies and circus families rose and fell with the economic tides. The number of circus companies expanded as circus begat circus and family begat family. Showmen entered into partnerships and dissolved them just as freely. Circus performers moved from one troupe to another, sometimes accumulating the confidence, the

¹ Anon, 1893a.
experience and the capital to launch their own circus enterprises. Some Australian circuses operated continuously over many years and generations. Others were short-lived affairs, organised for specific tours or seasons, or the victims of insurmountable financial pressures, internal squabbles, or mismanagement. Some toured widely while others confined their activities to particular states or regions. Apart from highly corporatised companies such as FitzGerald Brothers and Wirth Brothers, Australian circus management was a largely ad hoc affair. Many of Australia’s circus proprietors matched the description given the visiting South African circus proprietor, Frank Fillis, a man of ‘big ideas [who] never counts the cost so long as he can give the public a good show’.²

What risks faced Australia’s circus entrepreneurs and how did they enhance their pecuniary returns?

Capital

Luigi Dalle Case arrived in Sydney in 1841, laden with the gold used to launch his antipodean enterprise. His amphitheatre in Hunter Street, opened in January 1842, required an investment of between £700 and £800.³ In Sydney in 1850, the brick building that John Malcom constructed to accommodate Sydney’s first permanent venue for circus cost £1,000.⁴ Joseph A Rowe, after playing the Californian goldfields in 1849-50, purchased his own vessel – the Leveret - to cross the Pacific to Melbourne, where he sold it and

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⁴ New South Wales Archives Office: Colonial Secretary’s Office, Register of oaths and Licences, public exhibitions, 1821-63, 4/3784, p.199.
erected an amphitheatre with the proceeds, a ‘commodious’ building that cost nearly £1,000.\textsuperscript{5}

The transition from the fixed location circus to the itinerant altered the capital investment required of a circus from the cost of construction, fitout, decoration and ongoing improvements required of an amphitheatre to an investment in the appurtenances typical of a travelling circus: tents, wagons (but later, motor vehicles), horses and possibly a collection of wild or exotic animals, tiered seating and lighting systems. Again, although we lack detail, we have at least some indication of the investment required of a travelling circus, albeit from different eras. Horse-drawn circuses represented heavy investments in rolling stock (perhaps £100 to £150 for a well appointed living wagon, £50 to £80 for a flat top wagon, and as much as £500 to £600 for a stylish bandwagon) and horses (perhaps £20 to £30 for a service horse, £160 for 4 ‘greys’ to draw the bandwagon and up to £200 for a ‘ring’ horse). A well-appointed menagerie with its own vehicles represented a further investment of perhaps £2,000 to £5,000. William ‘Tinker’ Brown had to liquidate his business interests including his Wagga Wagga, N S W, hotel - perhaps £3,000 worth of assets - to organise his short-lived circus in 1855.\textsuperscript{6} In 1883, St Leons Circus, transported ‘exclusively in its own specially built wagons’, represented an investment of over £5,000.\textsuperscript{7} In Dunedin in 1896, Probasco and his partner, a Mr Finlay, kept various local firms ‘hard at work’ manufacturing ‘about £1,500[stg]’ - about £3,000 - worth of wagons, tents, harnesses and costumes required to launch

\textsuperscript{5} Argus, 28 Jun 1852.
\textsuperscript{6} Goulburn Herald, 7 Jul 1855.
\textsuperscript{7} Wagga Wagga Advertiser, 13 Feb 1878.
their new circus. In 1907, George Wirth said he would not take less than £15,000 for his circus, menagerie and plant ‘as a going concern ... supposing he and his brother were anxious for transfer’. Bemoaning the liquidation of his wild west and circus enterprise in Melbourne in 1913, the American showman Bud Atkinson said that ‘about £8,300 pounds [was] put into the show’, a figure which probably includes the cost of shipping the personnel from the west coast of the United States, as well as the purchase or construction, and shipment, of its American-built wagons. An investment of as much as £40,000 may have been required to put the well-appointed but short-lived Ivan Brothers International Circus on the road in 1935. The magnitude of these investments, re-expressed in current Australian dollar values in Table 9, suggest the increasing investment required.

For a would-be circus proprietor lacking capital, other methods of financing were available. One was to build up a show ‘from scratch’, carefully re-investing the profits as they accrued, expanding and improving as opportunities arose. Some of Australia’s most successful circuses were developed in this way. A St Leon descendant recalled of earlier generations that:

They used to travel in just a sulky and work in hotels or little halls ... They often perhaps busked. I’m sure it must have been what we call busking because even if they worked in the bar of a hotel they would then take the hat around ... From there on they purchased a small wagon and a small tent ... There’d be no horse or anything at

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8 Onlooker, 1907-08, in St Leon, 1985, p.84.
9 Referee, 31 Jan 1907.
10 Herald, 31 Mar 1913.
that stage, just juggling and Roman rings was one of the things I know they used to do. They’d carry the canvas on this little wagon and go out in the bush and cut saplings for poles.\footnote{St Leon Troupe, c.1865.} In the early 1880s, the brothers Wirth, whose German father and uncles had travelled the backblocks as itinerant bandsmen in the 1860s, conducted an acrobatic sideshow outside Ashtons Circus.\footnote{Bulletin, 16 May 1903.} A ‘rough-up’ at Goulburn in 1882 forced their departure and led them to squat on Sydney’s Market Square in the company of ‘merry-go-rounds, corn-curers, and countless kinds of hurl-y-burly showmen’.\footnote{Referee, 23 Feb 1916.} Each Saturday, from one o’clock in the afternoon until eleven o’clock at night, the brothers gave as many as eight performances on the Square. With admission set at sixpence a head, the brothers ‘cleared’ £42 from their first Saturday’s work. After six months, the brothers bought six horses and several wagons and engaged several Japanese and American performers. Commencing their travels, the Wirths found that, although their expenses might amount to £10 a week, their nightly takings averaged as much as £7 or £8 a night.\footnote{Anon, 1911.} Recalled Philip Wirth:

We ... used to sing comic songs, dance on stilts and perform on horizontal bars and with Roman rings besides doing various other acrobatic tricks ... We had two Japanese, one of whom was a cook and a German comedian who wasn’t much good at anything except sticking bills and helping with the managing of the show. To make the show spin out ... my brother John and I used to go on with our

\footnote{M Joseph, in St Leon, 1984, pp.297-98.}
cornets and the crowd seemed to like it ... Well, we opened our show at a place called Gulgong near Mudgee in the height of the gold mining days. There were 30,000 or more miners there at that time and they used to give us nuggets as a price of admission. We worked right through to Kempsey across to Windsor and then on to Sydney.\textsuperscript{16} [Wirths Circus, c.1883].

During the next few years, their company continued to grow until, by 1888, the Wirths possessed 125 horses, forty wagons and employed or supported more than seventy people.\textsuperscript{17} The Wirths’ contemporaries and eventual rivals, the FitzGerald brothers, adopted a similar strategy.

\begin{quote}
From a small road-show, with a couple of wagons, they now have grown into the largest road-show that has ever travelled Australia.\textsuperscript{18} [FitzGerald Brothers Circus, 1893].
\end{quote}

Other circuses were simply ‘born’ out of other circuses, as when family members chose to go their own ways. The family of W G Perry started with their circus from Northampton Downs, between Tambo and Blackall in outback Queensland in 1885, later assuming the promotional name of Eroni Brothers. By 1900, Eroni Brothers Monster Circus, Menagerie & Wild Beast Show comprised 150 horses – ‘three times more horses than any other circus in Australia’ – thirty-five wagons and twelve cages of wild beasts.\textsuperscript{19} As early as 1914, the Perry family had begun to fragment when James Perry, one of the younger sons of W G Perry left the family circus, Eroni

\textsuperscript{16} Anon, 1931.
\textsuperscript{17} G Wirth, 1920.
\textsuperscript{18} Bulletin, 20 May 1893.
\textsuperscript{19} Nyngan Observer, 12 May 1900.
Brothers, to form his own. Reverting to the original family name, his Perry Brothers Circus was, by the late 1920s, Australia’s largest after Wirth Brothers. Visiting Nowra, N S W, in March 1915, its programme ‘could only be classed as fair’.²⁰ Visiting the same town 14 years later, the improvements were obvious:

Perry Bros Circus played to a good house in Nowra on Saturday night last. It is a good, honest show and has emerged from its swaddling clothes – since its previous visit here – into a show of colossal magnitude, as compared to the days of yore.²¹

In 1917, W G Perry’s daughter, Eliza, and her husband, Bill Sole, departed the main family circus for the last time and commenced their travels as Sole Brothers Circus.²² While Eroni Brothers ceased operation in 1922, the Perry Brothers and Sole Brothers circuses were still active in the 1980s. A son of James Perry, Albert, formed Albertos Circus with his sons in 1958²³ which remained in operation until 1994.

Although larger capital investments were required of a travelling circus, professional circus men also sought the financial backing of people who ‘could see the potential we had but we weren’t able to capitalise on it ourselves’.²⁴ After its Melbourne Cup season of 1888, Wirths Circus toured Tasmania for the first time and two showmen, Harry Lyons and one McMahon, ‘took the show through on a percentage [basis]’.²⁵ These arrangements imposed commercial

²⁰ *Nowra Leader*, 26 Mar 1915.
²¹ *Nowra Leader*, 6 Dec 1929.
²² *Richmond River Herald*, 24 Nov 1917.
²³ *Outoor Showman*, Jan-Feb 1961.
²⁵ M Martin, in St Leon, 1984, p.20.
discipline that might otherwise have been lacking. Sometimes confidence was misplaced, as Mervyn King recalled:

St Leons always ran a good show, had a good name but they were not good businesspeople. They would get a good purse, a bit of money and then do it again. When Alf Honey was with the show, he kept a tight watch on the purse strings but after Alf and his family left there was always a bit of mismanagement somewhere, bad management, trying to do too much on the cheap.  

In Melbourne in 1932, their circus already severely impaired by depression, the St Leons were befriended by Major W T Conder whose multifarious career now embraced circus:

Major Conder was the head of the Broadcasting Commission in Melbourne and he was showstruck, loved show business, and especially circus. So he and a few of his friends ... [including] the head of the Dunlop Rubber Company ... invested money in it. Uncle Syl and Papa engaged the acts from overseas and ordered the tent, everything like that ... Just a normal hard business man ... [we did] silly things. We spent a lot of time breaking in ménage horses, high school horses and drill acts. We had done all this work, ordered the tent, ordered the seating - everything. Uncle Philip was still in America and he booked the acts from America that came out. It was a beautiful show ... Papa and Uncle Syl ... had brought a lot of ideas back from America with them but had never had the money to try them out. They had put all their efforts and dreams into this ... He

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26 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.256.
wanted the show, but he didn’t understand show business. He killed it himself. The show was magnificent.²⁸

Starved of entertainment, the less populous parts and the back country offered a small new circus a better prospect of finding paying audiences and avoiding clashes with the established circus companies and other itinerant entertainments. Setting out with his own small circus from near Kilmore in 1875, St Leon set a northwards course through the smaller towns and hamlets of New South Wales. Thus, St Leon’s Royal Victoria Circus was the first to pay Cooma ‘a visit for some years’, the first to visit Shoalhaven ‘for at least sixteen years’ while the Royal Victoria’s entertainment was ‘quite a novel one’ for the people of Kiama. Even tiny out-of-the-way places such as Terrara, Broughton Creek and Gerringong received visits from the troupe. Energy, labour and capital were nevertheless ‘expended without stint’ by the proprietor to make his ‘grand exhibition the very acme of grandeur, instruction and amusement’²⁹ and, within a few years, St Leon’s Circus was a ‘power in the land’.³⁰ After ‘numerous additions and improvements’, the strength of the St Leon company reached ninety horses, forty five performers and twelve cages of wild animals by early 1885. Soon after, the show was separated into two companies.³¹ Organising Silvers Circus in 1946, Mervyn King knew it would take about two years to develop a circus and build its reputation throughout the country districts. He told his financial backers, the Hardie family of tentmakers, that he wanted to head north in order to ‘get right away

²⁹ South Australian Register, 3 May 1879.
³⁰ Bulletin, 16 May 1903.
³¹ Hamilton Spectator, 12 Feb 1885.
from the city to give me time’.\footnote{M King, 1989, interview, Tape 31.} Within a few years, Silvers Circus was Australia’s largest road show.

**Liquidations**

After three years travelling New Zealand, Victoria and New South Wales, the American showman, E L Probasco, voluntarily liquidated his circus at Bega, N S W, in June 1899. Some idea of the property required of a large touring circus of the day is given by the auction notice for ‘the whole’ of the Probasco ‘travelling plant’. Amongst other items, Probasco advertised forty horses (twenty-seven draught horses and thirteen ponies) and nine wagons (a bandwagon, four spring wagons carrying two tons each, one strong wagon carrying one ton, two light wagons and one covered wagon ‘suitable for a hawker’). Eroni Brothers Circus acquired many of Probasco horses and thus assumed the proportions of the largest wagon show travelling Australia at that time. Indeed, circus proprietors frequently acquired, or even cannibalised, the remnants of a former rival show. More than a year after the death of Dan FitzGerald, the properties of his ‘branch’ of FitzGerald Brothers Circus were put up for auction.\footnote{Referee, 10 Apr, 1907.} The circus properties, horses and ponies were purchased by William Anderson, the proprietor of Wonderland, a popular seaside amusement park at Bondi, for a circus he planned to tour by special train through Queensland.\footnote{Referee, 24 Apr 1907.} The menagerie was purchased by Eroni Brothers Circus.\footnote{M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.201.} In Melbourne in 1913, the Wirths also purchased the ‘solid’ American-built low-wheeled wagons of the Bud Atkinson’s failed Wild West enterprise ‘and they had them for
years’. An American medicine showman, a ‘Dr’ Seguar, toured the backblocks in the early 1900s, selling fake cures to the accompaniment of musicians seated in a bandwagon that was ‘out of this world’. When exposed as a fraud, Seguar had to ‘get out of the business’. His bandwagon, which featured precious decorative panels of glass, was purchased by Eroni Brothers Circus, ‘the best bandwagon we [ever] had’. After the collapse of Ivan Brothers Circus, in 1936, Wirths bought its tent, seating and Lister diesel lighting plant ‘for a song’.

**Pricing & revenues**

The presence of a circus is temporary: it arrives, performs and soon departs. As an item of discretionary spending, the demand for a circus ticket is ‘elastic’, highly sensitive to factors such as price, the availability of leisure time, alternative offerings in the market place, weather and disposable income. Unlike a business firm, where a predictable volume of goods and services can be, more or less, sold at a price representing a mark-up of their true costs, the earnings of a circus are not as predictable or manageable.

The control of a circus is very different to the management of the ordinary, established business organisation, which, once it is successfully launched, seems to ‘stay put’ and runs itself, without much alteration or interference ... With a circus, ever on the move from town to town, city to city, country to country, the conditions are constantly changing, and it requires a real head to the business. Moreover that head must be the proprietor, for no one else will ever

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37 M Perry, in St Leon, 1984, p.202; see also McNamara, 1976, p.33.
38 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 19.
take the same interest that he does in the enterprise, it’s not human
nature.  

Advertised prices must be set according to the likelihood of longer
term cost recovery, not the short term cost exigencies of a single
night’s performance.

The problem in circus, as in several of the other performing arts, is
that cost efficiencies are difficult to attain given the size and structure
of the spectacle that must be assembled and then disassembled every
few days or weeks.

The revenues of a travelling circus were just as sensitive to regional
conditions as any other facet of a local economy, not to mention the
‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors discussed in Chapter VII. Abnormally high
profits extracted from one prosperous district might be offset by the
losses incurred in another less affluent. A small horse-drawn circus in
1916 was ‘a hard struggle’ and ‘was pretty much an up and down
affair’, since two or three thousand pounds of accumulated profit
was easily lost over a bad run of ‘six or eight weeks’. In 1973, it was
reported that a large circus made up to $300,000 over costs ‘in a good
year’ but that in ‘a bad year we can lose that much easily ... and
more’.

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40  G Wirth, 15 May 1933, p.408.
41  H L Vogel, Entertainment industry analysis: A guide for financial analysis, New
42  C Colleano, typescript memorandum reproduced in M St Leon, 1993, p.1.
Radford charged prices of one, two and three shillings, when he opened his Royal Circus in Launceston in 1847. Well into the 20th century, circus admission prices were typically set at these prices to the pit, stall and boxes respectively, with children at half price. Prices might be moderated for a town or district experiencing harsh economic times, or inflated for a remote settlement starved of regular entertainment.

During the sojourn of the [Ashton] troupe here [at Clermont and Copperfield, Queensland] no less than 600 persons attended nightly and the profits must have been considerable, judging from the amount of admission, which was 6s and 4s. I understand that Mr Ashton cleared some £800 in less than three weeks. [Ashtons British-American Circus, 1873].

On the goldfields, in the gold-infected capitals, in the shearing and mining camps, in the more remote townships, higher prices were charged with little objection. To see his North American Circus in gold-stricken Melbourne in 1852, Rowe charged inflated prices of 2s 6d, 5s and 8s for the pit, boxes and dress circle respectively. Bringing, in 1855, one of the first circuses to Albury, 'Tinker' Brown charged prices of 5s and 8s to his pit and reserved seats. The only circus to visit North Queensland’s coastal ports during 1876, St Leon charged prices of 5s and 3s for his reserved and unreserved seats when he opened in Mackay.

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44 Cornwall Chronicle, 29 Dec 1847.
45 Australian Town & Country Journal, 3 May 1873.
46 Argus, 28 Jun 1852.
47 Shennan.
48 Daily Mercury, 9 Sep 1876.
As glib as it may sound, St Leon’s self-promotional motto of 1884 to ‘give the maximum of pleasure at the minimum of cost’\textsuperscript{49}, tends to confirm that, even in circus, ‘value’, and the processes to deliver value, cannot be isolated from their social context.\textsuperscript{50} While excessive prices drew protest, failure to advertise any prices also drew criticism.

Neither newspaper nor handbill nor poster, contained the slightest intimation as to charges and no one could ascertain the truth until the circus was open, and application made for a ticket. The consequence was that all sorts of rumours got afloat about high prices, higher even than Cooper & Bailey’s and hundreds were deterred from coming who, had the chance been given them, would have determined beforehand how much money was required to obtain them admission to the charmed circle.\textsuperscript{51} [St Leons Circus, Hamilton, Victoria, 1879].

Small family circuses operated without the burden of large overheads and without commitment to fixed itineraries. Able to wander more or less as they pleased, they attracted audiences in the most unlikely places. When the acrobat Frank Jones made his way to Tamworth, N S W, in the late 1870s to join Ashtons Circus, he found the show playing to an encampment of railway workers on a section of the line under construction outside the town.\textsuperscript{52} As they began to build their circus, the FitzGerald brothers fetched large audiences from long distances away and took £250 in places that otherwise

\textsuperscript{49} Mercury, 2 Feb 1884.  
\textsuperscript{50} Throsby, p.22.  
\textsuperscript{51} Hamilton Spectator, 5 Apr 1879.  
\textsuperscript{52} Jones, 1919.
looked unpromising.\textsuperscript{53} When the small St Leon Brothers Circus played the shearing sheds in outback Queensland in 1904, the shearers paid five shillings to see the show, much more than people in the towns.\textsuperscript{54}

**Costs**

The larger proportion of costs that a circus has to bear are the relatively high levels of ‘overhead’ costs, costs that are fixed and largely independent of the touring and performance activity undertaken, and only indefinitely related to the number of seats sold and revenue generated. Once a particular route or region was selected, artists contracted, equipment ordered or leased, most of the costs of touring were committed. Horses and other animals, and possibly a menagerie, further committed the proprietor to the costs of feed and care.

As Australian circus began to motorise in the 1920s, motor vehicles generated new types of operational costs such as fuel, maintenance and repairs. Lamenting the costs of operating Alberto’s Circus in 1990, a small circus that catered for country audiences and shopping centres, its proprietor, Robert Perry, quoted costs that were chiefly overhead in nature: public liability insurance of $29,000 a year; ground rentals of as much as $500 a day together with additional costs of power and facilities; registration costs of up to $2,000 for each of ‘15 or 16’ trucks, even though the vehicles were ‘only on the road ... about 4 weeks a year’.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{53} Anon, 1893b.
\textsuperscript{54} G Lewis, in St Leon, 1984, p.176.
\textsuperscript{55} Perry, R, quoted in Anon, 1990, n.p.
The smaller circuses which routinely serviced rural Australia necessarily operated on modest cost structures and enjoyed cheaper ground rents, open country in which to graze their horses and overall lower transportation costs. In 1917, a wartime amusement tax of a penny in the shilling was levied on tickets sold at entertainment venues.\(^{56}\)

You’d go down and buy probably five [or] ten pounds worth of stamps on roll tickets ... It was a dam nuisance, a couple of hours’ job every day sticking these stamps on the ticket.\(^{57}\)

The tax remained in force until after the Second World War by which time a four shilling circus ticket attracted a shilling’s tax.\(^{58}\)

They could always falsify their tickets very easily. Usually what they used to do was, after the tickets had been put in the boxes, take the box back to the front ticket office and sell them again.\(^{59}\)

During its first Australian tour of 1876-77, Cooper, Bailey & Co. found that billing, advertising and rail transport were cheap by American standards while ‘lot rent’ was rarely charged. In New Zealand, ground was sometimes obtained for free tickets, at other times for a pound or twenty-five shillings.\(^{60}\) For its 1893 Sydney season, FitzGerald Brothers secured ground adjoining the Benevolent Asylum for which it paid a weekly rental of £50.\(^{61}\) Despite Australia’s abundance of open space, ground rents had reached

\(^{56}\) *Referee*, 3 Jan 1917; *Australian Variety*, 3 Jan 1917.

\(^{57}\) M King, 1989, interview, Tape 13.

\(^{58}\) M King, 1989, interview, Tape 13.

\(^{59}\) N V St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.331.

\(^{60}\) M King, 1989, interview, Tape 16.

\(^{61}\) *Bulletin*, 17 Jun 1893.
exorbitant levels by the 1970s – up to $250 a day - although the remaining ground in urban areas was often unsuitable for circus performances and facilities were poor.⁶²

While we lack complete financial data, the salaries and wages paid to performers and musicians, staff and workmen represented a significant proportion of any circus company’s expenses. The payroll of Wirth Bros Circus in 1914 supported 160 people⁶³ and, in 1931, some 300 people.⁶⁴ James Ashton was ‘ever willing to secure a new performer at an apprentice’s wages’.⁶⁵ The Walter St Leon family was paid only ‘a few pounds a week for practically the whole show’ in Dan FitzGerald’s circus of 1902-03. In 1914, the entire Sole family worked for the Gus St Leon circus for £12 a week. In 1912, when hotel waitresses received ‘perhaps ten shillings, or twelve-and-six a week’, a female trapeze and tightwire performer such as Sadie Onzalo received a weekly salary of £5.⁶⁶ In 1920 it was reported that ‘you’ve got to be a good performer’ to draw a salary of £5 of £6 per week ‘with fares and keep thrown in’.⁶⁷ The Winskills, a locally engaged gymnastic troupe of English origin, a ‘first class act’, consisting of three men, cost the St Leon circus about £25 a week in 1930.⁶⁸ In the aftermath of World War I, with artists difficult to obtain from customary sources in Europe and America, wages and salaries ‘soared’, especially in the case of star turns. By 1963, a circus artist

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⁶³ Shoalhaven Telegraph, 12 May 1914.
⁶⁴ Nowra Leader, 11 May 1931.
⁶⁵ G Wirth, 15 Jun 1933, p.525.
⁶⁶ S St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.138.
⁶⁷ Jones, 1919.
cost an Australian circus up to £150 a week together with cost of airfares if engaged from overseas. 69

Cooper, Bailey & Co. offered ‘Australia’s favourite’, the rider Gus St Leon, £35 a week to return with them to America, ‘the exact sum’ that a popular music hall singer of the day, Guglielmo, got for singing. This was certainly well in excess of what St Leon or any other star rider earned in a colonial company. 70 On the other hand, the imported star acts which began to regularly appear in the larger Australian circus from the 1890s onwards commanded significant premiums over local offerings. The revolving automobile act of the Garcias, from Cuba, cost the Gus St Leon circus in 1914 ‘around £80 a week, plus a percentage of the take, which worked out at about £200 a week’. The act generated ‘turn-away business in every town the circus went into’. 71

Musicians, although in short supply, were paid at a lower scale than ring performers, a fact that may account for the questionable musical standards occasionally noted in reports of circus performances. Although widely acknowledged for their musicianship, the Wirth family of musicians, which landed in Port Philip from London in 1855, did not find colonial circus an adequately remunerative form of employment. Johannes Wirth preferred to play ‘balls, parties and processions’ with his band as these were better paying propositions than ‘circusing’. 72 In 1875, Ashton advertised throughout New South Wales for four musicians to complement his existing band of six German musicians already employed, at a salary of £6 per month

69 Higham.
70 Bulletin, 5 Jan 1884.
71 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.152.
72 Wirth, 1933, p.23.
together with what was misleadingly described as ‘board and lodging’. Some musicians were paid extra to take on the role of schoolteacher to the circus children.

Visiting Nowra, N S W, in 1896 one of FitzGerals five advance agents stated that ‘anything over £100 would pay the circus for each performance while travelling in the country’. In 1901, FitzGerald Brothers Circus had to take over £900 pounds each week, simply to cover expenses, when showing in the big capitals and had to meet significant shipping costs, such as a ‘jump’ from Auckland to Townsville in 1901 that cost over £3,000. Dan FitzGerald claimed to have spent over £2,000 just to open the Sydney season of his circus that year, coincidentally the same figure St Leon reputedly spent in advance of his company’s Melbourne season early in 1884.

In 1889, a rail-based Wirth Brothers Circus generated weekly revenues of ‘something like £1,400’ while weekly expenses were ‘about £300’. The following year, the Wirths engaged a Wild West show from the United States and adopted a three-ring format, but seriously underestimated the work involved in putting on ‘a reasonably convincing Wild West Show’. The financial impact of the venture was soon felt:

> With this big show we travelled all through the states ... we made no money, but our expenses were £140 a day, and the work – well, we hadn’t time to eat our meals. It cost us £4,000 to bring out the Wild

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73 *Australian Town & Country Journal*, undated clipping, c.1875.
74 *Shoalhaven Telegraph*, 24 Sep 1896.
75 Anon, 1901.
76 *Argus*, 29 Jan 1884.
77 *Referee*, 30 Jan 1907.
78 G Wirth, 15 Apr 1933, p.374.
Risk & return

West show and Indians and cowboys, and we never saw a penny of it back. [Wirth Brothers Circus, 1890].

Interviewed in 1907, George Wirth bemoaned how the profits of the circus were ‘not much above’ what they had been in 1889 despite the enormous growth in the enterprise. The ‘ton of money’ taken in ticket sales was easily consumed by weekly expenses that totalled £800 comprised approximately of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salaries</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground rents</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing and advertising</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal feed</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>£800</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By 1911, ‘a bigger, more costly proposition than it ever was before’, the operation of Wirth Brothers Circus was ‘a perfected science’ but the company’s expenses amounted to £150 per day.  

Within two hours of the show, we are all aboard the train, with the whole of our equipment, and ready to go to sleep – in sleepers and other carriages set apart for us – until we reach the next town the following morning… For the special trains by which we travel in the different states we pay 10 shillings a mile. As we sometimes jump as

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79 Anon, 1911.  
80 Anon, 1911.
Risk & return

much as 150 miles at a time, you can form some idea as to what this works out at. \[Wirth\] Brothers Circus, 1911].

By 1963, train hire alone cost Wirth Brothers Circus £1,000 per week, while a figure of £3,000 per week was quoted as the all-up cost of touring a circus of the size of Wirth Brothers, Bullen Brothers or Ashtons. In 1973, the combined circus of Ashtons and Frank Gasser’s Circus Royale was Australia’s largest mainstream circus.

It costs $1,200 a day ... or closer to $450,000 a year. They show about 270 times a year and average about 1,500 people a performance at prices ranging from $5.70 to $2.70 for adults and $2.20 to $1.20 for children. So non-earning days are very costly and they often depend on how cleverly the circus can arrange its travelling schedule. And because circuses have to spend so much in country areas, floods, droughts, bushfires, a bad season, can be disastrous.

The economics of circus operation were clearly changing in Australia in the 1960s as they already had in the United States: in the 1950s Ringling’s was not only overwhelmed by inflation and increased costs but ‘the right kind of men’ to manage operations were no longer to be found. By the 1960s, television’s spread and increased rail charges had seriously eroded the conventional economics of Australian circus. In 1962 it was reported:

Television in Australia is comparatively new and being a novelty has made a terrific impact on show business especially circuses.

\[\text{Anon, 1911.}\]
\[\text{Higham.}\]
\[\text{Cornford, 1973, p.12.}\]
\[\text{North and Hatch, 1960, pp.360-61.}\]
Sydney is a city of two and a half million people, to say nothing of the floating population, yet circuses give it a wide berth because people will not leave their homes to go and sit in a tent when they can see excellent circus pictures on their TV sets.\textsuperscript{85}

By 1973, there were ‘only four gypsy caravans’ remaining in Australia - Ashtons, Sole Brothers, Albertos (the Albert Perry family) and Circus Royale (the Gassers, a family of Swiss origin and of relatively recent arrival in Australia).\textsuperscript{86} Co-incidentally or not, fully imported circus companies began to then re-appear on a regular basis.

**Diversification**

Diversification enabled the early circus proprietors to supplement the volatile income streams generated from circus activities. Since the early amphitheatres were only open three or four evenings each week, riding schools were a natural way to generate income at other times during the week. A riding school made use of the circus ring, the circus horses and, as instructors, the circus riders. In Hobart Town during his second 1848 season, Radford opened a riding school in conjunction with the Royal Amphitheatre where instruction was provided ‘to ladies and gentlemen in the polite art of horsemanship’. The American circus man J A Rowe erected an eight room house in Melbourne on a vacant lot adjacent his circus, within which he opened his American Bar, Supper, Oyster and Refreshment Establishment.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{86} Cornford, 1973, p.12.
\textsuperscript{87} Potts and Potts, *Young America and Australian gold: America and the gold rush of the 1850s*, p.149.
While the provision of riding schools and restaurants was impractical for a fully peripatetic circus, other forms of revenue diversification were possible.

Of course all the circuses in those days wanted to try and make money with anything but the circus. St Leon’s, same with Sole’s, Perry’s. They always wanted to have a go with racehorses and stuff like that. Then they’d have to come back and get another bank from the circus. The circus was the thing they knew. They knew that business backwards.  

Publicans provided the capital and facilities that the early circus ventures required and, at the same time, diversified their own sources of revenue. Mindful of the potential custom at intermission, country publicans were known to pay perhaps thirty shillings for a vacant piece of ground alongside the hotel for the circus or allow a circus to use its back paddock without charge.

**Amalgamation**

Economic viability was sustained by continuous travel, brief visits to interior centres of population and, where necessary, commercial integration - *amalgamations* in the argot of the circus people – with other touring entertainments, circus or otherwise. By 1888, Wirth Brothers claimed to have absorbed portions of the circuses of Chiarini, Mathews Brothers and St Leon. During the year 1909, the circus companies of Foley & Dale and Gus St Leon combined for

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88 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 38.  
89 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.174.  
90 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 May 1888.
mutual benefit; Barton Brothers Circus briefly combined with a so-called ‘vaudeville hippodrome’; while the circus and buckjumping companies of Ashton and Spillman, respectively, entered into a brief amalgamation. An ‘amalgamation’ with another circus or other type of itinerant show, offered mutual security, especially if times were hard. It sometimes lasted for a brief ‘run’ through a prosperous rural district, sometimes for a year or more. Speaking in 1974, a sixty-eight year old Mervyn King remembered this earlier era of toured Australian entertainment and pointed out the change that had taken place in the competitive environment since he was a boy in the Gus St Leon circus:

Nine times out of ten they combined for the night. It was common for them to come in, play together and travel along combined for a while. That was called amalgamating. They travelled along together until there was a row. Then they branched off from each other.  

The shows did not clash with one another those times. Some of the shows even worked in with one another, ‘Well, we’re going so-and-so, which way are you going?’ But today it’s dog eat dog. They move too quick now.

By 1934, a much depleted St Leon Circus amalgamated with O’Donnell & Rays Pantomime Company in outback Queensland:

We’d joined them because they were doing no good and we were doing no good. So they decided to put the circus and the pantomime

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91 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.256.
in the one show together and run it that way. We were motorised by that time, of course. We had trucks and caravans but not very good caravans, nothing like circuses have today ... It petered out at Townsville. [O’Donnell & Rays Pantomime, Queensland, c.1934].

Amalgamations also offered the possibility to exchange and enrich performing skills between the participating families. When the Sole family united with the Gus St Leon family for a three-year stint in 1909, there was ample opportunity for one family to learn from the other, and Mary Sole later recalled how her ‘best act’ was a wirewalking act taught to her by one of the St Leon boys during this period.

Outcomes

The American showman, Bud Atkinson, either miscalculated or received unsound advice when he took his American Circus & Wild West Shows overland to Melbourne in the autumn of 1913 after a successful inaugural season in Sydney. While the typical Australian circus wagon was light and high-wheeled to cope with a wide variety of travelling conditions, Atkinson had imported the heavier low-wheeled wagons typically used in American circus. These proved cumbersome on rain-soaked, outback roads of New South Wales and Victoria and within a few months he was bankrupt. Atkinson preferred to lay blame on the weather rather than his choice of wagons:

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93 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.171.
94 M Lindsay, in St Leon, 1984, p.103.
95 A F St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.159.
It is the weather that beat us. Nothing but the weather. I was within £600 pounds of the safety limit and if I could have got that everything would have gone on... We had horrible weather! About four weeks rain out of the five weeks.  

By 1895, American circus had produced its first millionaire. When William Washington Cole died in 1915, he left an estate of some US$5 million, at least some of which was attributable to his successful Australian tour of 1880-81. Circus activity in Australia was less remunerative. Radford eventually fell prey to his ‘disconsolate’ creditors, and was unable to resurrect either his amphitheatrical enterprise or his racecourse activities. The American circus man J A Rowe returned to California in 1854 materially enriched after nearly two years entrepreneurial (circus and oyster) activity in Melbourne. He was unable to repeat his success when he brought another company to Australia in 1858-59. He eventually died penniless in San Francisco in 1887. In Melbourne in 1855, G B W Lewis succumbed to the ‘pressure of the times’ - poor weather and rival attractions - and declared himself insolvent although he was later able to resurrect his entrepreneurial career outside of circus. There is nothing to suggest that Ashton was a man of wealth when he died in 1889. Henry Burton’s career as a circus man came to an abrupt end when the one time ‘king of the ring’ was declared insolvent with debts of £1,169 in Sydney in 1880. He died penniless at the

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96 Herald, 31 Mar 1913.  
97 Slout, p.2.  
98 Launceston Examiner, 15 Dec 1849.  
99 Potts and Potts, p.149.  
100 Dressler, p.98.  
Melbourne Dramatic Home in 1900. Poor business caused by floods forced St Leon into insolvency in 1889. Although he soon formed a new circus company, his fortunes never completely recovered. Despite the money that passed through his hands over a half-century long career as a successful colonial circus proprietor, St Leon rumoured wealth was ‘intractable’ when he died in Melbourne in 1903. When the circus proprietor Will ‘Jerry’ Baker died in his wagon at Hawera, New Zealand, about 1925, ‘all he had on him was a double-headed penny and a set of rosary beads’. At the other extreme, the last of the Wirth brothers, Philip and George, left estates sworn at £33,379 and £49,126, when they died in 1937 and 1941 respectively. For most Australian proprietors, circus seems to have provided a comfortable living but hardly a path to abundant wealth.

Dad was a funny chap. We’d get a certain amount of money and he’d say, “That’s all we want – that’s big enough. You get in a big way and you got all the troubles in the world ... Just as long as you’ve got enough to bury yourself – that’s all you want”. Just so long as he made enough to live on, he was satisfied. Us fellows we wanted to push along but Dad wouldn’t have that.

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103 Age, 12 Mar 1900.
104 Lorgnette, 20 Jul 1889.
106 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 2.
108 A St Leon, in St Leon, 1984, p.90.
They never ever had a lot of money, none of the circuses as I can see in those days. It’s only since the last war that the circuses have started to get in the big money ... I was a young man before I saw a circus getting a £100 house ... With my own show, we got £500 at Roma one night - 500 quid in the house! Well, it was big money at ten bob a head. [Silvers Circus, Roma, 1946]

Summary

Australian circus has had to face the risk inherent in circus activity anywhere. A part of the process of adaptation of circus activity was to work out, by trial and error, the economics of circus operation. While a country the size of the United States sustained a ‘payable’ circus business, absence of infrastructure, extremities of distance and limited population severely constrained the economics of circus operation in Australia. In the longer term, Australia supported no more than one or two large circuses of international standing. Apart from the Wirth and Bullen families, the pecuniary experience of the majority of Australia’s circus entrepreneurs appears to have been indifferent. The fact that contemporary Australian circus is critically dependent on public funding suggests that the industry remains a largely uneconomic one.

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An understanding of the emergence of a popular entertainment industry leads to an understanding of contemporary economy as well as society, since commerce touches questions of taste, discrimination and deeper still of human values.¹

Whatever its size or degree of sophistication, a circus is essentially a business firm operated with a view to making a profit, or at least providing its owners with a living. Its operational activity, like that of any other business, both mirrored and contributed to wider economic conditions. A circus required the investment and expenditure of capital, earned revenues from its performances and consumed the goods and services the economy had to offer. While there were undoubtedly pronounced differences in style, quality, operation and reputation between Australia’s family-based circuses, any serious growth ambitions were constrained by the limitations of the domestic market, its small population, extremes of distance and paucity of infrastructure. How has Australian circus been shaped by

¹ Briggs, p.5.
wider economic forces? How did Australian circus contribute to wider economic growth and development?

National market

The birth of the Australian nation in 1901 created a single market out of six, insulated from economic threats from without by protectionism and constitutionally guaranteed within by upholding the principles of free trade between the states. Since they had traversed colonial borders since the 1850s, regulated by no more than colonial theatrical licensing systems, the creation of this single market was of little consequence to Australia’s showmen. An imaginative few had already chosen to visualise Australia as a national market, such as Henry Burton with his so-named National Circus [my italics], and the Wirth brothers and the FitzGeralds with their comprehensive Australasian touring programmes.

Markets trade in ideas as well as goods and services. Therefore, the simultaneous emergence of nation-states, such as Australia, and their respective mass national markets was no coincidence.² Five economic conditions fundamental to the development of England’s mass entertainment industry, ‘all there by 1896’,³ were also present to varying degrees in Australia by the turn of the 19th century and inevitably affected Australia’s entertainment landscape including the structure of its circus industry.

² White, in Lyons and Russell, p.131.
³ Briggs, pp.9-12.
Firstly, in England, a large and concentrated urban population came into existence in the course of the 19th century: the citizens of the towns and cities generating the ‘great audience’. Despite its geographic size and the importance of its rural economy, Australia was a heavily urbanised country by the beginning of the 20th century, as suggested in Table 10. Its vibrant and prosperous urban economy, fuelled by immigration and manufacturing and increasingly protected, was only partly dependant on the rural economy that supplied the nation’s export earnings.4

Between 1881 and 1891 Australia’s urban population grew three times as rapidly in percentage terms as its rural population. The expansion of Australian towns and cities, the natural result of economic growth and structural exchange rather than industrialisation as in England, implied substantial social as well as economic change. Audiences were increasingly homogenous, increasingly Australian and served by the widening choices of entertainment and leisure that urbanisation offered - theatre, music halls, vaudeville and, eventually, cinema. By 1901, each of Australia’s cities with a population of 100,000 was a state capital, fertile ground for a large well-organised circus capable of negotiating the distances between these cities and the logistics involved. At the same time, the concentration of the population into larger capital cities slowed the growth of smaller urban towns. Australia’s impresarios, such as Harry Rickards and James Brennan, recognised the need to cater for new, larger, and somewhat more affluent audiences. The rise of urban theatre circuits and the unrelenting importations of artists from England, America and elsewhere meant that, in the larger cities especially, the circus had to match an array of competing

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4 Meredith and Dyster, 1999, pp.4-5.
entertainments in terms of novelty and sophistication. Urbanisation thus fostered the rise of the great circuses of Wirth Brothers and FitzGerald Brothers, towards the end of the 19th century. In their individual ways, the Wirths and the FitzGeralds recognised that an increasingly urbanised population demanded a different concept of circus, one that stressed novelty and sophistication. By the 1890s also, we see the Australian circus industry, specifically, bifurcate between those companies willing and able to take on the challenge of serving — and therefore of legitimising itself before — an increasingly urbanised population and those who were either unwilling or incapable of doing so. This is not to say that the provincial circuses relaxed their own standards. Ashtons Circus of 1900 was described as ‘an excellent show’, its equestrian acts ‘far ahead of most of the big tent shows’. 5 In 1905, the wirewalking, riding and ‘trapeze work’ to be seen in the same circus were ‘not surpassed by any performers in the same line in Australia’. 6

In stark contrast to the capital investments required of roadshows, cited earlier in this chapter, the investments required of the new ‘urbanised’ circuses were far greater, as shown in Table 11.

Secondly, in England, the real incomes of large sections of the urban population had risen sufficiently during the previous fifty years to enable people to afford to pay for regular, cheap entertainment. In Australia, the average weekly earnings of workers in the largely urban activity of manufacturing rose some 25% in real terms over

5 *Bulletin*, 7 Apr 1900.
6 *Dubbo Dispatch*, 16 Dec 1905.
the four decades to 1891, as shown in Table 12. Real wages at the turn of the 19th century were still high by world standards.7

Thirdly, in England, the expansion of available leisure time had prepared the way for its commercial exploitation, by the turn of the 19th century. In Australia by that time approximately one half of workers still worked in ‘gruelling manual labour’, up to sixty hours a week in a six day working week. Most manual workers were rural, their working day regulated by the hours of sunrise and sunset.8 At Bathurst in 1851, the local magistracy restricted Henry Burtons circus performances to daylight hours to prevent the ‘tradespeople and labouring classes’ from ‘indulging their tastes for sightseeing’9 but we find no more references to restrictions of this nature. Indeed, shorter working hours enabled the working class to increasingly participate in leisure and amusement activities.10 With the onset of industrialisation towards the close of the Victorian era, and the establishment of an arbitration system in 1904, urban working hours were standardised. Standard weekly hours of work dropped to about forty-eight hours across all industries by 1914 and to less than forty hours by 1980.11

Fourthly, in England, urban public transport systems had improved sufficiently in the 1880s and early 1890s to permit late night travel between city centres and residential suburbs. In Australia, all capital cities had installed tram systems by the end of the century, as had some provincial cities such as Bendigo, Victoria, while large cities

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8 G Blainey, pp.310-11.
9 Bathurst Free Press, 26 Jul 1851.
10 Cannon, 1975, p.254.
such as Sydney and Melbourne had built suburban and inter-urban rail networks.\textsuperscript{12} Circus proprietors since Radford’s day were sensitive to the need for families to return to their homes by a reasonable hour, to the extent of even having carriages waiting outside the circus for their convenience. The construction of urban transport systems allowed swift, mass transportation. For its 1893 extended Sydney season, the Fitzgerald brothers secured ground adjoining the Benevolent Asylum, at the junction of George, Pitt and Devonshire streets, and opposite the [then] Redfern Railway Station [now Central Station], a convenient position in relation to ‘the whole of the Western and Illawarra railway suburbs’, as well as trams from Sydney’s inner suburbs.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Fifthly}, in England, technology was being applied to entertainment, sometimes falteringly and uncertainly, but decisively. In Australia, it was too, with circuses large and small constantly tinkering with new modes of delivery, especially in the areas of lighting, configuration and transportation. The regular visits of the brothers Wirth and FitzGerald to the United States, England and Europe in the 1890s and early 1900s suggests a healthy curiosity in not only \textit{what} was being done in the areas of circus arts and management but also \textit{how} it was being done.

\textit{We saw all the big shows ... [We] were invited to join the company for a few days ... and travelled in the same trains for a week, and saw the ins and outs of everything.}\textsuperscript{14}
As the proprietor of Australia’s largest circus, Dan FitzGerald, explained in 1895, success in the circus business was largely a function of the birth rate since, simply, ‘no children, no circus’.

As flippant as his remark may seem, population growth was the most significant factor in sustaining the demand for circus entertainment. But, as Table 13 demonstrates, while Australia’s population, degree of urbanisation, rail systems and, except for the early 1890s, its gross domestic product, steadily expanded between the 1850 and 1920, the number of known circus and other touring companies was volatile. The more or less steady growth in the number of itinerant companies from the 1850s was arrested by the economic depression of the 1890s. However, these raw numbers do not tell us the extent to which give Australia’s circuses improved their mobility and productivity to reach larger numbers of people, nor the extent to which their activities were regularly augmented by large American circuses, nor reveal how itinerant companies, including circus companies, varied greatly in character and size.

Rail

Australia’s various rail networks carried mixed blessings for circus, as the English showman, E H Bostock, found when he toured his combined circus and vaudeville show, Bostock & Wombells, in Australia in 1906.

Business in Australia was much better than it had been in South Africa, although the journeys from place to place were much longer. Another great difficulty that presented itself was due to the difference between the rail gauges of South Africa and Australia. As

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Economy & scale

a matter of fact, there were two [sic] different gauges in the Commonwealth. [Bostock & Wombells Novelty Circus and Complete Menagerie, 1906].

In Australia, government-built railways expanded at a less dramatic pace than in the United States. In 1872, eight American circuses travelled by rail when the great era of the American railroad circus began. Although there is evidence of limited reliance on rail transport by Australian circus as early as 1872 – when some of Burtons company entrained from Goulburn to Sydney – it took the example of a large American circus to demonstrate how a circus could use the colonial rail systems to effectively execute a provincial tour. After completing its first Melbourne season on 17 February 1877, Cooper, Bailey & Co. commenced its tour of Victoria’s provincial towns on two ‘special’ trains. The first train carried the gilded, brightly painted circus vans, while the second carried the horses, mules, zebras, camels, and elephants. The first ‘railroad show’ organised in Australia, its twenty-eight carriages and wagons were fewer in number and probably smaller in size than those it used on American rail lines. The South Australian Railways traffic manifest, summarised in Table 14, provide a glimpse of the composition of Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s thirty-four carriage ‘special’ train. Thirty-five carriages were used for the subsequent N S W tour.19

16 Bostock, pp.178-80.
17 Speaigh, p.133.
18 Goulburn Evening Penny Post, 18 May 1872.
19 Sydney Morning Herald, 7 May 1877.
The spectacle of these large American rail-based circuses impressed the new generation of Australian circus men, eager to approach their business in new ways. After seasons in Sydney and Noumea in 1888, the Wirth brothers ‘looked at life with different eyes’ and decided to ‘drop the old life ... [for] ours must be a city show, with up-to-date acts and actors’. In 1895, their chief rivals, the FitzGerald brothers, concluded that ‘the mere travelling for business was a dull, humdrum sort of affair’ and took time out to visit the United States ‘hoping to discover secrets in the circus line which might be brought to Australia’. Interviewed after his return, Dan FitzGerald described America as ‘the greatest place in the world for the circus’ and the circus business in America as ‘a payable one’.

The railway companies offer such facilities, and the lighting, loading, etc., are so easily arranged. Barnum’s, of course, is the biggest show in the world. It is quite a marvellous sight to see it loaded and unloaded ... To conduct a circus of the size of Barnum & Bailey in Australia was not feasible. FitzGerald Brothers circus would be ... bankrupt in six months if we ran a show like that. You can only successfully run a show that size in a country like America where they are catering for 70 [sic] millions of people.

The immediate manifestations of these tours of study were the adoption of rail-based transport and the regular importation of artists from England, Europe and America. Wirths moved on to rail by the end of 1888 and FitzGeralds adopted rail by 1895. Before making the transition to rail-based transport, the Wirth and

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20 G Wirth, Round the world with a circus, pp.41-4.
21 Bulletin, 29 Sep 1895.
22 Anon, 1895.
23 Anon, 1895.
FitzGerald circuses had each grown about as large as a wagon-based circus could, as Table 15 demonstrates. Wirth’s first importation of artists was a Wild West show from San Francisco in 1890. FitzGerald’s first importation was its so-called New London Company – a programme of acts more representative of the music hall than circus - brought from London in 1895. By this time, Wirth Brothers had already departed Australia on a world odyssey. Until the Wirths’ return in 1900, FitzGerald’s had little substantial competition. In 1897, the American showman, ‘Happy Jack’ Sutton, wrote from New Zealand to the New York Clipper to sum up the situation

The Probasco Circus has made a most successful season through New Zealand, and winter here. The Fitzgerald Brothers close their season in West Australia, and that is about all the circuses in Australia. All others are snap shows … After the great boom in variety business in Australia the calm has come and left many good people to hustle for a cold winter. The Palace Theatre, Sydney, one of the finest of modern times, closed up Saturday, and stranded specialty companies are reported in many of the colonies. [Picture showman] Karl Hertz made a clean sweep and got out. All who linger get stuck. The only thing that catches the people here is a circus, band, wagons, sawdust and spangles.24

The contest between FitzGerald Brothers and Wirth Brothers for Australia’s circus supremacy was renewed in 1900. The eventual triumph of Wirths by 1906 proved that Australia, in that age, could not support more than one large circus company of international standing, since ‘the population wasn’t there, the roads weren’t there

24 New York Clipper, 12 Jun 1897.
[and] rail was pretty dear for a small show'. On the other hand, with its larger and more evenly distributed population and a better developed infrastructure, the United States supported a larger number of large circuses. The American circus industry reached its zenith in 1911 when thirty-one rail-based shows travelled the United States, servicing a population of some ninety-two million people over some 400,000 kilometres of track. That year, only one large rail-based Australian circus, Wirth Brothers, served a population of some 4.5 million people over some 25,876 kilometers of available track. The limited data available, adjusted to 2005 price levels, demonstrates how costs dramatically increased as a proportion of increasingly economised total costs for a rail-based circus over a sixty-two year period. Clinging to the rail-based transport with which it had been identified since 1888, the ever-increasing cost of this mode of transport, as suggested in Table 16, eventually contributed to the demise of Wirths in 1963.

**Road transport**

Travel by road nevertheless remained the norm for the majority of Australian circuses, by horse-drawn covered wagons until the early 1920s and thereafter, increasingly, by motorised vehicles. Although motorisation enabled a circus to potentially visit a different town every night, ’a feat beyond the capacity of Dobbin and Ginger’, the distances travelled by horse-drawn circuses were impressive given the conditions of the day. During a sixteen-month-long tour of New South Wales, from January 1912 to April 1913, the Gus St Leon Great

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25 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.274.
27 Fernandez, p.37.
United Circus played 217 towns and cover a distance of 5,510 miles. This distance was covered entirely by road, except for a few miles between Hornsby and Gosford, N S W, where rail was used. 29

This data deserves comparison with another published touring record, the 1886 tour of England and Wales of the famous English circus of ‘Lord’ George Sanger. 30 Although these touring experiences were some twenty-six years apart, each was a horse-drawn circus and among the largest and more prestigious of its day on its home turf. Despite Australia’s infrastructural improvements by 1913, Table 17 shows that the Australian circus clearly faced greater logistical challenges than an English circus in terms of distances between towns, sparseness of population and underdeveloped road systems. The Sanger data suggests that, playing nearly five towns each week, almost every English and Welsh town visited was a ‘one night stand’. In contrast, a partial reconstruction of the St Leon route over the stated period suggests that, the length of stands varied significantly between towns in this pre-motorised era.

A small circus, Holden Brothers, which mostly confined its activities to provincial Victoria, began to motorise in 1923. Within two years its ten horse-drawn wagons were replaced with twelve motor vehicles. With wagons, Holden Brothers played four towns a week: with motorisation ‘they played five and six a week’ 31 and could easily move beyond their home state into New South Wales. 32 ‘Glad to try something different’, Perry Brothers Circus motorised with ADC

29 Referee, 30 Apr 1913.
30 Lukens, 1956, App I.
32 Shoalhaven Telegraph, 16 May 1927, 16 Feb 1928.
trucks in 1924. With tyres of solid rubber, these vehicles could cope with the crudely formed roads of Australia’s interior. By 1927, St Leon made the transition to motor vehicles, financed by Dave Hardie, a Sydney tentmaker.

The horse travelling was going out by that time and so Dave financed the St Leons into two little Ford trucks, second hand things. They were only one-ton models, little tabletops. For the amount of stuff we had to carry we really needed ten of them.

Motorisation allowed proprietors to ‘crowd profits into as few nights as possible and keep moving on to where fresh profits could be made’ and freed a circus of the limitations of horse-drawn transport. With motorisation, a circus could move faster and with more directional flexibility to sustain the revenues demanded by the economic landscape of the 1920s. After switching to motor vehicles in the early 1930s, Ashtons covered up to 100 miles a day for a one-night stand. Even with motorisation, however, small circuses ‘moved very slowly in those days’. Often undercapitalised, they relied on multiple gilly loads, and had to contend with mechanical breakdowns and, just like wagon-based circuses, had to negotiate rough country roads and unbridged rivers. The Nullarbor Plain was still a major challenge for a motorised circus in 1949, the year Silvers Circus made the crossing of some 1,600 kilometres to Western Australia:

33 M King, in St Leon, 1984, p.272.
34 M King, 1989, interview, Tape 30.
36 Fernandez, p.5.
The first day out we made good progress travelling ninety miles before lunch and a further 120 miles before dark, making 210 miles the first day. Next day the trouble started. About a couple of miles out we came across a boggy patch. Mine was the first truck to get stuck in the mud and we had to unhook the caravan to get her out. We had to dig with shovels and put stones and bushes under the wheels. Finally we got her out then attached a long rope from the truck to the caravan to pull it out ... We only travelled sixty-four miles that day. Then more trouble started. When the big horse semi [sic] reached the camp the grooms let the horses out for a run right in the middle of the Nullarbor Plains with no fences on either hand for thousands of miles ... The horses were lost for six days, and in that time the searchers had ridden hundreds of miles on horseback and by trucks. In the end we had to employ black trackers ... These chaps finally located the horses about 100 miles northeast from where they got away ... The last half of the journey consisted of a few breakdowns in mechanical trouble. However, we finally reached the town of Norseman ... ten days from the time we started the crossing.  

With horse-drawn wagons ‘it took you twelve months to do one state’. With motorisation and improved roads, a circus covered five states in twelve months by the 1950s.  

As a prosperous post-war Australia supported two large circuses, the rail-based Wirth Brothers had to meet the sustained competition of the motorised circus of Bullen Brothers. In 1955, Bullen’s presented twenty-six acts in a tworing format, employed eighty permanent staff, and was transported by fifty-six vehicles and caravans.  

By 1961, Bullen Brothers was

40 Anon, 1955.
Australia’s biggest show\textsuperscript{41} and when this circus closed for the last time in 1969, the enterprise numbered ninety-four vehicles\textsuperscript{42}

**Comparisons**

So, of the three modes of transport examined – wagon, rail and motor – which served Australian circus best? **Table 18** provides a comparison of the itineraries of three major circuses (St Leons, Wirths, McConvilles) from the same month (June) but in different eras (1879, 1916, 1948), different states (South Australia, N S W, Queensland) and each dependent upon different modes of transport (wagon, rail, motorised). This same data, summarised in **Table 19**, demonstrates that the rail-based circus was clearly capable of covering more ground and servicing a greater population than the other two. The productivity of the motorised circus compared to the wagon-based circus was not that much greater, although the motorised circus made longer ‘jumps’ more quickly when needed.

**Economy**

It was claimed in 1909 that Australia’s showmen ‘pumped’ £500,000 into the nation’s economy.\textsuperscript{43} Although official statistics provided no specific data relating to leisure and recreation, this figure has at least the ring of credibility. After allowing for associated ‘multiplier’ effects, Australia’s showmen might have accounted for about 1% of the total value of final goods and services – Australia’s Gross

\textsuperscript{41} Outdoor Showman, Jan-Feb 1961.
\textsuperscript{42} Sunday Telegraph, 18Aug 1974.
\textsuperscript{43} Broome with Jackomos, p.43.
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Domestic Product - of about £280 million in that year. Australia’s itinerant show industry comprised, of course, a wide range of entertainment genres but, as Table 20 shows, circus companies were the most numerous on the road in 1909. In 1909, each of the ten circuses touring, and all but five of the other twenty-four companies, were of domestic origin although, of course, many relied on imported personnel and content to varying degrees. Most of these companies were dedicated, sometimes exclusively, to servicing the provincial areas with their entertainments, enabling them to not only avoid the costs and operational restrictions of city seasons but enjoy the widespread prosperity of rural Australia.

Although the expenditures of a business firm were recycled within a local economy, what the transitory circus earned in one town or district might be spent in another town or district perhaps hundreds of miles away, and perhaps days or weeks later. The salaries, wages and profit shares paid its employees and owners might be similarly lagged in time and distance before being spent in another locality.

In 1834, the biggest of the London pleasure fairs, Bartholomew Fair in Smithfield, generated lucrative commerce, in transport, accommodation and in the supply of food and drink, its ‘hucksters and tricksters’ notwithstanding. The fair’s provision of entertainment simultaneously generated a demand for concomitant goods and services, a positive ‘externality’ in the language of economics. Inevitably, from the localised perspective of small town businesspeople, a well-patronised circus in Australia was likely to

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44 Vamplew [ed.], 1987, pp.133, 139, 219. A spending multiplier of 4.5 was obtained for 1909.
give the impression that it was merely a ‘money making concern’ rather than, like Bartholomew Fair, a generator of positive externalities. Negative sentiments about itinerant showmen who took their profits with them were not infrequently expressed in the provincial press.

We have seen the big bubble, and are all crying and wishing we had that £1,700 back again. It would about clear off the debt of our new church, and how happy we should be. [W W Coles Concorporated Shows, Tamworth, 1881].

We have too many of these travelling shows taking money out of the place at the expense of local shopkeepers and it is thought that it would be well if the Borough Council would increase the fee for allowing the performance within the Borough boundaries from the 2 guineas now charged to £5 or £10. [St Leons Royal Palace Circus, New Zealand, 1886].

If commentators expressed concerned at the money extracted from local townships by travelling shows, circus proprietors bemoaned the ‘expense’ incurred in bringing their entertainments to the frontier. At Condobolin, N S W, in 1899, the American circus proprietor E L Probasco casually remarked that ‘circus life is not all beer and skittles. It takes a heap of money to keep a concern like this going’. Although a single itinerant show might withdraw money

46 Gundagai Times, 18 Dec 1878.
47 Cornwall Chronicle, 1 Sep 1849.
49 New Zealand Herald, 8 Sep 1886.
50 Condobolin Argus, 2 Aug 1898.
from local circulation, an *industry* of itinerant shows contributed to provincial economic stability and prosperity by augmenting, albeit temporarily, levels of local economic activity. In 1952, Wirth Brothers’ advance manager, H E Kelly, squarely commented on the issue with remarkable economic insight:

Certainly sums of money are taken out of each town. However, the fact must not be overlooked that large sums of money are spent in each town by the circus ... With about 150 people travelling with Wirths Circus ... these people are going to spend a considerable amount of money every day in every town ... No town, state or country is self-supporting. We each must trade freely with our neighbours, irrespective of distance ... It is the circulation of money, not its location, that determines prosperity. In the final analysis, the economic value of the pound depends on what it purchases rather than upon who receives it.  

Summary

The circus was and remains an economic concern as well as a social and cultural institution. Australia’s circus entrepreneurs over time demonstrated their dynamic adaptability in seeking, within the constraints of serviceable population and supporting infrastructure, ever more economic forms of accommodation and mobility. In economic terms, Australia’s circus firms strove to achieve ever-higher levels of productivity and address the operational and competitive challenges confronting them.

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51 Wirth Brothers Circus 1952 programme, reproduced in Fogarty, 2000, p.134.
Although a vehicle for social cohesion and cultural enrichment, however superficial, repetitive or banal, the touring circus was also a medium for engineering economic cohesion. While there might only be a passing connection between what a circus earned and what a circus spent in the same town or locality, from a regional and even a national perspective the peripatetic Australian circus contributed to economic activity.

Figure 23
A small ‘one poler’ outback circus, Hogan & Duckworth’s, about 1912, one of many that travelled the bush. Author’s collection.

Figure 24
The spacious tents of the American circus, Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Great International Allied Shows, Melbourne, 1877. Royal Historical Society of Victoria.
Figure 24a
The disembarkation of Cooper, Bailey & Co.’s Great International Allied Shows in Melbourne, 1877. The company actually arrived a month earlier than the date (‘Feb 14th’) indicated in the top right-hand corner of the picture. American Antiquarian Association.