

The First of the Lion Tamers

How a Clever Cobbler Became the World's Greatest Showman

By MAURICE BROWN KIRBY

Drawings by John Sloan

FORTY miles from London, in the little town of Braintree, Essex, George Wombwell was a prosperous cobbler a few years more than a century ago. When unoccupied with trade he spent his idle hours reading the newspapers of London, where he had never been.

In April, 1805, he observed in an issue of "The Times" an account of two enormous snakes that had been brought from India by John Wells, skipper of the ship Elizabeth, which was lying at the East India docks. The reptiles were described at length, and the description proved so interesting that George Wombwell called in his next door neighbors to astound them with the news.

According to the paper, the snakes were twenty-five feet in length, and could swallow young pigs at a gulp. Although "The London Times" was looked upon in Braintree with little less reverence than the Holy Bible, of which each household possessed a copy, George Wombwell and his neighbors refused to accept the snake story, and concluded that its author had been using liquor in large quantities—a habit to which writers had been traditionally addicted since the original plucking of the gray goose's quills.

On the following day "The Times" reiterated its former story with embellishments that appeared even more grossly exaggerated to the innocent, untraveled inhabitants of Braintree. The matter became the topic of the day in this little English town; and Wombwell, for the satisfaction of his curious eyes, decided to visit London and see if the snakes were as the paper had described them.

Closing the shop, he strapped about his waist a belt containing his savings, which amounted to something over a hundred pounds, and took stage for his destination. On reaching Great Britain's metropolis, the bootmaker immediately inquired his way to the docks, where he found several hundred people, who, like himself, had been attracted by the published accounts of the snakes. With some difficulty he obtained permission from the skipper to go aboard the Elizabeth, where he saw the reptiles in a cage which had been constructed on deck for their accommodation, and with his own eyes witnessed the destruction of pigs as described by "The Times" writer.

Dreamed of Snakes

GEORGE WOMBWELL was twenty-eight years old, and did not know what "show" business meant. He had never been inside a theater or museum; but, arguing from his own, his neighbors', and the Londoners' interest in the snakes, it occurred to him that if the reptiles were placed on exhibition at a convenient spot the public willingly would pay to see them. The idea took such compelling possession of his mind that he spent the night dreaming of an immense building filled with snakes which all London was crowding to see at a shilling apiece, with himself in charge of the box office till. Early the following morning he hid once more to the East India docks, and when he returned to his lodgings in the evening, John Wells, skipper of the ship Elizabeth, had ninety pounds of George Wombwell's money, and the latter owned the snakes. With the remainder of his savings Wombwell secured a month's lease of a building near London docks, whither the public was respectfully invited to witness the rare exhibits—tickets, one shilling.

One hundred years ago neither press agents nor bureaus of publicity existed, but Wombwell and his snakes were well advertised as they had attained that ever sought goal of showmen—the focal point of the public eye. In London's newspapers the story of the sale was prominently recorded, and George Wombwell's show place, consisting merely of a large hall with neither chairs nor benches, was filled every day with curious Britishers, who gladly gave a shilling to see the big snakes.

This little showman with his two vipers supplied



cal circus modestly it describes the ocelot as follows:

STOP! HEAR! LISTEN!
GEORGE WOMBWELL
The Foremost Naturalist of Great Britain, Has Just Received from the Darkest Depths of South America's Fearful Forests

A WILD OCELOT!
The Terrible, Treacherous, Tiger Cat of the Andes. A Super-Superb Specimen of His Species, He Was Imported to this Country at Enormous Expense, and Is NOW, NOW, NOW!
on Exhibition at
WOMBWELL'S MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
In Commercial Street, East London
SEE HIM! HEAR HIS SCREECH! SEE HIM!

One morning George Wombwell opened the window blinds of his bed chamber, which was on the floor above the museum. He was prospering and the world looked good to him. The day was beautiful and the sun streamed into his face; but it was not the glare of the sun that caused him suddenly and vigorously to rub his eyes. It was a new sign, bigger than his own and painted in more vivid colors, hung on the house directly across the way. It read:

ANDREW WELLS
MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
!!! TEN VICIOUS VIPERS !!!

Competition—and competition with exclamation points. It was not an element that had entered into Wombwell's calculations. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Yes, there it was; all right and plain, exclamation points not only behind but before the words. Up to this moment he had enjoyed exclusive use of exclamation points in wholesale quantities, and he felt that the man across the way was an interloping impostor. Wombwell, however, did not waste time inveighing against his competitor. He cast about for something new. Hitherto he had had the only museum of natural history; now he must have the only something else. That day Wombwell spent in deep cogitation; that night he spent in painting a new sign, which replaced next morning the other that had attracted patrons to his show shop. It read:

GEORGE WOMBWELL'S MENAGERIE.
(N. B. A Menagerie is a Collection of Wild and Ferocious Animals.)

For general information he had added the definition of a menagerie, which, apparently, was not a common term in his day.

The man across the way proved a lively rival, else London was losing interest in the study of natural history as taught by Professor Wombwell, for shortly after the arrival on Commercial-st. of Professor Wells, with his collection of ten vicious vipers and six vicious exclamation points, the former closed his London menagerie and set out upon a long tour of the Provinces. In order to transport the menagerie, he had devised and constructed an enormous wagon twelve feet long, six feet wide, and six feet high. It was divided into eight iron barred compartments for housing the exhibits, and contained in addition a tiny sleeping apartment for

the roots of the wild animal business, which have spread throughout the world and grown to enormous proportions. Within a fortnight from the opening of his insignificant showshop Wombwell had recouped his outlay, and at the end of a month had added another hundred pounds to his bank account, when he met with the first misfortune of his career. One snake died. With plenty of food within reach, it deliberately starved itself to death. Wombwell had not become sufficiently versed in the habits of animals to know that captive snakes frequently refuse to eat, whereupon it becomes necessary to pry open their mouths and push food down their throats.

A Rare Bird Added

REDUCED to a single snake, the exhibition lost much of its drawing power, and when the box office thermometer began to fall, Wombwell bestirred himself to secure a new attraction. At the psychological moment a ship arrived in port bearing among other things a pelican which had been captured in Egypt. Evidencing the instinct of a smart showman, Wombwell bought the rare bird and placed it on exhibition with the remaining snake. Big Ben, as the pelican was called, spread eight feet from the tip of one wing to the tip of the other, and was said to be over a hundred years old. Shortly after his purchase of the pelican Wombwell obtained a year's lease on an empty store on Commercial-st., East London, and over the door there was nailed a sign which read, "George Wombwell, Naturalist."

As soon as his new show shop was in good running order, he visited the skippers of all foreign ships at the docks, and informed them that he would make it worth their while to import rare animals, and was willing to pay fancy prices for beasts, birds, and reptiles, strange to the English people. From the time of this offer Wombwell's collection gradually increased, until at the end of a year he possessed, in addition to the snake and pelican, a Russian cub bear, an American eagle, an ocelot, or tiger cat, from South America, a dog with three legs, a rabbit with no ears, and a small capuchin monkey of the breed usually adopted by peripatetic organ grinders.

Whenever he secured a new exhibit Wombwell would advertise the fact by writing out for distribution on the streets hundreds of handbills which rivaled in alliterative hysteria and polysyllabic enormities the best efforts of latter day press agents for American circuses. One of these handbills which has been preserved by a descendant of Wombwell is a sample of the others. With typi-