

Providence Institution for Savings

Established 1819

A Mutual Savings Bank

where interest is allowed
from day of Deposit to
day of Withdrawal

MAIN OFFICE
86 South Main Street

OLNEYVILLE BRANCH
1917-21 Westminster Street
Olneyville Square

EMPIRE-ABORN BRANCH
Between Westminster and Washington Sts.

Open all business days and Tuesday evenings
5 to 8:30. Olneyville Branch open
Saturday evenings also.

"The Old Stone Bank"

THE J. C. HALL CO., PROV., R. I.

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The Grand Caravan

R. I. Hist. Soc.



Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

April 10, 1933

The Grand Caravan

THOSE who find it genuinely amusing to peruse copies of early American newspapers are subject to various emotions depending upon their present-day interests in what the daily press has to offer in the way of literary enlightenment. Most readers of the ancient sheets enjoy the quaint and ponderous columns filled with curious American and European legends, over-sentimental love stories, and lengthy shipping reports; few, very likely, spend much time with the laboriously hand-set Congressional records and Presidential pronouncements, but, all seem to find keen interest in the advertising sections, particularly the announcements of theatrical and other public entertainments. For, these advertisements disclose a surprising change in tastes for diversion during the past one hundred years and more, and cause the average person to wonder how his ancestors of just a few centuries ago could have found any thrill in the performances which were offered for the "approbation and support" of the audiences. However, all things are relative, and the horseman who could



leap his steed over a canvas eight feet wide was as astounding to the wide-eyed youngster of 1800 as the shooting of a man from the mouth of a smoke-belching cannon is to the thrill-seeking youth of today.

Research into this fascinating subject indicates that Providence, during its early history, and well into the nineteenth century, was favored with equestrian exhibitions only at long intervals. It is also discovered that during the Revolutionary period, very few public amusements were indulged in by Rhode Islanders. The occasional exhibition of a wild animal, the simple feats of a mountebank, displays of wax figures, tight-rope walking, and dancing assemblies constituted the chief, if not the only, modes of entertainment until the establishment of the theatre which, of course, met with violent opposition on the part of many who regarded the institution as a danger to morals. The soil of early New England was never favorable to the cultivation of any sort of amusement; it required considerable fertilization before it began to yield any perceptible harvest in that endeavor.

In February, 1781, a tight-rope performance was presented in the Old State House on Benefit Street, and the

artist was a Mr. Templeton, a native of Virginia who had come to Providence to establish himself as a dentist. Not meeting with the encouragement which he expected, he supplemented the business of teeth-pulling with occasional performances upon the wire. Circus and minstrel show history is filled with amusing instances where the trombone player was also the troupe cook, and where the boss stake-driver did a turn at juggling in the show, but it would be difficult to find another case of a wire-walker who doubled in dentistry. Mr. Templeton's "various equilibriums", as he advertised his performance, were exhibited in one of the chambers of the historic Providence structure, and the price for admission was sixty dollars. Of course, that was in the days of fiat money, when the staggering amount charged for one ticket was worth about one dollar in silver. Nine years later, another exhibition of like character was offered in the same place by a Mr. Bennett of London.

It was nearly twenty years after that before another performance of rope-dancing, or walking the slack wire, took place at the Providence Theatre, then situated at the corner of Westminster and Mathewson Streets, on the present

site of Grace Church. Again, on Independence Day, 1821, a Mr. Godeau and a Miss Adolphe performed; and, a week later, at the same place, a six year old child appeared as one of the slack wire performers. It was not until 1826 that any project for establishing a circus in Providence was seriously considered, and then it was proposed to erect a permanent building where equestrian exhibitions could be held indoors regardless of the weather or the season of the year.

Samuel MacCracken, an equestrian of some note, obtained a license from the Town Council of Providence, on June 5, 1826, to open a circus and retain the privilege of promoting such entertainment for the period of one year. He was widely experienced in the management of circuses and traveling shows and he was probably quite typical of those pioneer promoters who sought to "give the public what it wanted". Through his efforts, entirely, a temporary arena, constructed of wood, was erected on a lot that fronted on Westminster Street and that ran back as far as Fulton Street. One of the entrances was on the latter street, and the other was opened on Union Street, then known as North Union Street. This particular area was then referred

to as Westminster Gardens, somewhat of an amusement park which had been laid out with winding walks, gardens and shrubbery. Various attractions had been presented there for some time before the erection of the circus. This innovation subsequently called the "Westminster Circus" enjoyed a long and prosperous career, and it, evidently, supplanted the Gardens as an amusement center, for no mention is ever made of the resort after the wooden building with its ring and rough board seats had been opened under the able direction of Professor MacCracken.

Few issues of the newspapers of those days did not mention an approaching series of performances or a review of the programs recently offered by some itinerant company that apparently enjoyed good business whenever its surprising feats were displayed. Although the various program features appear to be rather tame in comparison with the thousand and one wonders that may be seen in today's "three ring and two stage" tents, the old-time press agents were thoroughly up-to-date in their generous use of high-sounding adjectives and spell-binding phrases. They knew the power of such words as "stupendous, mammoth, grand, ferocious, unexampled,

man-eating, strange and untamed", but, observe what the circus fans had in store for them when they crowded into the "pavilions" to see what had been assembled from many lands for their delight and edification.

The horse was the mainstay of the early circus pretty much as it is today. The daily performances of the Grand Caravan, that exhibited in Providence late in the year 1826, opened with a grand entree by six beautiful horses with riders in full costume. A Mr. Hians was the riding master and his trained charges would lie down, sit up, go through a variety of positions, and conclude with a special feature by the horse, "Washington", a talented beast that would actually dance to the tune of Nancy Dawson. Following an offering by a lad who would leap whips, hoops and garters with his horse, the entire company presented an act of ground and lofty tumbling. This was followed by slack-wire walking by a Mr. Clover, and tight-rope walking by a Mr. Hunter who was the star performer of the show, for he appeared later in a display of surprising horsemanship when he offered his celebrated imitation of the "Drunken Hussar", and, incidentally, rode his horse without bridle or saddle. No description of the

special act entitled "The Miller's Frolic or Grandmother's and Grandfather's Return from the Mill", accompanies the program announcement in the press so its character must forever remain a secret, along with the nature of the comical antics of the show clown who was tendered a testimonial reception following the final performance here in Providence.

Local audiences were certainly thrilled a century ago when a company of "Real Indians was engaged to perform for a few nights". It was announced that the Indians would be dressed in the style of ancient chief warriors, with their bows and arrows, tomahawks, scalping knives, and war clubs together with all the implements of bloody warfare used by the wild natives. This performance commenced with a war dance, including a generous salvo of blood-curdling war whoops; then the performers indulged in a series of scalping manoeuvres that must have horrified the audience. The exhibition came to a grand finale with a grand battle on horseback between two rival chiefs, while music on the violin was rendered during the performance by one of the "wild" Indians.

This account could go on without end from this point, for Rhode Island

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audiences soon became circus-minded and demanded a continual display of all the wonders that the wise showmen could procure for the rapidly-growing road shows that soon followed regular itineraries with Providence always listed as a good "show town". Local folks never did see the spectacle of a blood-sweating behemoth, thousands of miles from his native haunts, disporting himself in a portable tank, back in the days before the Civil War, but they did gaze in wonder at a single dancing monkey from the Island of Borneo. Great herds of elephants did not come this way in those days, but boys and girls found just as much pleasure in peering at a captive ichneumon "famous for destroying crocodile eggs and young reptiles, and formerly worshipped by the Egyptians".

Additional Copies of this Booklet sent upon request.

ADDRESS

"THE OLD STONE BANK"

86 South Main Street, Providence



THE PROVIDENCE INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS, familiarly known as "The Old Stone Bank", is in its own right a historic institution of Rhode Island. Founded in 1819 as one of the first mutual savings banks in the country, it has since contributed vitally to the development and life of this community.

Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

"THE OLD STONE BANK"