

LOOK INTO THE MIRROR

THIS PAGE
IS UNAVAILABLE
ON THE DIGITAL
VERSION OF THE *VIPER*

LHE BICCESL CLOWN

COVER PHOTO COURTESY OF MARGO MONG.
COVER STORY ON PAGE 9!



G OWNING AROUNDI

We've got stuff to talk about in Issue 2 of the *Viper*, and you've already wasted the first page by checking yourself out in the mirror! We have just 16 more pages to cover everything we need to discuss!

So stop looking at yourself (you look good, we promise! You always do, as you well know! Stop fishing for compliments!) and let's get to talking about what matters:



ennsylvania's Oil Region was a popular stop for circuses throughout the 20th century.

Prosperous towns such as Emlenton, Franklin, and Oil City attracted the big time shows.

In 1930, Billboard magazine deemed Oil City as "...one of the best show towns in America."

"ONE HAS TO SEE TO APPRECIATE IT AND NOT TO SEE IT IS MISSING A SIGHT OF THE LIKE OF WHICH MAY NEVER BE BEHELD AGAIN IN A LIFETIME."

- THE DERRICK NEWSPAPER REPORTING ON P.T. BARNUM'S 1882 CIRCUS IN OIL CITY.



1906 circus in Oil City

WHEN THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

in 1882, newspapers announced P.T. Barnum's arrival and advised the Oil City superintendent to close schools for the day.

Half a dozen extra policemen were sworn in to help on circus day.

Trains were rerouted so
Barnum's two trains could be
accommodated. Extra
excursions from surrounding
communities to railroad
schedules were added to Oil
City that day.

Circus advertisements were plastered everywhere, upon walls and poles.



Playbills were distributed across the region, promising the exhibition of Jumbo, which was said to be "one of the largest elephants ever to be exhibited" at over 16 feet tall [see page 10 for more on Jumbo]. Also advertised were a herd of elephants, a fourlegged girl, and more.

On the day of the circus,
Barnum led a parade through
Oil City, and more than
15,000 spectators watched
the four-hour procession. The
parade boasted animal-filled
cages, bands, elephantdrawn chariots, over 400
horses, and more.

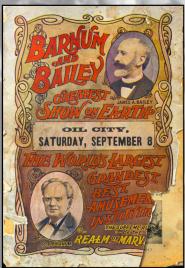
10,000 people attended the afternoon circus performance, while the evening show played to approximately 20,000.



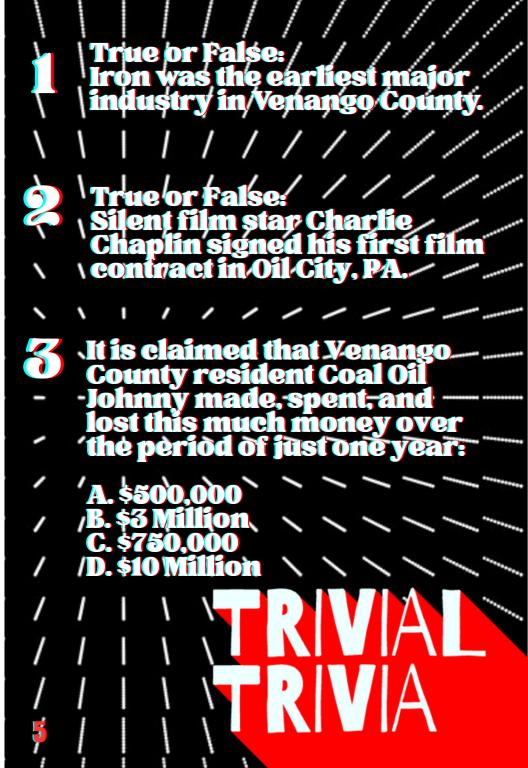
Circus parade with the calliope at the Center and Elm Streets in Oil City.

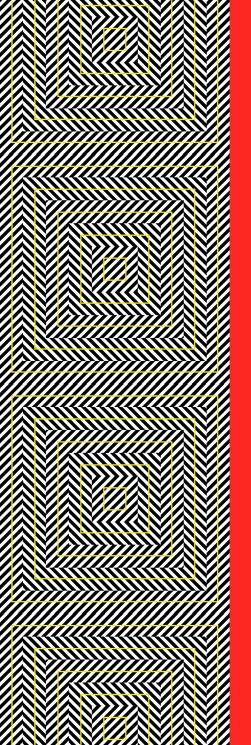
BEST SHOW TOWNS IN AMERICA

Along with P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show On Earth, other shows that toured across the region included Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Touring Show, the Cole Brothers Circus, Walter L. Main Circus, Robert Stickney's Big Show and Imperial Circus, the King Brothers Circus, and more.



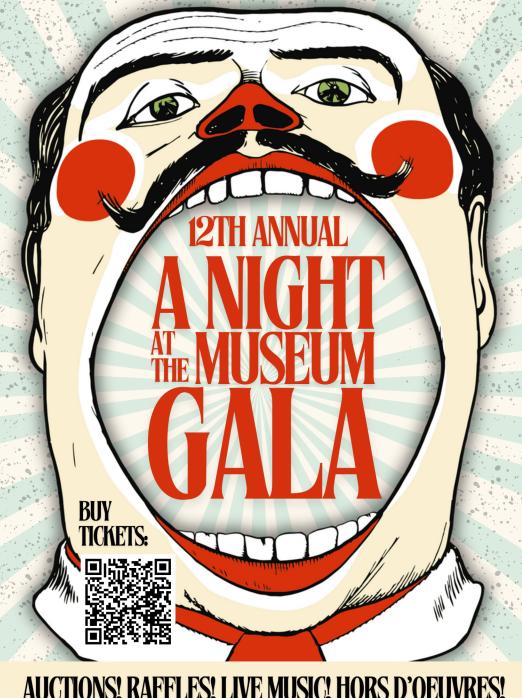
Program cover from Barnum And Bailey's *Greatest Show On Earth* from an Oil City performance. Courtesy of Margo Mong.





ANSWERS:

- 1. True. Iron making was the first major industry in Venango County. Early settlers established stone blast furnaces to produce iron. Approximately twenty-four furnaces were in operation between 1825 and 1845, with a large number of them in Rockland and Cranberry townships. Iron was shipped to Pittsburgh via the Allegheny River on steamboats. The iron production in the area contributed greatly to Pittsburgh's growth as an iron and steel center.
- 2. False. It is a common local myth (and a false one!) that Charlie Chaplin signed his first film contract after he performed at Oil City's Orpheum Theater with Fred Karno's Vaudeville Troupe in 1913. Records can be traced back to Chaplin signing his first contract for a period of one year with Keystone Film Company in September 1913 in Edendale, Los Angeles.
- 3. B. \$3 Million. It is believed that John Washington Steele, aka "Coal Oil Johnny," lost \$3 million (over \$50 million in 2025, adjusted for inflation!) over the period of one year. He received his money through inheritance and investments in the oil industry. It is claimed that he once went on a one-day spending spree where he spent \$100,000. Upon reflection, he admitted to spending his money "foolishly, recklessly, and wickedly." This included giving money away, throwing money to children, tipping lavishly, and being intoxicated for most of that time period.



AUCTIONS! RAFFLES! LIVE MUSIC! HORS D'OEUVRES!

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 11

The night will consist of a **cocktail hour** beginning at 6 pm featuring **hors d'oeuvres**, **beer**, **wine**, **and a specialty drink**, while our beautiful **Steinway piano** and **Wurlitzer Theater Organ** from Oil City's Latonia Theater will be played for the enjoyment of all guests. A **live auction** will immediately follow at 7 pm, and drawings for our basket raffle and silent auction will be held at 7:30 pm. Tickets to attend are \$30 each or \$50 per couple and can be purchased **by scanning the QR code to the left.**

SPONSOR THE GALA		
Diamond Sponsor \$1,000.00	8 complimentary tickets, full-page ad in program, website listing, program front cover recognition	
Platinum Sponsor \$500.00	4 complimentary tickets, 1/2 page ad in program, website listing	
Gold Sponsor \$250.00	2 complimentary tickets, 1/4 page ad in program	
Silver Sponsor \$100.00	1 complimentary ticket, listing in program	
DONATE TO THE GALA		
If you would like to donate a our 12th Annual Gala, you c	a gift certificate(s), gift basket and/or gift item(s) for an:	
Pick up you may call the Venango Museum at 814-676-2007 and one of our volunteers would be happy to pick up your donation in person.	Mail your donation to the Venango Museum at 270 Seneca Street, Oil City, PA 16301. Drop off your donation to the Venango Museum's front desk at 270 Seneca Street, Oil City, PA 16301. We are open Tuesday - Saturday 10am - 4pm.	
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(For donations) Item donated:		

(This helps us decide which auction/raffle to place the items)

Approximate value:

ELEPHANT HAUNTS CEMETERIES!

What are you more likely to find haunting a cemetery: a ghost or an elephant? In Pennsylvania's Oil Region, the answer might surprise you!

iss Burma, a 40-yearold, 4.5-ton Asian elephant, arrived at the Franklin Cemetery in 1953 alongside "midgets, clowns, aerialists, lot men, and circus officials" of the Mills Brothers Circus to lay a wreath at the gravesite of Ethel Vane Vensel.

Ethel Vane Vensel was a former aerialist with top circuses and the wife of former East Brady resident Charles Vensel, a general superintendent of the circus.

Miss Burma returned to the Oil Region four years later at the Reno Cemetery. In July 1957, the Mills Brothers Circus performed in Reno, and after the show, they went to the Reno Cemetery to pay their final respects to Maude Osbourne, the wife of circus publicity man Bill Osbourne.

Maude and her husband, Bill Osbourne, worked for the Mills Brothers Circus for years prior.

The Derrick reported that "Big Burma...carried off her part of the role in perfect aplomb under the commands of her trainer, Capt. Seagrave." The service ended with the circus bugler sounding Taps.



Captain Seagrave and Miss Burma at the Reno Cemetery in



Background photo: Miss Burma laid the wreath on Maude Osbourne's grave at Reno Cemetery in 1957.

MONSTER ELEPHANT

arnum's Greatest Show on Earth arrived in the Oil Region several times around the turn of the 19th century. The show played in Oil City in 1882, 1885, 1887, 1889, and 1906 and reportedly toured nearby towns such as Titusville, Warren, and Meadville.

The Greatest Show on Earth was a three-ring circus known for its elaborate costumes, thrilling acts, and use of animals in performances.

Among those animals was a "monster elephant" named Jumbo, billed as the "biggest elephant in the world."



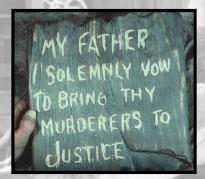
P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth brought Jumbo, the "biggest elephant in the world," to Oil City on September 29, 1882.

"THE BIGGEST ELEPHANT IN THE WORLD"

Jumbo was a 6.7-ton African bush elephant. He was 10 feet and 7 inches tall, but Barnum often billed him as taller, ranging from 13 to 16 feet.

Of Jumbo's arrival to Oil City it was said that "The first streak of daylight will cause the children, yes even the children of larger growth, to be up and on the alert for a sight of the wonderful Jumbo, and it is altogether likely that Jumbo figured very prominently in the dreams of many sleepers last night in the city."











NEXT UP IN OUR

2025 SILENT FILM SERIES

THE BLACK PIRATE

"The love story of a bold buccaneer"

September 13 | 1 pm & 5 pm

featuring live musical accompaniment on the museum's 1928 Wurlitzer Theater Organ, originally from Oil City's Latonia Theater!

> GET FREE TICKETS HERE:











OCTOBER 17



NOVEMBER 22



he luxurious
Latonia Theater in
Oil City was a
popular motion picture
house in the region for
several decades.

The Venango Museum acquired the Latonia's 1928 Wurlitzer Theater organ in 1988. Thousands of hours of volunteer and professional labor were required to restore the organ to playable condition, which includes more than 600 separate pipes, as well as numerous sound effects and percussion instruments. Museum staff were fortunate to meet the

LEARN MORE & DONATE HERE:

team at Musical



Restorations, LLC, based in Dayton, VA, in 2024, who are set to work on the organ's restoration in phases over the next few years.

This comprehensive restoration is set to return the Wurlitzer to its former glory. By the end of the multi-year project, the organ will look and sound exactly as it once did when it was first installed at the Latonia Theater when the theater opened in 1929.

As of June 2025, \$20,000 worth of restoration work on the organ has been completed, thanks to several generous donors at the museum. The entire project will cost over \$60,000 by the end!

WHAT'S A GLOCKIN-SPIEL?



A glockenspiel is a musical percussion instrument having a set of tuned metal pieces mounted in a frame and struck with small hammers. The glockenspiel on our Wurlitzer Theater Organ was just fully restored in June 2025!



OIL CITY TO SCALP BUFFALO BILL!

Prosperous oil towns of the region attracted many bigname performers to put on shows for their residents. One of these bignames included popular showman Buffalo Bill.

uffalo Bill performed in the towns of Oil City, Franklin, and Titusville.

After his first show in Oil City in 1873, newspapers reported that his show was "atrociously poor" and that his company "swindles the audience by claiming all the lower part of the house as reserved and charging a dollar admission to all but the gallery."

Buffalo Bill and his company were advised "not to come to Oil City again. They may get scalped." Buffalo Bill returned to Oil City with his show four years later.

Upon his return, he made it clear that his absence was not due to his fear of the threats, but rather because he had been fighting in the Indian Wars. He performed his new play (called *The Red Right Hand* which chronicled his experiences during the battles in which he fought) at the Grand Opera House in Oil City.

The people of Oil City, who had once threatened Buffalo Bill, filled the opera house to capacity to witness his return.

The Derrick once wrote of Mr. Cody: "Thus, it can be recorded in the history of this city that the great [Buffalo] Bill Cody was here; that he was first scorned, then he was praised and finally he was caught up in a world filled with competitive business."

that passed through the region became part of the lives of some of the town's residents who were inspired to join in.

il City native Anna
Chelton joined the
circus when she was
18 in the early 1900s. She
toured with the Barnum &
Bailey Circus for a time
under the stage name "Elma
Moore, the Fat Girl." She
was billed as weighing 731
pounds.

In 1911, The Derrick reported that "when she was 4, she developed elephantiasis and took on flesh at an alarming rate, and by the time she was in her teens, it was a burden for her to move around." Later, while on tour, her right leg was injured and had to be amputated. She received a custom-made wooden leg, described as "the largest one in the world" as it was rounder "than the measurement of the chest of a normal man."



Oil City native Anna Chelton.

harles Vensel from East
Brady ran away from home
at the age of 11 to join the
circus. In 1897, Vensel traveled
all over the United States and
Europe with the Barnum &
Bailey Circus.

In 1901, Vensel toured with the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show and he toured with the Kit Carson Wild West Show in 1914.

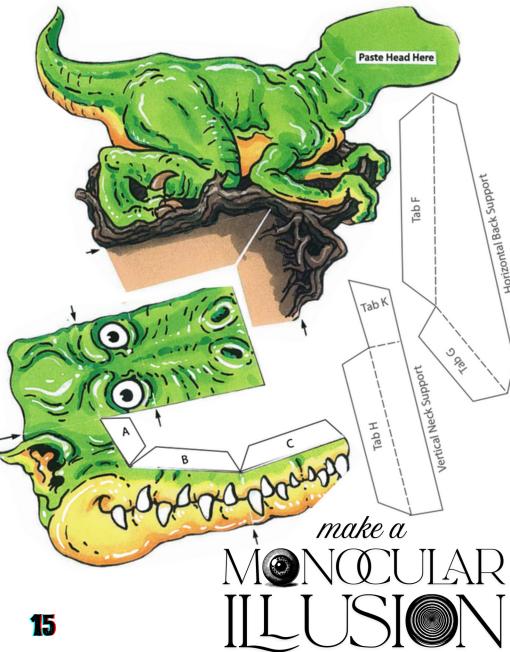
Charles would go on to be the superintendent of the Mills Brothers Circus. He was attributed to turning the Mills Brothers Circus into the world's largest motorized circus by 1940.



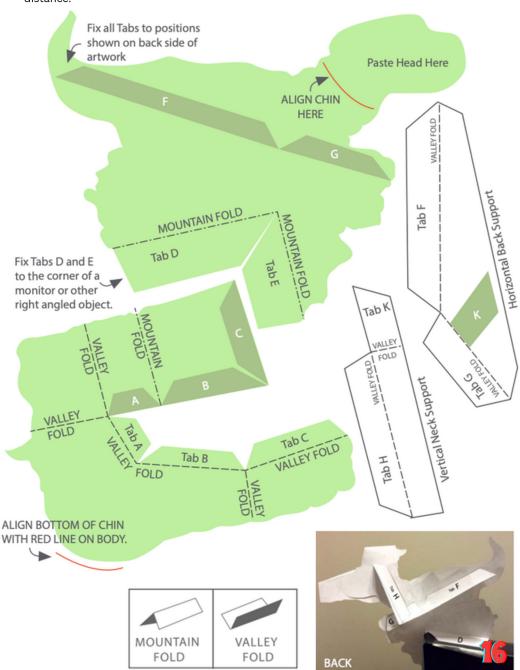
Charles Vensel working on a circus set c. 1930.

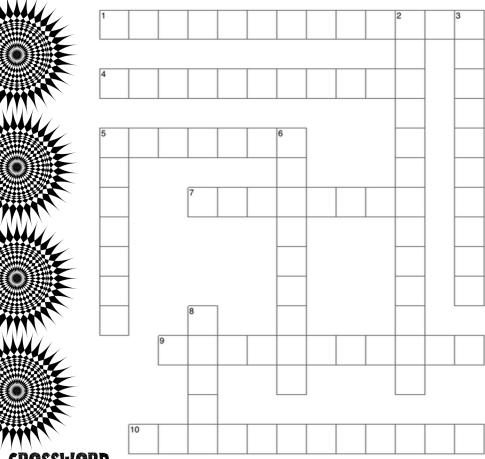
CUT OUT, FOLD, AND ASSEMBLE USING THE NEXT PAGE. TAPE THE DRAGON TO THE CORNER OF A MONITOR OR OTHER RIGHT ANGLED OBJECT. THE ILLUSION WORKS BEST IF YOU'RE LOOKING UP SLIGHTLY AT THE DRAGON. VIEW FROM 2 FT, CLOSE ONE EYE, LOOK INTO THE EYES OF THE DRAGON, ROCK BACK AND FORTH





A monocular illusion is an optical illusion that deceives the brain into perceiving depth or other visual elements that are not present, even when using only one eye. These illusions exploit how the brain interprets visual cues that usually provide information about depth and distance.





CROSSWORD

ALL ANSWERS CAN BE FOUND IN THIS ISSUE OF "THE VIPER"

ACROSS

- **1** Maude Osbourne and her husband, Bill, worked for this circus for years before her death (two words)
- **4** Coal Oil Johnny received his fortune from investments in the oil industry, as well as:
- **5** Name of the Oil City theater where film star Charlie Chaplin performed in 1913
- 7 Circus aerialist Ethel Vane Vensel was buried at this Oil Region cemetery
- **9** Famous showman who was threatened with being scalped if he returned to Oil City (two words)
- **10** A musical percussion instrument having a set of tuned metal pieces mounted in a frame and struck with small hammers

DOWN

- 2 A condition that Oil City native Anna Chelton developed at age 4
- 3 Iron was once shipped to Pittsburgh on the Allegheny River via these vessels
- **5** Billboard Magazine named this Oil Region town as "one of the best show towns in America" in 1930 (two words)
- **6** An optical illusion that deceives the brain into perceiving depth or other visual elements that are not present, even when using only one eye
- 8 Name of "one of the largest elephants ever to be exhibited."

MEMBERSHIP FORM

GENERAL OPERATING SUPPORT CAMPAIGN

Become a member of the museum or renew your membership

Name	and exhibits for one year.	today! Membership grants you free admission to the Museum
tax-deductible.	meet their daily expenses. I understand t	I would like to donate \$
	understand that my contribution is	to help the Venango Museum

Name

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