

# Exploitation was an unfortunate fair tradition

by [Jane McClure](#) // August 8th, 2014

Going to a county or state fair can be a highlight of the summer. It's fun to see the exhibits and animals, try new foods, take a ride or play a game of skill. But one dubious part of the history of many fairs, including the Minnesota State Fair, is that of the sideshow.

The Disability Social History project, a website devoted to preservation of historic issues, notes that: "For one hundred years (1840 – 1940) the sideshow was one of America's most popular forms of entertainment. Today the same shows would be considered unacceptable and cruel, or as one disability rights activist put it, 'the pornography of disability.'"

One of the best-known stories of a person exploited in this way was John Merrick, the so-called "Elephant man" in 19th century England. It was at this time that P.T. Barnum brought the concept of such shows to the United States, as part of his circus.

While Barnum touted his productions as the "Greatest Show on Earth," the notion of what he promoted as entertainment would appall us today. Author Robert Bogdan in his book "Freak Show" stated that, "How we view people who are different has less to do with what they are physiologically than with who we are culturally. 'Freak' is a way of thinking, of presenting, a set of practices, an institution – not a characteristic of an individual."

One particularly cruel aspect of history was that children with disabilities who were born into slavery were often sold to shows and separated from their families. An example of this is Millie and Christina, conjoined twins born into slavery in 1852. They were sold for \$30,000 and after years of abuse and exploitation, gained freedom after the Civil War. Of their own choosing, they took control of their earnings and made a good income through sideshows and public appearances.

One group of people who came to the Minnesota State Fair in the 1930s was the Singer Midgets, a term we would not use today because of its derogatory meaning. These little people made up a troupe of performers who portrayed the Munchkins in MGM's 1939 classic "The Wizard of Oz." They were organized by Leo Singer, a Viennese showman. Members sang, danced, wrestled and did acrobatic stunts. History of the 1939 movie indicates that many members of the troupe were Bavarian and didn't speak English.

The troupe grew in response to the needs of the movie, with about 125 members hired from around the country. The performers were paid \$50 per week plus expenses during the preliminary costume and makeup tests, and \$100 per week through the rehearsal and filming of the Munchkin scenes. Payment came through Singer and there were claims of pay being withheld. But in other histories performer spoke highly of Singer. The group disbanded in the 1940s and members returned to their homes.

Learn more [here](#).

---

*Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at [access@accesspress.org](mailto:access@accesspress.org) or 651-644-2133 if you have questions.*

*The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the [Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities](#).*