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AMERICAN ALBUM

Step Right Up, Ladies and Gents, to See the End of an Oddity



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

The King of the Midway, Ward Hall, upper left, and, clockwise, some of his associates: Diane Falk, a sword swallower; Pete Terhurne, known as Poobah; Chris Christ, Mr. Hall's business partner; Vicki Condor, left, the Four-Legged Woman, and Chelsea Ramer, a fire eater; and Red Stuart, the Human Blockhead.

By [CHARLIE LeDUFF](#)

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YORK, Pa. — Ward Hall, the King of the Midway, has perpetrated perhaps his greatest illusion. He has risen from the dead. He has collected up his big top, rustled up the midget, dusted off the rubber fetuses and beat it back out on the road. Once again, he is the geriatric front man of the last traveling freak show in America.

American Album



Portraits of offbeat Americans by Charlie LeDuff, with videos, appear every other Monday.

Retirement just didn't sit right.

"I live in [Florida](#) but I never summered in Florida, and I discovered it's too damn hot," says Mr. Hall, standing inside his trailer in a back lot of the York Fair in [Pennsylvania](#). He is in a white suit, stained on the elbows and rump. Some sequins have fallen off the lapel.

His freak show, the World of Wonders, has been shoved by the organizers to the back corner of the fairgrounds, next to the horse stables.

"I missed the road life anyway," he goes on, his elegant vaudevillian verbiage nearly drowned out by the sound system of the whirling Himalaya thrill ride. "I missed my friends. I missed the money. This is what I am."

And, returning to the nation's state fair circuit after a full season off, Mr. Hall has discovered something he already knew. When he goes, it will be the end of an old-time American art form.

Back in the heyday, in the '40s, '50s and '60s, a fair number of people with deformities were happy to let you look at them for a price. Not only were freak shows the draw of the carnival, they were the carnival.

But like John Henry and the steam drill, the freak show was done in by the machine: the Plunger, the Tilt-a-Whirl, the Zipper. Before them, the carnival was strictly dancing monkeys and dancing dwarves and dancing fat ladies. There was the Ossified Woman. Lobster Boy. And they made a good life. Monkey Girl managed to buy a farm.

There was also the bearded lady, who found a lover when her husband was out of town and shaved to please him. But it turned out the lover preferred her with the beard and rejected her, as did her husband.

“Her husband, coming home after a few days and seeing the beard was gone, knew something was amiss,” Mr. Hall said. “He chased her down the midway with a gun.” This is how it used to be on the road.

“Nowadays, it’s in the contracts: no freaks,” says Mr. Hall, who believes political correctness is putting people out of work. “Do-gooders run things. I’m telling you, this life was very good for freaks. These kind of people made money. They were hams, but they could never be actors. Who’s putting a bearded lady or a one-armed girl in a leading lady role on Broadway? This way they lived a great life. No more. It’s ridiculous.”

Mr. Hall ran away from his father’s fourth-floor walk-up in Denver in 1946. The father mocked the boy, telling him he would come crawling back in two weeks.

“Those two weeks are yet to expire,” he says with a cackle.

Mr. Hall joined the circus at 15, became a clown, wasn’t funny, realized people didn’t pay to see unfunny clowns and committed to a career of getting knives thrown at him.

He never married, never had children: “I’ve been blessed. I have not been burdened with that, dear sir.”

Instead he has spent his life on the road, most of it with his disheveled, mutton-chopped, chain-smoking business partner, Chris Christ, 58, and with Poobah, the 3-foot-7-and-a-quarter-inch dwarf who, after eating 100 skewers of fire a day, 12 hours a day, seven days a week for five decades, has no eyebrows or eyelashes to speak of, giving him the look of a pale jack-o’-lantern. Poobah has a knot on his forehead, wears a hearing aid the size of a bagel, has low blood

pressure and speaks with a deep, incomprehensible gurgle. Clearly, fire has taken its toll.

The three men have toured [Mexico](#), [Canada](#) and the entire [United States](#). Today, they travel together in the same trailer, the place smelling of old men and ashes. In the off-season, they spend the winter in Gibsonton, Fla., known as Showtown U.S.A., where many freaks used to live. It is thought to be the only city in America where zoning allows people to park an elephant in the front yard.

Some men go for golf when they grow old. Others make model boats. Mr. Hall sells fantasy. He hauls himself up from his chair, adjusts his bow tie in the mirror. Break time is over. It is his turn on the microphone. The show is never ending, going round and round like a carousel.

“Technology killed the art form, too,” Mr. Hall says, unable to get the tie straight.

Separating Siamese twins at birth?

“Can’t they just leave well enough alone?”

Cleft palate?

“Plastic surgery.”

“It’s a shame,” he says. “I don’t know where to get my freaks.” He advertises in the trades. Few people answer.

Then there is the strange but true fact that American society has gone just plain freaky itself, Mr. Hall believes.

“The fat man — Howard Huge — he wanted to come out with us. But I said, ‘Howard, a fat man couldn’t sell 10 cents’ worth of fried chicken. Everybody in America’s fat.’ ”

You want to see a fat man, Mr. Hall says, try the Cracker Barrel, you'll see a dozen at once. Same with the tattooed lady. Ditto with pierced women. Nothing special.

Mr. Hall steps out into the sweltering sun, climbs onto the platform in front of the marquee and begins the pitch. "Ladies and gentlemen, now come watch as Poobah will eat fire."

Sitting in a little pink lawn chair, Poobah looks run-down. It is nearly 100 degrees, the air as sticky as lemonade. It seems cruel, as he is only four years away from 80, but that's show business.

Poobah is the attraction, the only physical oddity left. Poobah is the draw that gets the dupes standing out there in flip-flops, holding on to their plastic Spider-Man blowup dolls, to pay three bucks to go inside and see a man stick a screwdriver up his nose, a sword swallower with periodontal disease, an eight-foot woman made of foam. Her left foot is broken off, and she needs a dusting. Once inside, seeing they've been lied to, people get hostile.

"Now, Poobah here is the king of the Pygmies," Mr. Hall yaps. The crowd comes closer.

Poobah's real name is Pete Terhurne.

"Poobah comes all the way from Beverly Hills."

Poobah grew up in Minnesota, met Mr. Hall at a carnival there in the mid-'50s.

"Poobah is the last living munchkin from 'The Wizard of Oz.' "

Poobah first saw the movie as a television rerun.

"He is the star of 84 Hollywood pictures, 114 television shows and numerous Broadway musicals."

Poobah couldn't sing to save his life. But Poobah says he doesn't mind. It's a living. He says he loves Mr. Hall. And it beats retirement.

“Now, watch as Poobah eats the fire.”

Poobah does so for the umpteenth time today.