



“The cops are coming!”

Jimmy McGinnis took off running when he heard his friend’s warning. All the other boys scattered in different directions. Jimmy was barefoot and soaking wet from swimming in the Detroit River, which was not allowed. But a cool dip on a hot day was hard to resist.

Jimmy found a place to hide and think. Chances were, when he got home, he would be in trouble with his older sister Catherine. He’d been sent to live with her when he was only eight, right after his mother died. His father had passed away just a few years before from a disease called cholera.

Catherine made Jimmy work extra hard and punished him severely when he couldn’t finish his work. He had endured her harsh treatment for years. As he sat by the river that day, Jimmy decided to take a risk that he knew would change his whole life.

CIRCUS TERMS

ABA-DABA:
Food from the
cookhouse

ALFALFA:
paper money

BACK DOOR:
The performers'
entrance to the
Big Top

BIG TOP:
The main and
largest circus tent



He slipped away and trudged down the road, barefoot, broke, and alone. Jimmy wasn't sure where he would go or what he would do. But he knew one thing: he was *not* going back home.

A farmer driving down the road gave Jimmy a ride in his wagon. When Jimmy told him he was an orphan, the farmer offered him work and a place to live.

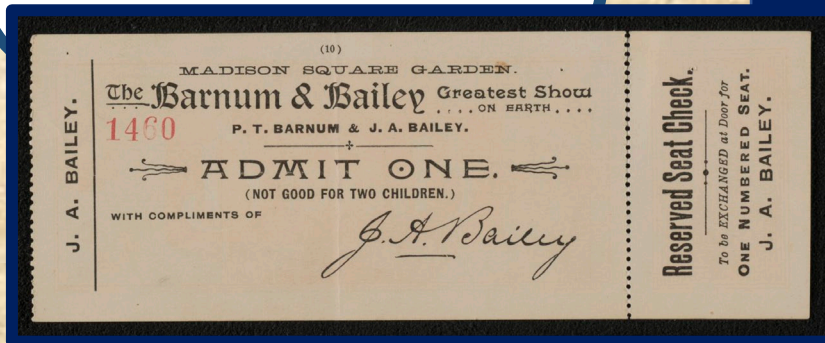
But lifting and stacking wheat sheaves was a heavy job for a young boy. On top of that, the pay was very low.

Even though Jimmy was a hard worker, the farmer wouldn't give him a raise. Jimmy finally decided to leave. Once again, he headed out on his own, this time with a little money jingling in his pocket. He was determined, as he later said, to be "master of my own destiny."

DID YOU KNOW?

When James became a circus owner, he established "Orphan Day," one day a year when all the orphans in the city could attend the circus for free.

He was often known to carry children into the circus tent who were unable to walk and settle them into seats away from the crush of the crowd.



Circus ticket signed by James A. Bailey, Courtesy of Bridgeport History Center, Bridgeport Public Library





Ten miles from the farm, Jimmy wandered into the city of Pontiac, Michigan.

He remembered that day distinctly. “I was a boy of thirteen, the town was full of people, as a political meeting, an abolitionist rally, was being held. There were brass bands, and floats, and civic societies, and a lot of soldiers marching. It was all very wonderful to me, and I stood watching the display until I was tired.”

Jimmy sat down to rest on a bench near the stables of Hodges House, one of the main hotels in Pontiac. A man who was unhitching horses said, “Say, Bub, come and help me with these horses. I’ll give you a dime and your dinner.”

Jimmy accepted and found a new job and a place to stay. He was “quite independent and happy” there. But on June 17, 1861, Colonel Fred H. Bailey rode into town. Jimmy’s life was about to change once again.

CIRCUS TERMS

CLOWN ALLEY:

Area where clowns
get dressed

DUCKET:

Free ticket
to the show

FINK:

Something
broken

FLAG'S UP:

The cookhouse
is open



Colonel Bailey was a big, slow-moving man. Jimmy described him as having “a splendid character and most kindly and generous nature.”

The colonel was the general agent for John Robinson and Bill Lake’s traveling circus. He, along with his advance team, had come to hang posters around town, advertising that the circus was coming to Pontiac.

Jimmy helped with the posters. He worked so hard that the colonel asked him if he would come to work for the circus. A more exciting life with better pay than the hotel? Yes!

He left with Mr. Bailey, perched on an upturned bucket in the circus wagon. Not long afterward, he took the colonel’s last name. With the start of this new life, Jimmy McGinnis left not just his past, but also his name behind. From then on, he was known as James Anthony Bailey.