

Melvin Burkhart is Dead

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George H. Byars

## Preface

Gentlemen of the Athenaeum Society, as a service to those members who feel compelled to classify, characterize, and otherwise pigeonhole all papers presented before this astute society, I shall now attempt a brief characterization of the paper I am about to present. It is nostalgic to a sickening degree; it is nonpolitical and nonreligious. It has the one obligatory reference to Hopkinsville that is requisite of all society papers, and it also has one brief reference to chickens that all of my papers require. For those of you who show a propensity for nodding off while suffering through the tedium of a long-winded paper, you will find this presentation blissfully brief and only modestly painful. I can assure you that within a month you will have forgotten most of the content of this paper and within the year, you will not recollect that I even gave a paper.

## Melvin Burkhart is Dead

As I was driving home from town on the evening of November 9<sup>th</sup>, I became aware of a distressing news feature being aired on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." As I began to listen more intently, the news analyst proceeded to announce that Melvin Burkhart had passed away the day before at the age of 94 at his home in Gibsontown, Florida.

Now a few of you less literate in the audience may be asking yourselves, "Who in the dickens is Melvin Burkhart?" Well, Melvin Burkhart was the undisputed king of the American carnival sideshow and, according to the NPR reporter, his passing represented the closure of an often considered seedy 100- year- old American entertainment tradition.

Who was Melvin Burkhardt? Melvin Burkhardt was the original “Human Blockhead” who possessed the unusual ability to hammer six-inch steel spikes up his nose. Melvin Burkhardt was the “Anatomical Wonder” who could breathe with one lung at a time. He could dislocate both of his shoulders and instantly become a hunchback and suck in his gut to the point that it outlined his backbone. He was the two-faced man who could frown with half of his face and smile with the other half. Melvin Burkhardt was the “Rubber-necked Man,” who swallowed swords, threw knives, and gobbled fire. He was an accomplished magician and a silver-tongued midway barker of the highest order.

Listening to this National Public Radio spot on the life of Melvin Burkhardt transported me back to my youth, growing up in Western Kentucky in the 1940’s and 50’s. It was a time before television and computers had sucked all of the imagination and wanderlust from our skulls. It was a time before giant theme parks and glamorous casino complexes had robbed our circuses, carnivals, and fairs of their unique magnetism for Main Street America.

Lest you think that I am a hopeless romantic or that I have some freaky fetish, let me share with you that it has been years since I last visited a circus, and the last time I felt drawn to the seedy attractions of a carnival side show I had just turned fifteen. But when I was twelve, the forbidden allure of the sideshow was more temptation than one skinny boy could handle.

I believe that I came by this attraction to circuses and sideshows honestly enough. It seems I was genetically programmed by my mother, a Hopkinsville native, who loved circuses and carnivals. As far back as I can remember, when a show would roll into Bowling Green, she would gather her tikes and take us. In my formative years she

regaled my sisters and me with stories of her own youth when she and her older brother would awake before daylight and creep out of their house at Trimble Lane and hurry down the street to the old fairground on Virginia Street to celebrate the pre-dawn arrival of the circus. According to my mother, sometimes they got underfoot and were chased away by the workers who were busy setting up the circus tents and midway, and sometimes they were fortunate and stayed all day, but always they had a memorable adventure.

I can remember holding my mother's hand when I was five, standing on the crowded circus midway, waiting for the gates of the Big Top's main entrance to open. I can remember listening intently to the never-ending banter of the sideshow barker up on that stage telling of the wondrous attractions hidden from my sight behind those colorful sideshow banners that so graphically depicted the wonders within the forbidden sideshow tents. The barker would always bring out a few teaser acts from behind the giant banners. There would be a scantily clad Lady from Persia with a large python draped across her shoulders. There would be a fire-eating dwarf and a tall skinny gentleman loaded down with real swords who claimed that he would swallow those instruments of death of only we would step forward and buy a ticket. Despite all of my best pleadings, my mom, of course, always declined to take me to the sideshow. No self-respecting southern lady would ever be caught introducing a child to the freaks, curiosities, and oddities of the sideshow.

However, when I was old enough to be let loose by myself at the fairs, carnivals and circuses that came to town, it was no great challenge for the sideshow barkers to lure me

into whatever strange attraction that they had to offer. I wanted to experience it all – the freaks, the geeks, the illusionists, the magic, and the fakery.

I had only two rules that I unfailingly followed concerning my sideshow adventures. First, never, under any circumstances tell my parents about my sideshow visits, lest they put an abrupt end to my trips into preteen titillation. My second rule was to always take a friend with me so as to steel my nerve, but more importantly, to assure that I was not abducted and taken away by this group of traveling nomads, only to reappear as an attraction in some far off town as “George, the Big-Headed Wild Boy” who had been reared by wolves in the hills of eastern Kentucky.

My friend of choice when attending a carnival sideshow was my fellow fifth- grader David Garvin. David’s family owned and operated Beech Bend Park outside of Bowling Green on the banks of the Barren River. David, like all of the Garvin clan, worked every weekend at his family’s amusement park, and during the summer months when school was out, David worked at the park full time. Spending the weekend at David’s was not the typical childhood experience. As everyone was required to work, including guests, we cleaned animal cages, shoveled elephant poop, worked the front gate, assisted drunks down the back stairs of the dance pavilion, and did whatever else David’s dad told us to do. It didn’t matter in the least that I was never paid anything. All the attractions, the carnival rides, and the junk food were free, and every weekend at Beech Bend was an exciting and unique adventure.

David was a formidable ally when we attended visiting carnivals together. Having been raised around carnival workers all his life, David possessed a vast store of knowledge concerning the customs and vernacular of the carnie life. Such knowledge

proved invaluable to us in staying out of trouble and in allowing us access to carnival attractions at no cost.

On one such trip to a carnival, David and I decided to take in the “Geek Show.” Geeks in side show parlance are not grade school computer nerds as the current vernacular defines the word. No, geeks are side show performers who make their living by devouring live chickens and other small animals for appreciative audiences with strong stomachs.

Now, out of respect for my fellow Athenaeum members, and its being the dinner hour, I will refrain from sharing with you the gruesome details of the geek’s performance other than to note that at least half of the audience had exited the show in a state of hyperventilation before it was half over. It is enough to say that one geek performance will last you a life time, and I have never felt compelled to revisit my geek friend. Much of what is presented at sideshows is complete fakery, but let me assure you, there is no fakery in the world of geekdom.

Most bona fide sideshows offer at least ten attractions. They even call them “Ten-in-One Shows” – ten acts, one price. But once they have you inside, they usually offer you an additional show for additional money. The additional show I remember the best was the “Ester-Lester, Half Man-Half-Woman Show.” At first I was very hesitant about even considering such an attraction until they explained that this was a medically approved scientific exhibit, and to prove their point, there would even be a registered nurse on the premises during the entire show. Well, that was good enough for me; after all, a registered nurse would surely not be involved with something unseemly. The “Ester-Lester Show” would prove to be my one and only experience with a hermaphrodite.

Well, now that I think back, maybe a few dates that I remember in college would fall within that category, but I digress.

In regard to that registered nurse that I mentioned who was supposedly overseeing the “Ester-Lester Show,” apparently it was a fairly common practice for sideshow acts to trot out a nurse to lend an air of credibility to whatever ballyhoo they were exhibiting.

One sideshow aficionado tells of such a show where there was a two-headed lady on display. The storyteller describes his experience thusly, “The two-headed lady’s trailer seated about twenty people on small chairs facing curtains on the end. After the tickets were taken, and the patrons were seated for the show; a nurse appeared and asked for absolute silence due to the two-headed lady’s timidity and fragile health. The nurse then pulled back the curtains to reveal a window and behind the window, the two-headed lady. She wasn’t bad looking for a gal with two heads, but the glass was fuzzy and the lighting was rather poor. The show began, and one of the lady’s heads said a few words; then just as the second head’s mouth began to move, the head fell off, dropped right off and fell straight to the floor of the trailer with a loud thud. The nurse in charge shrieked, ran to the curtains, and threw them shut. ‘My God,’ the nurse exclaimed, ‘She’s fainted!’”

Well enough about me and my enlightening experiences with the side show. I am supposed to be presenting a paper on the life and times of the king of freaks, Melvin Burkhart. Melvin Burkhart was born on February 14, 1902, in Lexington Kentucky. Melvin spent his early years growing up in Louisville, Kentucky, and at the age of fifteen, while attending a Vaudeville Theater Show in Louisville, he volunteered to go up on stage and tripped while doing so. This unplanned blunder got Melvin a good laugh and from then on, show business was in his blood.

Melvin was an excellent athlete and aspired to be a professional boxer, but after suffering through six painful defeats and no victories in the ring, Melvin gave up this ambition. Melvin's dalliance into prize fighting had left him with a badly broken nose that required surgery to remove twelve fragments of bone. Fortunately, the surgery left Melvin with a small open passageway through his nasal cavity which he later learned would allow him to hammer ice picks and nails through this nose and down into his throat without harming sensitive tissue along the way, and a career was born!

Burkhart would amuse his friends with self-taught stunts such as dislocating his shoulder blades so as to make it appear that he was a hunchback. Like many other stage-struck youth of his day, Melvin entered local Vaudeville amateur nights. But unlike most of the other would-be performers, Burkhart usually won. After one such show, a Vaudeville booker offered Melvin employment as a "Ringer." He took the job as a paid contestant and gained valuable stage experience as he continued to develop his routine as a kind of contortionist. A few months later Burkhart was approached by a second booker of exotic attractions who offered him a job with a circus. Melvin accepted this promising job offer and hurried off to join the Conroy Brothers Circus. When he arrived, Mr. Conroy became quite angry when he discovered that the booker had sent him an unseasoned circus worker—known in circus jargon as a "first of May." Poor Melvin was immediately put to work cleaning the animal cages. But, Burkhart's natural abilities as a performer and talker were recognized, and he soon found himself up on the side show platform where his gifts as a showman stood him in good stead for the next seventy years.



Melvin Burkhart was a professional sideshow freak and proud of it. To Burkhart the word and concept of “freak” were never pejorative, but an enviable entrée to the show business he loved. “It takes something special to be a freak,” he told the Associated Press in 1985 when he was appearing at the New York Fair. “Have you looked up the definition? You can’t just put on some feathers and call yourself Birdman. I qualify because nobody else can do the things I can do.”

Over the course of his career, Melvin Burkhart logged over 900,000 miles, performed in more than 100,000 shows and entertained millions of people. During the 40’s and 50’s Melvin toured with the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus. He later worked for ten years at the Ripley’s Believe It or Not Odditorium. Melvin’s sideshow career was profiled twice in television documentaries. The first documentary was the Learning Channel’s 1977 production “Sideshow,” and the second was an independent production entitled “Gibtown.” Melvin finished his career performing as a magician at Coney Island, and in 1994, he and his wife Joyce retired to his home in Gibsontown, Florida, a small town thirty miles south of Tampa on Highway 41.

It was only natural that Melvin move back to Gibsontown upon his retirement because this is where all of his old friends lived. For over seventy years, Gibsontown, or Gibtown as the locals like to refer to it, served as the winter quarters for sideshows and carnivals for the eastern half of the United States. Today, Gibtown is more of a small retirement community with only two gas stations, three restaurants, and a lot of mobile homes, but in its heyday, Gibtown was a thriving village and had the distinction of being considered the oddest town in America.

The fire chief of Gibtown was Al Tomaini, "The Giant," who stood eight feet four and one half inches tall. Al was married to Jeanie Tomaini who ran a local bait shop. Jeanie was two feet and six inches high, having been born without legs. Together, they were billed on carnival midways as the world's strangest married couple.

The assistant police chief of Gibtown was a dwarf. The sideshow fat man was Gibtown's premiere auto mechanic, and the town's post office had the distinction of being the only one in the country with a special counter for midgets.

Gibtown has served as home for such sideshow notables as Grady Stiles, the Lobster Boy; Priscilla, the Monkey Girl; Bill Durks, the two-faced man and his wife Mildred, the Alligator Woman.

You may remember the Lobster boy making the national news years ago when his wife and stepson concocted a sinister plot to do him in and murdered the Lobster Boy on a cold November night. It seems that Grady, the Lobster boy, had a long history of abusing his wife and children that eventually led to his untimely demise in a hail of bullets.

Every winter the population of Gibtown would double as thousands of carnival workers came in off the road at the end of the season. They came for the warm weather and the fishing, but mostly they came because the town had voted in a unique zoning classification called "Residential Show Business," which allowed everything from concession stands to elephants to be kept in the residents' front yards. But, over the years, as the popularity of sideshows faded, Gibsontown became less of a winter quarters and more of a retirement village for such sideshow notable as the Alligator Man, The Monkey Girl, The Seal Boy, The Frog Man, The Rubber Lady, The Turtle Man, The

Lobster family, and, of course, Melvin, The Human Blockhead. All of these sideshow performers have long since retired, and many have passed on.

What brought about the death of the American Sideshow? Sideshows began to decline sharply in number beginning in the 1960's as medical science discovered how to eliminate or reduce genetically- caused deformities. With the advent of political correctness, public attitudes changed, prompting state laws that banned the exploitation of the disabled. Hundreds of sideshow workers lost their livelihoods and were forced to retire and go on welfare.

Other factors that played a part in the demise of sideshows were the development of special effects in movies and television along with the growing popularity of theme parks that could induce greater thrills than a mere peek at a bearded lady. Or, could it be that the real world just got so overtly weird that the strange world of the sideshow just could no longer compete?

Back in the late 1940's and early 50's, there were more than 100 ten-in-one-shows traveling the circuit; today there are only two remaining, and both of these are found at Coney Island. But, like almost everything else, the survival of the sideshow came down to money. The crowds began to dwindle, and carnival owners found that they could make larger profits by replacing the shows with additional rides.

In 1982 the Smithsonian Institution marked the disappearance of the sideshow, calling it "a uniquely American art form." Melvin must have been proud of that.

The public has become more sophisticated and less gullible, and perhaps that is a good thing, but I lament the sideshow's passing because for me it represents the passing of my

own childhood innocence and wonder. Melvin Burkhardt, the sideshow king is dead, long  
live the king!