

American Talkers: The Pitchman By Steven Zeitlin

Bobby Reynolds describes the wonders within his tent.

Suggested Reading

Fiedler, Leslie. *Freaks: Myths And Images Of The Secret Self*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.

Gresham, William Lindsay. *Monster Midway*. New York: Rinehart & Co., 1948.

Lewis, Arthur. *Carnival*. New York: Trident Press, 1970.

McKennon, Joe. *A Pictorial History of the American Carnival*. Sarasota: Carnival Publishers, 1971.

McNamara, Brooks. *Step Right Up: An Illustrated History of the American Medicine Show*. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1976.

McNeil, Violet. *Four White Horses And A Brass Band*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1947.

Suggested Recording

A Documentary Record of the James E. Strates' Carnival, Library of Congress. AFS #4699-4705, 1941.



Photo by Greg Schneider, *The Daily Chronicle*, Santa Paula, California

Much of what is appealing about a carnival, a side show or a circus comes not from what is seen but what is heard. The midgets, the sword swallowers, the dancers are only half the show. The pitchman sets the scene for all of them. His skillful use of language can transform the most paltry attractions into unforgettable images, and lend his curiosities some of the bizarre beauty of a Grimm's folktale.

Carnival pitchmen are among the last oral poets to hold the attention of modern American audiences. Their spiels, handed down from one generation of showmen to another, combine rhythm, alliteration, repetition and hyperbole—that is, outrageous exaggeration. The pitch builds to a fevered point where the talker “turns the tip,” and tries to transform the magic of his talk to ticket sales. The following pitch, from a 1941 recording at the Archive of Folk Song in the Library of Congress, is for a carnival Motordrome, a cylindrical building where motorcycles rode on the walls:

*High powered motorcycles on a straight up and down perpendicular wall!
Motor maniacs, upside down riders,
Crazy riders, crazy drivers on the walls of death.
Say hell riders, hell drivers,
Say come on in!*

With the demise of many small travelling shows, the pitchman is vanishing from the American scene, his artistry gone unrecorded. In the late twenties and early thirties, throughout the Depression, Fred Foster Bloodgood operated one of the last “geek shows” which travelled with a small carnival. His show consisted of little more than an ordinary carnival employee, a man with a mop on his head, who wrung off the head of a chicken in a fashion not all that different from a country cook. But his graphic images transformed this makeshift attraction into a monstrous illusion which transfixed his carnival audiences. In the hope of recording the oral poetry of a pitchman and his perspective on the art, we asked Fred Bloodgood to pen an essay for *American Talkers*.

Here, then, in his own words, are some of the reminiscences and spiels of one of the greatest carnival pitchmen of all time.