

The Geek Showman's Pitch

By Fred Foster Bloodgood

"Hold it, doctor. Don't feed her just yet!"

The scene is a carnival lot of a midwestern city in the early 1930s. A young man on the bally platform of a side show describes the strange woman inside the tent:

*She was found by a Dr. Carter,
Crouched as you're going to see her tonight
Upon a huge flat rock.
From a point of vantage he watched her.
She was entirely surrounded by venomous reptiles,
Some larger than a man's upper arm.
And occasionally she would
Tease, tantalize, and torment them
Until, in their wildest fury,
They would strike,
Biting her all over her miserable body—
Upon the arms, the limbs, the cheeks, even upon the tongue,
Until the blood would course from those wounds
Just as you'd pour water from a glass.*

Fifty years ago I was that young man on the front of the bally platform and that woman was, in the language of the carnival world, a "geek," the strangest of all strange creatures. Her eating habits were not nearly as dramatic as the gruesome descriptions, handed down by word of mouth from showman to showman:

*Often to avenge herself she picks up one of the larger reptiles,
Bites off the head with her long and tusky teeth,
And proceeds to peel down the skin and devour it head, hide, tail, and all,
Just as you or I would eat a banana.*

During my 11 years of exhibiting geeks, I used many of the techniques favored by showmen throughout the ages. As with any sales endeavor, the pitch and a few tricks were woven together to whet the appetite of the audience. A cardinal rule was to exaggerate some of the more colorful aspects of the side show attraction and to never rely on *one* word when *four* would do. This gave a certain balance or rhythm to the pitch. For example, when explaining the moral quality of the show, it would be unthinkable to simply state, "It's a clean show." Rather this: "There will be nothing seen, heard, said, or done that would mar the impunity or injure the propriety, in any way, shape, form, or manner, of the most fastidious lady in the community."

Euphonious names and alliteration were extremely important to a pitch. I once described an attraction called the "Giant Deep Sea Devilfish" as a "death-dealing demon, a denizen of the deep." A series of phrases or words was always very effective. A thin man or "human skeleton" was

Slowly becoming atrophied, slowly becoming ossified, slowly becoming petrified . . . and slowly turning to stone.

I discovered that a female was a better lure than a male, hence the names "Neva" and "Neola." Any name with a long "e" had a much better carrying quality, especially before the days of sound equipment.

It was imperative that a competent "inside lecturer" be on hand at all times and I had one of the best in Robert Barnard. His duty was not only to answer



Fred Bloodgood wearing his doctor's uniform to lend an aura of authenticity to his geek-show attraction.



Fred Foster Bloodgood's geek show, 1929

the many questions regarding the background and origin of some of the “most marvelous creatures you ever saw,” but also to help the patron make the transition between fantasy and fact, between the emotional exaggeration on the outside and the cold, hard facts visible on the inside. He was extremely useful when one sold his goods sight unseen—and collected his money in advance.

Imagine now that the front of the tent is open and already a crowd of interested spectators can be seen peering into the “pit.” Suddenly the geek begins the “roust.” She becomes completely unmanageable. In clear view of the potential customers outside she picks up a snake, screams, and leaps across that steel-bound arena, seeming to throw the reptile at one of the spectators. (Actually a piece of inner tube is substituted, but the illusion is most convincing, and women scream and often faint.)

At this point the inside lecturer rushes to the front man in utter panic to inform him that he can no longer control her. “We must FEED HER NOW!” The front man races to the pit and fires several rounds of blank cartridges from a .38 caliber revolver. In desperation they seize a tent pole to wield as a weapon, causing the entire tent to collapse on the spectators’ heads. Screams are heard across the midway until order is finally restored, the tent is re-erected, and the feeding proceeds—but only after a few hundred tickets are sold.

Incredible? Indeed it was. But even more incredible was the fact that anyone would resist investing a dime or quarter to see just what was transpiring inside.

Without question the geek show was, in the words of my own pitch, “one of the most disgusting, one of the most repulsive, yet I’ll say one of the most interesting attractions” ever conceived by the mind of mortal man. It brings back a host of memories. . . .

Last year I walked down a carnival midway at the Dane County Fair near my home in Madison, Wis. Suddenly a youngster leaned over the counter of his roll-down game joint, beckoned to me, and said, “Hey, how about you, Dad?”

Yes, he called me “Dad!” And at that moment I experienced a deep sense of shock. I wondered how all the years had gone so quickly between this eager, callow lad and my young self on the bally platform exclaiming:

“It’s feeding time . . . and we are going to feed her!”