



LW6 The Dark Side of the Show: Investigating Mysterious Aspects of Traditional American Sideshows

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After attending this presentation, attendees will appreciate the possible contribution that forensic science can provide to understanding apparently mysterious aspects of traditional American sideshows.

The presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing examples of different disciplines applied to cold cases and old pieces of evidence. This presentation will also suggest a new method of presenting science to young generations of students based on traditional American sideshows, offering the opportunity for reflection on ethical issues related to the use of human samples.

In the American tradition, a sideshow is a secondary production associated with a circus or a fair. These attractions entertained the audience by exhibiting living “human oddities” (a “freak” show) or unusual animals, stuffed abnormal creatures, and exotic paraphernalia (a museum show).

Some of the most popular living performances (working acts) exhibited fire eating, sword swallowing, and lying on a bed of nails. These stunts can be used as interesting examples of physical and physiological principles that can be appreciated by modern generations of students. These attractive cases are not only appropriate for a better understanding of scientific aspects, but also help people preserve part of the American tradition.

An example of how it is possible to use one of the brightest stars of the vaudeville stage to understand physics concepts is represented by Annie May Abbott. During her performance, the small lady, known as the “Little Georgia Magnet,” was able to resist the combined efforts of four men to move her while she stood on one foot. She also could lift all four men while they were on a chair by simply touching the chair. The application of balance, leverage, and force vectors to anatomical knowledge help solve the source of this apparently inexplicable strength.

If the living stunts can be only analyzed through the contemporary newspapers and pictures, some of the most unusual specimens from museum shows are still available in public and private collections. An example is the human mummy Sylvester (still present in the Ye Olde Curiosity Shop in Seattle, WA), who recently underwent a virtual autopsy to discover his origin and identity.

Furthermore, the history of sideshow abounds with real and fake mummies. Fiji mermaids and alleged human shrunken heads were a must-have for any impresario of a “freak” museum. The luckiest ones, such as Frank Hansen, a Minnesota showman who claimed ownership of a frozen Bigfoot-like creature, were able to present a giant hairy man preserved in ice.

Two mummies that have a strong link to the forensic sciences belonged to Elmer McCurdy and Julia Pastrana. Elmer, a thief, was killed in a shoot-out with police and his mummified body traveled for 40 years throughout the United States as a sideshow attraction. The body then vanished without a trace until it was discovered in The Pike amusement zone in California and identified via a forensic investigation.

Julia Pastrana, a woman affected by hypertrichosis and gingival hyperplasia, was employed as a living attraction in a “freak” show and was advertised as a hybrid between human and an ape. Married to her manager, Theodore Lent, she had a baby with the same pathological condition. During a European tour, they both died a few days after childbirth and their bodies were mummified by the impresario to be displayed in a glass cabinet. After the show ended, Julia’s body went through several difficulties, was stolen and recovered, and then stored at the Oslo Forensic Institute. In 2013, it was finally buried at her birthplace in Mexico.

In conclusion, the story of Julia Pastrana, as well as the decline of the human oddities shows and the legal actions that forbid this attraction, offers the possibility of evaluating the modern approach to rare and disfiguring pathological conditions. These ethical considerations currently become more important, considering the recent revival of reality television shows on the topic.

This review of some of the most iconic and mysterious aspects of the traditional American sideshows is an opportunity to apply forensic science to cold cases and to teach science in a different and more attractive way, with a stronger ethical attention to human remains.

Cold Cases, Education, Forensic Anthropology