

Montevallo Historical Society

Opening the Portals of Our Heritage

540 Shelby Street
Montevallo, AL 35115
www.historicmontevallo.org



Like Us On Facebook

UNDER THE BIG TOP

Marty Everse

If you lived in and around Montevallo in the 19th century, there just wasn't much to do for entertainment. School gatherings, church socials, and revivals were about it. That is, until the circus arrived. For a few years in the decade following the Civil War, three different troupes were licensed to perform in Shelby County. A circus transformed the town into a place of mystery filled with exotic animals and modern wonders and most everyone came to marvel at the sights.

Thomas Fancher, a farmer, part-time limestone contractor for the Bibb Furnace and devout Baptist who lived on the Little Cahaba River just south of Montevallo, managed to attend three such spectacles, two with his wife Miriam, between 1870 and 1872, and he wrote about his experience. His first encounter was in the spring of 1870.

Well, I will proceed to tell you what I thought about the show. I was very well pleased. I think I got pay for my money. I went in to two shows. In one I paid 50¢ to see the serpents, Tom Thumb, so called, a man 33 years old only weighing 25 pounds, also a woman 25 years of age weighing 17 pounds. Can you imagine how small she is? Both intelligent persons. I then went into the circus which cost me one dollar. I saw, I think, the worth of a dollar. The animals of all description but didn't see the horned horse [unicorn]. They say he died in Northport. I don't think they ever had one. I think there must have been 3,000 people there perhaps.

In the fall, another circus came to Montevallo. This time, Thomas carried his wife along.

I think we were well paid for our 75¢. There was no animals but the best circus I ever saw or heard of. Besides that we saw a great wonder free which was a balloon. I would not take 5 dollars for my part of that scene. No indeed. I saw it go up perhaps six hundred yards with a boy about fourteen or fifteen years of age. He went so high he didn't look larger than a man's fist. He went up & travelled rather a south course & lit about a half mile from where he rose. There was an immense crowd present.

A couple of years later, in May 1872, Thomas and Miriam were again drawn to the big top but were not as impressed as previous visits.

Yes, we went to the show. We did not see anything particularly extra. Nothing but a circus except a couple of lions. They report they lost their animals in the Mississippi River through an accident. I think I never saw better summersitting [somersaulting] before. Not much on horseback. The best of all was the balloon. There was a boy went up in it. I suppose it went a mile high & it came to the ground something near to two miles from where it started. So that was the best of all.



As a means of advertising and admission, the Great Eastern Menagerie Museum, Aviary Circus and Balloon Show produced a token in 1872.

