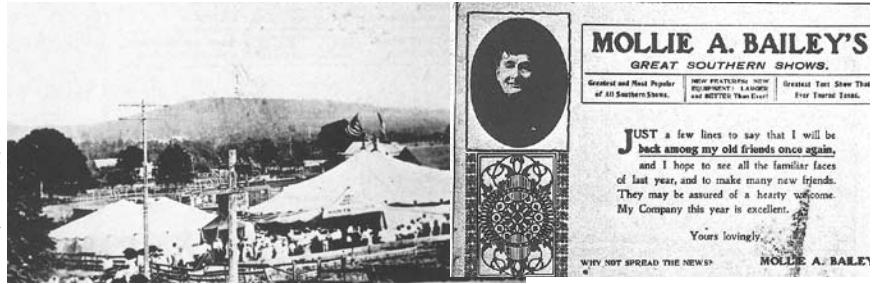


NARRATIVE TEXTS

Mollie Bailey, Circus Owner, 1844?-1918

Born to an Alabama plantation owner, Mollie Bailey seemed headed for the life of a Southern belle. Instead, she eloped at age 14 with a circus musician whose father's troupe was passing through town. Mollie and Gus Bailey soon formed their own vaudeville singing-and-dancing troupe, joined by Mollie's sister and Gus's brother. They performed in Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas, but with the outbreak of the Civil War, Gus joined Hood's Texas Brigade.¹



Mollie traveled with the soldiers as a nurse. According to tales, she also served as a spy, going behind enemy lines disguised as an old woman selling cookies or smuggling quinine buried in her pompadour hairdo.² At war's end the Baileys had several small children to feed, and Gus was sick with tuberculosis.³ They operated a showboat on the Mississippi River, performing Shakespeare as well as vaudeville, all the while seeking to relocate in Texas. Most days they flew the Texas flag to honor their Civil War service.⁴

In 1879 they traded their showboat for a circus. By this time their children (they eventually had nine) were old enough to perform. In 1885 the Baileys purchased a winter house in Dallas and could finally make Texas their base. They billed their enterprise as "A Texas Show for Texas People."⁵ The caravan departed in spring for the sawmill towns of East Texas, then traveled to the Rio Grande region, back through Dallas and the cotton section to the Panhandle, then far southwest, finally home in December for the winter. Their acts included trapeze, birds, African mammals, blackface comedy, singing, dancing, and band and orchestra. For many small-town Texans, the arrival of the circus was the highlight of the year, an event that quickened the heart and forged community.

Mollie had always been the organizational force behind the traveling show. After Gus's retirement in 1890, Mollie ran it entirely. To avoid paying rental fees when the circus came to town, she purchased town lots. She eventually donated these for use as parks. Mollie welcomed veterans and poor children to attend the show for free. When the circus began traveling by rail in 1906, she entertained famous people in her opulent observation car—governors, state senators, even Comanche chief Quanah Parker.⁶

Quotation

*It was cotton-picking time down in Texas
And the leaves of all the trees a golden brown.* *The children and the old folk all were happy
For the Mollie Bailey show had come to town.*
—stanza from a poem by Frank W. Ford⁷

Photos

ITC 79-278. Caption: "Local patrons stream into Mollie Bailey's circus.;" ITC 79-275. Caption: "Poster advertising the upcoming Texas tour." Both from the Dallas Historical Society.

Endnotes

¹ Major sources for biographical information in this article are Martha Hartzog, "Mollie Bailey: Circus Entrepreneur," in Francis Edward Abernethy, ed., *Legendary Ladies of Texas* (Dallas: E-Heart Press, 1981), pp. 107-14; John Troesser, "Mollie Bailey: Circus Queen of the Southwest," *Texas Escapes Online Magazine*, <http://www.texasescapes.com/They-Shoe-Horses-Dont-They/Mollie-Bailey.htm> (April 14, 2005); Diana J. Kleiner, "Bailey, Mollie Arline Kirkland," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/BB/fba12.html> (April 14, 2005); Narcissa Martin Boulware, "Following the Mollie Bailey Circus, Up Close and Personal, Part III," *Montgomery County News*, March 5, 2003, online <http://www.montgomerycountynews.net/ivebeenthink03-05-03.htm> (April 14, 2005); and Narcissa Martin Boulware, "Following the Mollie Bailey Circus, Up Close and Personal, Part IV," *Montgomery County News*, March 12, 2005, online <http://www.montgomerycountynews.net/ivebeenthink03-12-03.htm> (April 14, 2005).

² Hartzog, "Mollie Bailey: Circus Entrepreneur," p. 109; "Bailey, Mollie Arline Kirkland," *Handbook of Texas Online*.

³ That Gus had tuberculosis is surmised from a description of his symptoms, which lingered for many years. However, the diagnosis is not explicitly stated. See Hartzog, "Mollie Bailey: Circus Entrepreneur," p. 109.

⁴ Boulware, "Following the Mollie Bailey Circus, Part III."

⁵ "Bailey, Mollie Arline Kirkland," *Handbook of Texas Online*.

⁶ *Ibid.*; Troesser, "Mollie Bailey: Circus Queen of the Southwest."

⁷ Quoted in Hartzog, "Mollie Bailey: Circus Entrepreneur," p. 113.