

## “The Fella was a Tripp”

Courage, talent, perseverance, inspiration, activist. These are just a few words that could be used to describe Charles B. Tripp (Charlie).

During his lifetime, Charlie was most notably a remembered performer in the Barnum & Bailey Circus. In addition to his time spent with the circus, he became well known for his elegant penmanship, woodcarving, paper crafts, painting, and photography.

But what made all of this so notable? In 1855, Charlie was born . . . without any arms – not even shoulder blades!

Charlie had every excuse in the book to let his birth defect negatively impact his life and lead to a life of lesser quality. But he refused. One of Charlie’s most famous quotes was, “I found that I had to look after myself as much as possible, and I decided that I would NEVER say ‘I can’t.’” As a result, Charlie was able to train his feet to do tasks most people took for granted, and was able to do all of the same things that his friends and family could.

After persistent urging by his friends, Charlie decided to travel to New York in March of 1873 to have a meeting with P.T, Barnum of the Barnum & Bailey Circus. The meeting proved to be successful, and Charlie began his career traveling and performing with the Circus all over the world. While he visited some other smaller circuses over a few years, Charlie’s career with Barnum & Bailey lasted unto 1904. He became known worldwide as “The Armless Wonder”.

Charlie’s circus act consisted of him showing the audiences how he could perform normal, everyday tasks by the use of only his feet. The crowd favorite was his shaving with a straight razor.

Also as part of Charlie’s performances, he would give motivational speeches about his life and did his best to stress the importance of self-worth while empowering all to reach their goals by giving nothing but their best. Charlie was viewed as a hero to many, but certainly to those that faced more difficult circumstances.

Charlie also advocated for himself and his peers. In 1903, he participated as secretary in a conference with other performers that worked for Barnum & Bailey. They named themselves The Protective Order of Prodigies, and demanded that Mr. Bailey stop using the term “freaks” and use “prodigy” instead. Charlie was quoted in the April 13, 1903, New York Times as saying, “We can’t endure this . . . We are all ladies and gentlemen, and we act so. None of us are frights. We are greeted courteously when we go out into the streets.”

Charlie married later in life and traveled with his wife in some of the smaller circuses. The two would spend their winters in Salisbury, North Carolina. After a particularly rough winter, Charlie became ill and eventually died of pneumonia on January 27, 1930. His body was then transported to Olney by train for burial in the Haven Hill Cemetery where he still rests.

\*\*Information compiled from the Richland County Sesquicentennial History Book and “Prodigies in Conference,” The New York Times, April 13, 1903. Compilation submitted by Kelsie Sterchi.