

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 1, 2020:
[JUMBO & DUMBO](#)

There's one conspicuous problem with the 1941 Disney movie *Dumbo* and Tim Burton's recent remake: the elephant's name is not, in fact, Dumbo. He's named for a famous circus elephant, the mighty Jumbo.

THE STORY

The little elephant with the big ears is, in fact, given a family name when he is born, and Mrs. Jumbo's baby is christened Jumbo, Jr. (The mocking nickname comes about when his giant ears are discovered.) This establishes Dumbo in the lineage of a real circus animal – the one and only Jumbo, P.T. Barnum's prize African elephant. In 1941, when the original Disney film came out in theaters, Jumbo was still within fifty years' living memory – and indeed, a fair swath of adult audience members were likely to have remembered seeing Jumbo as children on circus day, as the Greatest Show on Earth wound its way across America.

When P.T. Barnum secured him from the London Zoo, where he was known as the “children's friend” for the rides he would give to young zoo visitors, Jumbo became the undisputed star of the circus, elevating the Barnum shows to an even greater level of cultural prominence.

Not only that, Jumbo quality-tested the then-new Brooklyn Bridge in 1884. Even a year after its opening, there were plenty of folks who were too afraid to set foot on the bridge for fear it couldn't possibly hold. And so on May 17, 1884, Barnum arranged for 21 elephants, 7 camels and 10 dromedaries to make their way up Broadway to the bridge. A child was heard to yell, “Hooray, there's Jumbo!” and the excitement “spread like a financial crisis.” Jumbo brought up the rear of the procession, flapping his ears at spectators as the parade made its way to Brooklyn, where Barnum's circus was to open the following Monday.

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

Why do you think Jumbo resonated so strongly with so many people?

Should circuses or shows allow animal performers?

Most 19th century audiences had never seen an elephant. What would be a comparably remarkable and can't-miss sight today?

What do you think of story changes from 1941's *Dumbo* to the remake?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

bgkellem@gmail.com

IG: @bgkellem

Visit Drinks With Dead People™ and subscribe for updates at:

<http://www.drinkswithdeadpeople.com>

READ MORE:

Primary source: “[Elephants Cross the Bridge](#),” *New York Times*, May 18, 1884

Primary source: [P.T. Barnum Digital Collection](#), The Barnum Museum

“[Jumbo the Mascot](#),” Tufts University

“[Jumbo the Elephant: The Afterlife](#),”
The Guardian (UK)

“[The True Story of How Dumbo Came to the Screen](#),” Smithsonian