Phineas T. Barnum, Gardner Q. Colton, and Painless Parker Were Kindred Princes of Humbug

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Abstract

Phineas T. Barnum (1810-1891) and Gardner Q. Colton (1814-1898) both entered the laughing gas show business in Manhattan in 1844. With Horace Wells (1815-1848), Colton introduced inhaled nitrous oxide for dental anesthesia in December 1844. The Barnumesque nature of laughing gas exhibitions may have contributed to the initially negative reception of nitrous anesthesia as humbug. Colton continued laughing gas shows after 1844, and he performed in a Barnum forum in Boston in 1862. In 1863, Barnum encouraged Colton to establish a flourishing painless dentistry practice in Manhattan. Barnum designated himself to be the Prince of Humbug. He embraced humbug for entertainment purposes but decried medical humbug. Notwithstanding, Barnum explicitly evinced awareness of the power of the placebo response. Accordingly, the proneness of individuals to deem impersonal all-purpose assessments to be personally applicable is dubbed the Barnum effect. Barnum was indirectly connected to Painless Parker (1872-1952), a dentist who exploited sensational advertising and humbug and ran a circus.

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Introduction

Nitrous oxide was synthesized in 1772 by British chemist Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), and its nonirritating, intoxicating, analgesic, and potential anesthetic effects were described by Humphry Davy (1778-1829) in 1800.1 After self-experimentation, Davy introduced laughing gas parties that enticed colleagues to explore recreational use of the gas. The parties evolved into popular demonstrations of the hilarious "giddiness" induced by nitrous.1 Shows spread to America, where they were lucrative, for instance, for Samuel Colt (1814-1862), later known for his revolver-type firearms.2,3 Both medical student Gardner Quincy Colton (1814-1898) and entertainer Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810-1891) launched laughing gas exhibitions in New York in 1844.2,3 Colton had momentarily presented nitrous to anesthesia pioneer Horace Wells (1815-1848) in December 1844.7 The coincidence of Colton and Barnum in time and space suggests a connection between the two. Barnum did influence Colton as well as the Barnumesque dentist who called himself Painless Parker (1872-1952).

Nitrous Oxide Derided as Humbug

The first anesthetizer to be accused of humbug, namely, performing a deceptive trick, was probably English physician Henry Hill Hickman (1800-1830), who reported in 1824 that hypoxic carbon dioxide could render experimental animals insensible of surgical pain.8 Perhaps the second was Wells, who failed to impress a tough audience when he demonstrated nitrous oxide for dental anesthesia in Boston in 1845.9,10 Viewed from today, neither Hickman nor Wells elicits a sense of humbug. They correctly announced that the torture of surgery could be averted by the inhalation of gases that depress the central nervous system. Those innovators were sadly misjudged to be humbugs, or purveyors of false promises, largely because their inhaled agents were not strong enough to reliably convert skeptics.

Months later, Boston surgeon John Collins Warren (1778-1856) declared that the ether vapor of William T.G. Morton was "no humbug." Still, the attempt by Morton to gain proprietary rights to inhaled anesthesia through patent and branding (calling ether Letheon) drew the epithet "quack" from detractors.11 Inebriation, the voluntary abdication of reason, was considered a moral vice, especially if done for mere pleasure.12 For decades, widespread nitrous shows featured comical public display of each participant reduced to "the disordered directives of his lower faculties and appetites."12
The shows may have contributed to the association of the inhaled inebriants with irrelevant jocularity. Failure to acknowledge the clinical value of these agents likely slowed experimentation with anesthesia in surgery and postponed the acceptance of the concept of inhaled anesthesia by the medical community and the society.

**Barnum with Colton**

Colton entered the Crosby Street College of Physicians and Surgeons in Manhattan in 1842. Medical students of the time self-experimented with nitrous oxide, and Colton gained popularity among classmates for his talent at synthesis of nitrous oxide. In spring of 1844, Colton approached David Hale (1791-1849), a media entrepreneur, preacher, and owner of the Tabernacle at 340-344 Broadway in Manhattan, to set up a public laughing gas show. More than 3000 people attended on March 19, 1844, and the show proved financially successful (Figure 1). This was the first demonstration of laughing gas by Colton that was open to the public. Colton profited more than $400 overnight. He thus left medical school without a degree to pursue showmanship, subsequently holding regular exhibits at locations around the city from 1844 to at least the end of 1845 (Figure 2A-D).

A few blocks downtown, Barnum acquired a five-story showplace at 222-224 Broadway in 1841 and named it Barnum's American Museum. Laughing gas shows were prominently featured among a variety of live entertainments at Barnum's museum from November 1844 to January 1846 (Figures 3A-C and 4).

Could there have been an intersection of paths or even collaboration between Colton and Barnum, both involved with laughing gas?
shows in New York City at the same time? Jon Franklin and John Sutherland have suggested that Colton and Barnum interacted in the 1840s. In their account of nitrous oxide anesthesia, Colton, upon meeting Wells, claims to be working “with the backing of P.T. Barnum.” Colton met Wells in Hartford, CT, on December 10, 1844, and Colton continued to put on laughing gas shows while Wells pursued nitrous anesthesia. It is plausible that Barnum, being always on the lookout for items that appeal to human curiosity, was aware of Colton’s successful mass demonstration at the Tabernacle and sought collaboration with Colton. Colton might have approached Barnum for new show venues. Proof of collaboration during the 1840s is elusive. Of note, Barnum shows included actors of markedly short stature, and they may have appeared in the laughing gas shows of Colton (Figure 5). It is not clear if Colton used those actors in the 1840s, but there was definitely such a collaboration two decades later in 1863 (Figure 5).

Colton at Barnum’s Aquarial Gardens in Boston in 1862

Barnum purchased the Boston Aquarial and Zoological Gardens located in the financial district of Boston, MA, in June 1862, making it an extension of the American Museum. From mid-1840s to early 1860s, Colton had traveled the country as a science lecturer, electrical inventor, and real estate investor. After failed ventures hurt him financially, he returned to New England to produce laughing gas shows and was hosted at Barnum’s Aquarial Gardens in the autumn of 1862 (Figure 6). The aquarium advertisements are the earliest documentation of a business relationship of the two men.
In his autobiography, Colton cited business advice from his esteemed friend.\textsuperscript{13} Colton wrote:

Mr. Barnum then gave me a bit of advice which I think is worthy of being repeated here. As near as I can remember, these were his words. “Let me give you a word of advice. You are going to make some money. As soon as it is known that you have a little spare money, you will have all sorts of schemes offered you—mining stocks, patent schemes, and the like, by which the parties will prove to you on paper that you can make money a great deal faster than in your legitimate business. Now don’t touch a thing of the kind say No to every such thing. As soon as you get any spare money put it into government bonds, or real estate, and never mind the small interest.” That advice has saved me thousands of dollars, and would have saved me much more if I had strictly followed it. In every instance in which I disregarded this advice I lost money. Mr. Barnum may be called “a humbug,” but he had a clear head for making and saving money.

Possibly with financial backing of Barnum,\textsuperscript{13,21,22} Colton established a thriving dental practice in Manhattan in 1863. The Colton Dental Association featured painless tooth extractions under nitrous.\textsuperscript{4,6,7,13}

“Doctor” Colton stressed the no-humbug nature of nitrous anesthesia. Yet, he insisted for decades that the oxygen atoms of \(\text{N}_2\text{O}\) support life in the manner of those of \(\text{O}_2\), perhaps even better.\textsuperscript{23–28} Indeed, he alleged that medical patients in respiratory distress should get nitrous instead of oxygen. At least once, he sent some nitrous oxide over to the home of a medical patient who was gasping in extremis, fighting for breath. He reported the “case in point” in 1893 as follows.\textsuperscript{23}

When Mrs. Peter Cooper was dying, many years ago [1869], she was suffering from partial congestion of the lungs. She had not strength to draw sufficient air into the lungs to supply the necessary oxygen to the blood and she was gasping. The physicians in attendance sent over for Prof. Doremus [Robert Ogden Doremus, M.D., 1824–1906] to get some oxygen to throw into the room. Prof. Doremus told them it was not oxygen they were wanting, but it was the nitrous oxide, laughing gas. They then went to my office and obtained 180 gallons of gas in large India rubber bags. The whole of this was pressed out into Mrs. Cooper’s room and it afforded immediate relief. Mr. Hewitt told me it was apparent to all present that the effect of the gas was to lengthen Mrs. Cooper’s life by several hours and relieve her of all distress in breathing.

The gasping patient, Mrs Peter Cooper, was Sarah Bedell Cooper, the mother of a mayor of New York City and the mother—in-law of another one, Abram S. Hewitt. Her husband Peter Cooper (1791–1883) was an alderman of New York City, the 1876 US presidential candidate of the Greenback Party, and the founder of Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. A Cooper—Hewitt Museum became part of the Smithsonian Institution. Colton’s dental practice was located at Room 19 of Cooper Union.\textsuperscript{29}

Fig. 3. A. At Barnum’s American Museum in New York City, laughing gas and “all its Mirthful Influences” were exhibited “for the first time” there on November 11, 1844 (New York Daily Tribune, November 11, page 2). The advertisement reads: AMERICAN MUSEUM—Corner of Broadway and Ann-street [sic]. P. T. Barnum ———— Proprietor. Every Day and Evening This Week! COMMENCING MONDAY Nov. 11th, 1844. GRAND PERFORMANCES Every evening, at 7 clock, and Wednesday and Saturday afternoons at 3. The Manager has engaged the Celebrated KENTUCKY MINSTRELS! MONS. CHECKENI, the dancer and Pantomimist, formerly of the Ravel Family, THE INFANT CHILDREN. LA PETITE ELISE and LA PETITE MEE, only four and six years old, the most accomplished juvenile Dancers and Pantomimists of the age. They will appear in a laughable and amusing Comic Ballet, composed expressly for them and also in several admired and favorite dances. LAUGHING GAS will be administered at each performance, and all its Mirthful Influences exhibited, for the first time at this establishment. Miss ADAIR, the Vocalist. Mr. B. WILLIAMS, the Irish Comedian &c. Beautiful engrav’d Likenesses of QUEEN VICTORIA, Prince Albert, Queen Adelaide, and Duchess of Kent. — Tickets 25 cents — children under ten years 12½. B. The conductor of the laughing gas shows at Barnum’s American Museum is identified only as “a learned Chemist” (New York Daily Tribune, March 3, 1845). Of note, the program also featured “animal magnetism” (hypnotism).\textsuperscript{15} The text reads: AMERICAN MUSEUM — Corner of Broadway and Ann-street [sic]. EVERY DAY AND EVENING THIS WEEK! Every evening at 7½ o’clock, and Wednesday and Saturday Afternoons at 3 o’clock LAUGHING GAS, by a learned Chemist, MISS ORVILLE, a charming Vocalist. Mr. WESTERN, a talented Low Comedian. MR. LANGE, by Mr. and Mrs. Western and Mr. Hamilton. Admission 25 cents — children under ten, 12½ cents. C. A splendid bill of attractions is offered to-day at the American Museum—one that will delight and amuse both old and young. The Manager has engaged a talented list of The Laughing Gas, Dissolving Views, &c, and will give a splendid performance at 7½ o’clock P. M. besides which, he has re-engaged the Giant and other rare novelties for to-day, to be seen at all hours. Those who have time and money can spend a few hours most agreeably at the Museum.
Barnum on Humbug

Barnum called himself the Prince, sometimes the King, of Humbug. He was caricatured as such an insect in 1851 (Figure 7). In 1866, he wrote the book on humbug (Figure 8). Humbugs of the World proposes that humbug can be either meritorious or disgraceful. Barnum plausibly felt that his own humbug activities were obvious entertainments of good value and fair price. On page 34, his motto is

"Lecture Room" or theater of Barnum's American Museum. Laughing gas shows were well attended.16

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said to be “we study to please.” The phrase invokes the medical concept of placebo, a word meaning “I shall please” in Latin. Indeed, Barnum wrote astutely of medical placebos. Consider the following excerpts from his book on humbug.

Medicine is the means by which we poor feeble creatures try to keep from dying or aching. In a world so full of pain it would seem as if people could not be so foolish, or practitioners so knavish, as to sport with men’s and women’s and children’s lives by their professional humbugs. Yet there are many grave M. D.’s who, if there is nobody to hear, and if they speak their minds, will tell you plainly that the whole practice of medicine is in one sense a humbug. One of its features is certainly a humbug, though so innocent and even useful that it seems difficult to think of any objection to it. This is the practice of giving a placebo; that is, a bread pill or a dose of colored water, to keep the patient’s mind easy while imagination helps nature to perfect a cure. As for the quacks, patent medicines and universal remedies, I need only mention their names. Prince Hohenlohe, Valentine Greatrakes, John St. John Long, Doctor Graham and his wonderful bed, Mesmer and his tub, Perkins’ metallic tractors—these are half a dozen. Modern history knows of hundreds of such.

But to return: It is certainly the case that frequently “the doctor” takes great care not to let the patient know what is the matter, and even not to let him know what he is swallowing. This is because a good many people, if at a critical point of disease, may be made to turn toward health if made to believe that they are doing so, but would be frightened, in the literal sense of the words, to death, if told what a dangerous state they are in.

One sort of regular practice humbug is rendered necessary by the demands of the patients. This is giving good big doses of something with a horrid smell and taste. There are plenty of people who don’t believe the doctor does anything to earn his money, if he does not pour down some dirty brown or black stuff very nasty in flavor. Some, still more exacting, wish for that sort of testimony which depends on internal convulsions, and will not be satisfied unless they suffer torments and expel stuff enough to quiet the inside of Mount Vesuvius or Popocatepetl. “He’s a good doctor,” was the verdict of one of this class of leather-bowelled fellows—“he’ll work your innards for you!”

It is a milder form of this same method to give what the learned faculty term a placebo. This is a thing in the outward form of medicine, but quite harmless in itself. Such is a bread-pill, or a draught of colored water, to keep the patient’s mind easy while imagination helps nature to perfect a cure. As for the quacks, patent medicines and universal remedies, I need only mention their names. Prince Hohenlohe, Valentine Greatrakes, John St. John Long, Doctor Graham and his wonderful bed, Mesmer and his tub, Perkins’ metallic tractors—these are half a dozen. Modern history knows of hundreds of such.

One might almost fancy that, in proportion as the physician is more skillful, by so much he gives less medicine, and relies more on imagination, nature, and, above all, regimen and nursing. Here is a story in point. There was an old gentleman in Paris, who sold a famous eye-water, and made much gain thereby. He died, however, one fine day, and unfortunately forgot to leave the recipe on record. “His disconsolate widow continued the business at...
negative connotations. Barnum recognized the power of the placebo, and Barnum available as an online

Fig. 8.

Barnum Effect

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “the word Barnum was in use from the mid 19th century as a noun in the sense ‘nonsense, humbug.’” The Oxford also offers Barnumize and Barnumesque as a verb and an adjective. The popular appeal of humbug prompted the term Barnum effect in psychology. The name was coined in 1956 by American psychologist Paul Meehl (1920–2003) because of the Barnum motto: “we have something for everybody.”

The psychological term arose when subjects accepted utterly non-specific and vague personal assessments after taking a supposed test of individual personality. Similarly, fortune telling is given credence when properly staged. Any manifestation of human gullibility might be ascribed to the eponymous effect, which may be akin to the placebo response. It is also a clue to the power of advertising. Barnum’s shows at the American Museum included fortune telling and animal magnetism (hypnotism), which are applications of the Barnum effect (Figure 3B).15

Painless Parker

Edgar Rudolph Randolph Parker (1872–1952) was a Canada-born Philadelphia-trained dentist dubbed by Arden G. Christen to be the P.T. Barnum of dentistry (Figure 9). Although almost half a century apart in time, Parker and Barnum shared qualities as businessmen and showmen. Indeed, Parker had the spirit of humbug, and there is a link to Barnum. In the 1890s, Parker joined forces with William Beebe (-1902) in Brooklyn, NY. Beebe had formerly been a publicity agent for Barnum. At the instigation of Beebe, and using Barnum’s autobiography as a guide, Parker understood the importance of branding and the value of entertainment. Beebe designed saturation advertising campaigns for Parker and made him perhaps the most sensational health care advertiser of all time, certainly of his time. Parker moved to California in 1906 and acquired a Barnumesque circus in 1913. Dentist and ringmaster, he performed dental extractions in a sideshow. The loud brass band and circus performances distracted patients and perhaps masked their occasional cries. His favorite anesthetic was a dilute solution of cocaine. American surgeon William S. Halsted (1852–1922) had diluted commercial 4% cocaine in pioneering work in the 1880s, but Parker implied that he used a special concoction by naming the product hydrocaine. He often demonstrated painless dental extractions on the street, but shills acting as patients sometimes assisted him. One of his accomplices was unwitting; showman Parker painlessly extracted teeth from an aged lion that had become naturally toothless. Although frowned upon early on by his contemporary dental authorities for being “unethical” by skewing competition with heavy advertising and practicing in states where he did not hold license, Parker became wildly successful. In 1948, he oversaw more than 70 dentists in 19 dental offices in California, 3 in Oregon, 4 in the state of Washington, and 1 in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Conclusion

Humbug is a tricky business. Barnum maintained that medical humbug could be deplorable quackery, but he understood that medical placebos have benefit. He felt that his own humbug was valuable entertainment at a reasonable price. The claim is debatable from the vantage of today. For instance, laughing gas shows indicated that recreational public intoxication is a harmless pastime that is suitable for witness by children. In the 1850s, Barnum was a temperance lecturer, so it is incongruous that he allowed laughing gas shows in his Boston Aquarial Garden in 1862.

“Doctor” Colton proved the possibility of painless dentistry. Still, he may have caused harm. He touted his daily recreational use of nitrous and maintained that the gas is healthful and supports life in the manner of oxygen, thus justifying hypoxic anesthesia practice.
Dr. Parker was a licensed dentist who advocated dental hygiene and brought affordable care to countless patients. Many of his antics were deemed unprofessional, and he blatantly engaged in Barnum-esque false advertising. However, after he legally changed his given name from Edgar, no one could say he was not truly Painless.20,21,22

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