

February 14, 2022

Christian Øverland  
 The Ruth and Hartley Barker Director & CEO  
 Wisconsin Historical Society

Via e-mail

Dear Mr. Øverland:

I'm writing on behalf of PETA to call for the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) to acknowledge a historical wrong and end animal acts at Circus World Museum.

In 2021, an eyewitness documented the conditions for elephants Isa and Viola, exhibited by Oklahoma-based Carson & Barnes Circus at Circus World. The [footage demonstrates](#) that both animals—who are in their 50s and considered geriatric for captive elephants—appeared to be experiencing ongoing foot and joint problems that are likely attributable to the harsh conditions of circus life. Like any aging individual whose body is marked from decades of toil, Isa and Viola deserve retirement.

Two veterinarians, both board-certified specialists in zoological medicine, reviewed footage of these elephants and observed they had notable swelling above their hind toenails throughout the summer. Above one of Isa's nails there appeared to be an opening from a former abscess. Nails on two of her feet were also misshapen. Both elephants had a habit of shifting weight off their hind limbs for significant periods—a possible sign of discomfort caused by underlying pathology, such as arthritis. Indeed, a person who said he was a retired veterinarian for Circus World told the eyewitness that age and arthritis were likely the reason that Viola so often rested one hind leg. The veterinarians PETA consulted both recommended a comprehensive veterinary evaluation, including radiographs, for both elephants.

Foot problems and arthritis are painful and potentially debilitating for aging captive elephants. They are closely associated with poor husbandry, including holding elephants on concrete or asphalt, chaining them for prolonged periods, limiting their freedom of movement, and making them perform tricks that place excessive stress on their joints.

At Circus World, all of these harmful conditions were present. At night, the elephants were chained by two legs in a cement block barn. During the day, they [had to perform](#) twice a day, seven days a week. They were also forced give rides before and after every show, and during PETA's observations, the burden of carrying riders nearly always fell to Isa. **WHS's [records](#) show that nearly 5,200 people paid to ride an elephant, and over the course of 72 days, the elephants never had a day off.**

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Chaining as routine nightly confinement is widely disapproved by elephant care professionals because of its demonstrated harmful impact on elephant health and welfare. Modern facilities stress the importance of providing elephants with free access to a natural habitat that encourages them to spend their days walking, foraging, bathing, scratching on trees, digging, and socializing—all activities that promote physical and psychological health.

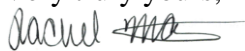
When not performing or giving rides at Circus World, Viola and Isa were routinely confined to a small, barren paddock with limited shade and no access to water for drinking or bathing. Elephants may drink 50 gallons of water a day, and should have free access to it for their health and wellbeing. But circuses limit elephants' access to water for human convenience, so that the animals don't dirty themselves, spray guests, or make a "mess." But elephants love to swim, which helps them cool off and alleviates pressure on their feet and joints. Mudding and dusting also keep their skin healthy. There's no doubt that Isa and Viola needed better access to water—after a rainstorm, they crowded around a small puddle and tossed onto their backs what little mud they could get.

The use of elephants, tigers, and other animals is central circus history—but it's a history of exploitation, not of the whitewashed "entertainment" that Circus World portrays it to be. Isa and Viola were taken from their families and natural homes as babies, and have spent much of the last five decades in heavy chains and dark trailers, hauled from place to place to enrich their captors—and WHS [paid nearly \\$60,000](#) for the elephants' 10 weeks of performances in 2021. The only reason elephants perform is that their spirits are broken. Behind-the-scenes [footage](#) of a Carson & Barnes training session shows its head trainer viciously beating elephants with bullhooks and shocking them with electric prods. This barbarity is standard practice. When a former Ringling Bros. employee released [photographs](#) of baby elephants being shocked, prodded, and bound by ropes, the circus's head elephant trainer said they were "classic pictures of professional elephant-training."

Circus World has never acknowledged the cruelty and injustice inherent to taking elephants from the wild, robbing them of their freedom, coercing tricks through fear and punishment, and depriving them of the environments they need to thrive. To do so would mean acknowledging its own complicity in abuse and abandoning animal acts altogether. Preserving history should never include a reenactment of its harms—especially by those who are still its victims.

It's time for the Wisconsin Historical Society to end live animal acts for good.

Very truly yours,



Rachel Mathews, Esq.

Director of Captive Animal Law Enforcement