



After its nearly century and a half run, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus plans to shut down "The Greatest Show On Earth." The historic American spectacle will deliver its final show in May, said Kenneth Feld, the chairman and CEO of Feld Entertainment, the producer of Ringling. Feld announced the news on the company website in January, citing declining ticket sales — which dipped even lower as the company retired its touring elephants. "This, coupled with high operating costs, made the circus an unsustainable business for the company," Feld said.

Ringling has been phasing out elephants as a result of shifting public tastes and criticism from animal rights groups over the well-being of the animals. The company held its last show featuring elephants last May, before completely retiring the animals to its 200-acre conservation center in Polk City, Fla., established by Feld Entertainment in 1995. Elephants had been a circus mainstay almost as long as the circus itself has been a staple of American entertainment, since Phineas Taylor Barnum introduced Jumbo, an Asian elephant in 1882. But before the traveling exhibition evolved into a regular destination for wholesome family fun, Barnum "made a traveling spectacle of animals and human oddities popular, while the five Ringling brothers performed juggling acts and skits from their home base in Wisconsin," reports the AP. "Eventually, they merged and the modern circus was born. The sprawling troupes traveled around America by train, wowing audiences with the sheer scale of entertainment and exotic animals."

The Feld family bought Ringling in 1967 and employs about 500 people for both touring shows "Circus Extreme" and "Out of This World." Those employees were told about the closure after shows in Orlando and Miami in January. "The Felds say their existing animals — lions, tigers, camels, donkeys, alpacas, kangaroos and llamas — will go to suitable homes," adds the AP. "Juliette Feld says the company will continue operating the Center for Elephant Conservation."

In addition to the circus, Feld Entertainment also runs a number of high-profile traveling shows, from Monster Jam and Supercross to Marvel Universe Live and Disney on Ice. Each year, Feld Entertainment's live shows draw some 30 million attendees. Before it draws the curtain, the two touring circuses will perform a total of 30 shows over the next four months, in major cities including Atlanta, Washington, Philadelphia, Boston and Brooklyn.

*Cover courtesy of Loren Moore, CA*

