



FORUM: ANIMALS IN MODERN U.S. HISTORY

The Captive Lives of Ostriches as Belligerent Animal Workers and Bad Mothers

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Sometimes male ostriches emit a low guttural sound that sounds strangely like a lion. On the plains in South Africa, these sounds aimed at female ostriches might confuse an unknowing listener. But on a ship bound from South Africa to Galveston, Texas in February 1887, these lion-esque sounds would not have been heard. Instead, as these dozens of ostriches crossed the Atlantic, their vocalizations were probably a quiet chirp, despite each bird weighing well over 100 pounds. Each ostrich had a more solitary existence on the ship than they had experienced in the wild or on a South African farm. On the Atlantic, they lived in single padded stalls near the middle of the hold, with paddocks between the stalls to offer some exercise and perhaps some interaction among the birds.¹

Successfully shipping ostriches from South Africa to the United States was a fairly new venture that had begun in the 1880s. Yet the shipment of these giant birds followed a path familiar to other wild animals bound for captivity in the United States in the preceding decades.² The birds also found similar fates as other captured animals, as human caretakers had constant concerns about how to keep a newly captured animal alive. What should a captive ostrich on a ship eat? Cabbage, sweet potatoes, carrots, turnips, bran, crushed bone, and some water kept most of the ostriches nourished enough to survive the voyage. The forty-four birds that eventually made it to California had made two stops in the Caribbean, at St. Helena and Barbados, prior to their final dock in Galveston. After a rest at the Texas seaport, where residents came to see the newly arrived animals on the brick wharf, the ostriches boarded a train for Los Angeles.³

The United States-bound ostriches had already been wrapped in a flurry of legislation and policies that demonstrated how organized the animal trade and animal farming systems had become by the late nineteenth century. They also show how savvy importers worked tirelessly to avoid contending with local laws. It might have made sense for the American buyers to seek out ostriches in Cape Colony, where ostrich farming had been thriving for decades. But they instead trekked “all over the country” before finding ostriches for sale in Natal, where they would not be charged a heavy export tax.⁴ Indeed, by 1885, the U.S. press was reporting a hefty export duty out of Cape Town.⁵

¹T. Lindsay Bake, “Ship’s Cargo of Ostriches Created Stir,” in *Victoria Advocate* Jan. 1, 1889, 38.

²“Ostriches for California,” *Fall River Daily Evening News* Mar. 10, 1887, 3.

³Bake, “Ship’s Cargo of Ostriches Created Stir,” 38.

⁴Nigel Rothfels offered one of the first animal studies books on the colonial networks that supported animal captivity in the United States. See: Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* (Baltimore, MD, 2008). Carl Hagenbeck’s animal importation business cornered much of this market and is explored in Rothfels’ work and the visual history presented by Eric Ames. See: Eric Ames, *Carl Hagenbeck’s Empire of Entertainments* (Seattle, 2008).

⁵“Ostrich Farming in California,” *Scientific American* 53, no. 21 (Nov. 1885): 321.

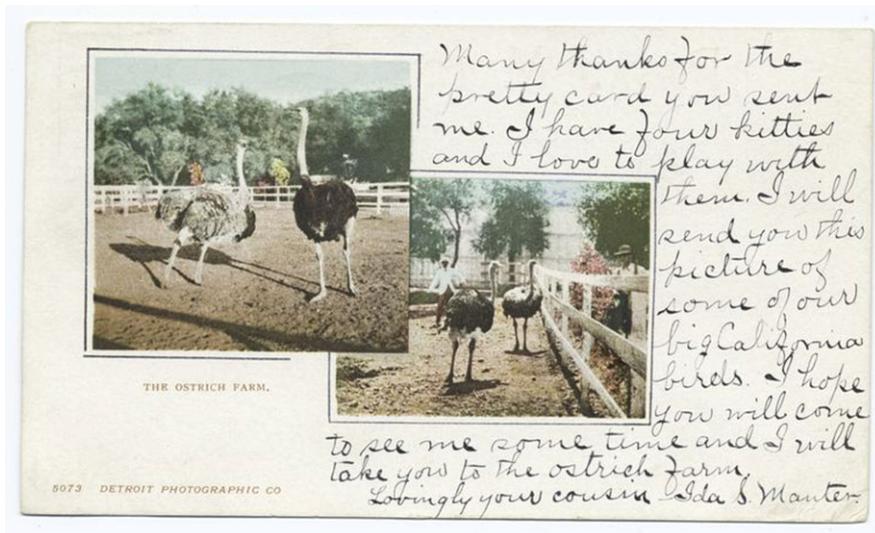


Figure 1. An early twentieth-century postcard shows ostriches on a California farm. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "The Ostrich Farm, California" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed December 6, 2024. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-9bc9-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

Once in California, the ostriches joined a landscape that was quickly transforming into a series of farms focused on animal agriculture and open for tourism.⁶ By the time the South African ostriches had arrived in the United States in 1887, they entered a local tourist destination as proprietors figured out how to maximize profits on the birds. It was a rather easy decision since the entire bird could be commodified through the fashion and meat industries. In addition to farming the eggs, plumes, leather, and meat of ostriches, they also made profits from curious onlookers (Fig. 1). Though Florida had some of the earliest farms, California quickly overtook the market as the U.S. ostrich capital.⁷ Ostriches that remained in Southern California became a public spectacle with a curious public visiting the ranches and sometimes interacting with the birds. Ostrich farmers quickly began charging an entrance fee.⁸ To centralize the profits, several ostrich farm investors built the short-lived Ostrich Farm Railway for tourists.⁹

Ostrich farms thrived in environments that closely resembled at least the warm temperatures of their wild counterparts. Proprietors understood this and prioritized setting up farms in spaces that would yield the biggest profits. This was a marked difference from the experiences of the diversity of animals living in the close quarters of zoos, where species like hippos and grizzly bears came from vastly different natural environments, yet inhabited the same institutions. This meant that temperatures and natural weather conditions of a single zoo could not provide the healthiest and most stable environment for the animals imported from around the world, as mortality rates sometimes indicated.¹⁰ All captive animals, including ostriches, had their reproductive and parenting behavior meticulously tracked by institutions. Those first few generations of a captive species habitually suffered from inadequate care and were met with astonishment as people rushed to write down a whole host of behaviors that seemed to defy

⁶For comparable histories of agritourism and the performance of working-class labor, see: Dominic A. Pacyga, *Slaughterhouse: Chicago's Union Stockyards and the World It Made* (Chicago, 2015); Wayne Ludwig, *The Old Chisholm Trail: From Cow Path to Tourist Shop* (College Station, 2018).

⁷"Ostriches in Florida," *The Florida Agriculturalist*, June 1896, 4.

⁸"Ostrich Farming in California," 321.

⁹"The Ostrich Farm Railway," *Los Angeles Herald*, July 1886, 6.

¹⁰"New Babies at the Zoo," *Buffalo Courier Express*, Oct. 1900, 5.

expectations or assumptions.¹¹ Like animals in zoos, ostriches in farms rarely kept their young as farmers found incubators more efficient and easier to watch over. Like captive hippos, lions, and monkeys, the ability of an ostrich to mother became far less important than her ability to breed.¹²

California may have been the first physical encounter that Americans had with ostriches, but they had likely already encountered them in a variety of writings. These early sketches of ostriches depicted them as bad mothers.¹³ Their reputation as bad mothers, however, was based on faulty observations about how ostriches cared for their eggs. The trope developed around people observing what seemed to be ostrich mothers laying their eggs and then abandoning them. Ostriches nest communally, allowing a single pair to hatch and care for dozens of eggs from just as many birds at a time.¹⁴ Americans may have encountered the most well-regarded information about ostriches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in *Scientific American*. By 1885, ostrich mothers were described as practicing “affectionate solicitude,” though the separation by breeding pairs meant that they could not practice communal nesting.¹⁵ Ostriches faced a refreshed public image as mothers with this new reporting, but their behavior as workers came under public scrutiny as they moved into entertainment industries.

Amid a growing ostrich farming landscape in Southern California, the circus industry capitalized on the bird’s popularity. In 1889, the Sells Brothers show purchased an entire herd of ostriches to carry with their menagerie throughout the season. In typical circus advertising fashion, newspapers reprinted the syndicated story along the circus route, reminding people that they had the means to buy out a full flock, that circusgoers would be gazing upon an entire herd of ostriches, and that a breeding program was on the horizon.¹⁶ The show also advertised its new ostrich herd in lithographs through the 1890s (Fig. 2). One poster featured a variety of animal groups in customized wagon cages in the menagerie, waiting for audiences to peruse the aisles of captive animals between big top shows. The ostriches, at the forefront of the poster, appear especially alert, active, and even loud behind a chain link fence in the middle of the menagerie tent.¹⁷ Another poster depicts the herd in a fenceless background, perhaps in Africa. The poster shows males, with their highly prized white plumes, but also females, perhaps to remind viewers of their captive breeding in the shows.¹⁸

Circuses were quick to label some animals as good workers, like elephants. They performed every cue in the show and pulled some of the heaviest equipment around the lot.¹⁹ Categorizing

¹¹For literature on captive breeding programs in zoos, see: Daniel Vandermommers, *Entangled Encounters at the National Zoo: Stories from the National Archive* (Lawrence, 2023); Daniel Bender, *The Animal Game: Searching for Wilderness at the American Zoo* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); Vicki Croke, *The Modern Ark: The Story of Zoos, Past, Present, and Future* (New York, 2014); and Lisa Uddin, *Zoo Renewal: White Flight and the Animal Ghetto* (Minneapolis, 2015).

¹²H. C. Hovey, “American Ostrich Farming,” *Scientific American* 68, no. 1, Jan. 1893, 3.

¹³“Reading Lesson XXIV: The Ostrich,” in Laura Valentine ed., *Warne’s Victoria Picture Spelling Book* (London: Frederick Warne and Co. 1866), 90; Julia Maria Huyshe, *Bible Stories of Animals* (London, 1855), 103.

¹⁴Edgar Williams, *Ostrich* (London, 2013).

¹⁵“Ostrich Farming as an Industry,” *Scientific American* 102, no. 10 (Mar. 1910), 200–201; “Ostrich Farming in California,” 211–212.

¹⁶“An Ostrich Farm,” in *The Daily Commercial Herald* Oct. 1889, 4.

¹⁷“Sells Bros. Circus,” 1893, Poster Collection, Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center, Baraboo, WI, <https://circusworld.catalogaccess.com/archives/31129> (accessed Jan. 9, 2025).

¹⁸“Adam Forepaugh & Sells Brothers great shows consolidated A congress of the giant birds of the world,” Cincinnati & New York: Strobridge Litho. Co., c1898, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, Washington, DC.

¹⁹Susan Nance’s monograph on elephants in the circus industry offers insights into their behavior, perception, and experiences in tented shows. See: Susan Nance, *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus* (Baltimore, MD, 2013).



Figure 2. A lithograph from the Sells Brothers Circus features a flock of ostriches. “Sells Bros. Circus,” 1893, Poster Collection, Robert L. Parkinson Library & Research Center, Baraboo, WI. Accessed December 6, 2024. <https://circusworld.catalogaccess.com/archives/31129>.

an animal as a worker (or even an actor) rather than a captive being sidestepped the growing chorus of animal rights organizations and seemingly justified the truly grueling manual labor that many animals performed to create the magic of circus day.²⁰

But by every metric held by the circus world, ostriches were bad workers. As they crossed into the traveling entertainment sector of the circus, they suddenly joined an interspecies workforce that required daily labor to assemble an entire city in the morning, keep it running smoothly for a day, and disassemble it in the night. Ostriches, as circus workers would repeat, had a natural disposition that was “repulsive” and “belligerent.”²¹ This characterization was echoed in newspaper stories that colorfully told of their escapes, and the comically bad attempts to recapture them as the industry demanded increased movement and cross-country travel.²² When put alongside other captive animals, newspapers were quick to call an ostrich “so ill-tempered that it is unsafe to venture near his cage.”²³ Yet they were ever present in the late nineteenth and early twentieth shows because they were novel, entertaining, and ostrich-made goods were so familiar to the American public.

Even as bad workers and bad mothers (by the metrics of the animal entertainment industry), ostriches were still part of animal spectacle spaces. Supposedly bad animal mothers filled the captive breeding ventures, and disgruntled animal workers were part of the excitement. As the feather industry collapsed and the promise of wealth in ostrich farming seemed to slip, they were

²⁰The ASPCA, founded in the late nineteenth century offered some of the earliest organized critiques against animal cruelty. Janet Davis and Susan Nance have written most prolifically on the intersection of travelling animal entertainments and animal rights movements. See: Janet Davis, *The Gospel of Kindness: Animal Welfare and the Making of Modern America* (Oxford, 2019); and Susan Nance, *Rodeo: An Animal History* (Norman, 2020).

²¹William C. Crum, *History of Animals and Leading Curiosities* (New York, 1874), 4.

²²“Ostrich is a Husky Bird,” *The Goltry News*, Aug. 1907, 3.

²³“Spring Opening for Animals,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Apr. 11, 1904, 3.

no longer popular as a novel sight or as members of a mobile farm.²⁴ Yet that ostriches stayed traveling shows the comedic value of races. Often pitted against horses, ostriches ran with the kind of wild unpredictability that made their labor remain central to captive animal industries.²⁵ They may have held reputations as bad mothers and bad workers, but their labor was still valuable in an industry that prioritized entertainment above all else.

²⁴For a treatment of the ostrich feather industry, see: Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Plume: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (New Haven, CT, 2008).

²⁵"Big Zoo and Novelties with Ringling Circus," *The Daily Item* (Lynn, MA, June 1917), 12.