Like Topsy and like the United States itself, the vaudeville show "jes growed." It was not planned, nor was it a European import or adaptation. The word *vaudeville* is French, referring in the nineteenth century to light pastoral plays with musical interludes, but the shows were completely indigenous developments, the product of American saloon owners' attempts to attract free-spending drinkers by offering the added enticement of free shows to feed common people's insatiable appetite for fun as well as for food, fun that included early girlie shows that gave variety entertainment an initially bad reputation. When minstrel shows, wedded as they were to blackface, plantations, and Negroes, proved unable to adapt fully after the Civil War to changing public interests and concerns, show business promoters expanded variety shows, moved them into theaters, and cleaned up their reputation by purging them of objectionable material and advertising them as family entertainment.

By the 1890s variety shows, rechristened the more elegant sounding "vaudeville" in a final purge of the old disreputable image, replaced minstrel shows as the nation's most popular entertainment form. Paralleling the development of monopolies and trusts in other rapidly expanding businesses at the turn of the twentieth century, vaudeville grew into a highly organized, nationwide big business. Besides tracing
These images—boxing, women, and whiskey—gave early variety shows a bad reputation. HTC.
vaudeville's evolution, this chapter concentrates on the qualities that distinguished vaudeville from all other entertainment forms: the underlying structure of its shows; the special demands it made on performers; the stars who seemed suited only for its format; the unprecedented popularity of its animal and magic acts; and the emphasis it placed on humor, and especially on ethnic humor. These distinctive qualities not only explain vaudeville's uniqueness, they also explain why the American people made vaudeville the most popular entertainment form in early twentieth-century America.

The career of Tony Pastor, the "father of American vaudeville," spanned the full range of pre-Civil War show business before he settled down and transformed saloon shows into family entertainment. As a six-year-old boy around 1843, he began to perform, singing about the evils of alcohol at temperance meetings, an ironic beginning for the man who later became perhaps the most famous saloon singer of his day in New York. In the mid-1840s, the
plauded clown. But in 1860, he began to perform in variety shows, in 1861 beginning a four-year run at 444 Broadway, a honky-tonk saloon. Probably embarrassed by 444’s total lack of respectability, Pastor, in the frequent interviews he later gave, always glossed over that part of his career in favor of the ten years after 1865, which he spent staging and starring in variety shows in the Bowery, shows that he tried to clean up so they would appeal to more than the traditional masculine saloon crowds. During that decade, when minstrel shows began to travel widely, Pastor took his sanitized variety show on tour. This tour proved so successful that he made it an annual venture, one that was soon booked into high-class theaters—a major breakthrough for variety shows.

One of Pastor’s typical traveling shows featured a blackface skit, The Colored Nurses; a male and female song and dance team; an Irish comedian; a woman playing the violin, guitar, xylophone, bells, concertina, and banjo; a gymnast and contortionist; a female dance team; a magic lantern exhibition; Pastor’s comic songs, “which brought down not only the gallery but the parquette”; and a trapeze act that “resembled the gambols and eccentricities of monkeys.” Besides being his own best attraction, Pastor was a striking character. Perhaps because of his background as circus ringmaster, he dressed flamboyantly, wearing a long frock coat, a vest with a prominent watch chain, high-laced patent-leather boots, and a shining opera top hat. Sporting a dashing handlebar moustache, the short, stocky Pastor swaggered through life, personally running his theater, booking his bills, and singing his songs. He was a master of the comic song, which, as he explained, poked fun at “some topic of the times which is capable of being looked at from a comical point of view.” Be-

Boy Prodigy became a tambourine player and singer with the minstrel troupe at Barnum’s Museum. After experience in minstrel shows, the talented young performer began a diversified circus career, working his way up from prop boy, to equestrian, acrobat, ringmaster, and finally to singing, dancing, joking clown. By the later 1850s, Pastor was a widely ap-
fore Will Rogers was born, Pastor considered the newspaper "the most valuable agent the vocalist has ever had for securing subjects for popular songs." Constantly creating new material, he sang about virtually everything, including the problems of the Civil War, the novelty of electricity, the plight of the workingman, the foibles of politicians, the Spanish-American War, and the frivolities of fashion plates. "I've introduced one or two new songs nearly every Monday night during the season," he boasted in 1895, "for the past thirty years." Whatever his topic, he played to the common people who made up his audiences, using the time-tested American popular formulas. "You can always depend on good songs with patriotism or freedom for their themes," he observed. "The average audience is almost invariably delighted by songs that laud the poor and toss the boots, so to speak, to the rich."

But in 1875, Pastor moved uptown from the Bowery to Broadway, leaving behind his established clientele and putting himself in direct competition with the Harrigan and Hart shows and with opulent musical extravaganzas, productions that taught him to appeal to a broader audience. Six years later, he moved into Tony Pastor's New Fourteenth Street Theatre, staged "high class" variety shows, and actively tried to build the family audience that variety had not yet consistently attracted. Besides cleaning up the show, Pastor enticed respectable women to his theater by offering major door prizes like sewing machines, new hats, and silk dresses; modest gifts like dress patterns; or sewing kits for every female patron. Pastor's gimmicks and his shows caught on, and other vaudeville theater managers quickly followed his example. Pastor remained primarily an early nineteenth-century trouble, an entertainer who thought in terms of running and performing in his own shows. But new promoters with the broader visions of the new age made vaudeville into a huge show business empire.

The two men who built vaudeville into a national big business, Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward Franklin Albee, came out of circus backgrounds like Pastor's. But unlike Pastor, they were businessmen, not performers. Keith, born in 1846 in New Hampshire, started by operating a circus candy concession
ON WITH THE SHOW

B. F. Keith's lavish New Theatre in Boston, an early vaudeville palace. HTC.

for a few years. Soon Keith was taking his own small shows on the road. He met with little success but was determined to make show business his career. Reverting to P. T. Barnum's pattern, Keith and a financial backer in 1883 transformed a small Boston store into the Gaiety Museum, whose only attraction at first was an infant midget “Baby Alice—The One Pound Baby.” But even after Keith added a typical array of curiosities and exhibits, like Jo-jo the Dog-faced Boy, presented small variety shows on a stage constructed by laying planks over dry goods boxes, and expanded his attractions to a room upstairs, the ordinary dime museum did not draw well.

Then E. F. Albee, who also spent time with a traveling circus, went to work for Keith, and the two men began moving toward their eventual entertainment empire that would be crowned by opulent entertainment palaces—a long way from that one tiny dime museum. Keith made the first move. After observing that potential customers would leave the museum rather than wait for the variety show to begin, he staged continuous shows. But after an initial upturn in business, patronage fell off. “The trouble,” Albee told his boss, “is that we are running the kind of a show where people, especially women, feel sort of sheepish to be seen. We’ve got to do something to raise the tone of the place.” In 1885, Keith and Albee moved away from the rather sleazy “freak show” atmosphere. Redecorating the room into a Japanese garden complete with Kimono-clad Japanese waitresses serving tea, Keith and Albee staged an abridged one-hour version of Gilbert and Sullivan’s Mikado, a current success in a major Boston theater. “Why pay $1.50 when you can see our show for 25 cents?” Albee advertised. Enough people found the advertisement and the abbreviated show appealing that Albee and Keith presented a season of “tabloid opera,” which proved such a success that by mid-1886 they had enough money to lease a regular theater. After a year staging popularly priced plays, they presented their first continuous, completely reputable variety show, the type of show that led to their success.

Keith and Albee built their entertainment empire on three basic components. Aiming at family audiences, Keith absolutely insisted that every act had to eliminate any potentially offensive material, including “such words as Liar, Slob, Son-of-a-Gun, Devil, Sucker, Damn . . . also any reference to questionable streets, resorts, localities, and bar rooms.”
Keith’s theater managers enforced the restrictions rigidly by firing offenders on the spot. This strict censorship made performers mock Keith’s theaters as “the Sunday school circuit.” But patrons flocked to them. Again appealing to women and children, the continuous show began at about 9:30 A.M. and ran until about 10:30 P.M., the patrons being able to stay as long as they wanted just as they could in Barnum’s Museum and would in motion picture theaters. But to keep crowds moving, especially on weekends and holidays, Keith and Albee opened the shows with “chasers”—acts so boring that, when they began to repeat their lifeless routines, they “chased” customers out—a more sophisticated version of Barnum’s “egress.”

The third major ingredient in the Keith-Albee formula—besides wholesome and continuous fun—was luxury. They built palaces for the people, where everyone with the price of admission was treated like an honored guest in an incredibly ornate mansion, one literally fit for royalty, where uniformed “servants” catered to the patrons’ needs and whims—whether for refreshments, direction to seats, or assistance in powder rooms. It was as if exclusive millionaires’ clubs or Barnum’s fabulous Iranistan had been thrown open to the general public. For twenty-five cents anyone could feel like a king or queen for a day. More than twenty years before the construction of New York’s Palace Theatre—the ultimate symbol of the lavish vaudeville house—Albee and Keith built the first vaudeville palace. When they opened their Colonial Theatre in Boston in 1894 only two American buildings rivalled it for opulence—the Imperial and Savoy hotels in New York. By that time, Keith and Albee already had expanded to a richly appointed theater in Philadelphia and one in New York that featured ushers in Turkish costumes and powder room attendants in lace caps and frilly aprons. But it was the Colonial Theatre in Boston that was the most sparkling gem in their show business crown.

Built during the depression of the 1890s at an unheard of cost of $670,000, the Colonial was truly palatial. The theater boasted a pillared, iron-worked, arched, gargoyle-bedecked exterior, marble ticket booths with gold domes, and a mirrored foyer with stunning painted panels. Velvet carpets led to the even more extravagant interior, with its brocade walls, plush seats, gorgeous paintings, and intricately decorated ceiling, or to its opulent restrooms with their shining brass fixtures and freshly cut flowers. But, ironically, at least as far as publicity was concerned, the theater’s major attraction was in its basement. Albee often boasted that his greatest feat in showmanship was an inexpensive rug, the red carpet that covered the floor of the power plant. With the flair of a Barnum, Albee converted the theater’s boiler room into a showplace. Its
attendants, at least at tour time, wore spanking clean uniforms, kept the machinery immaculately clean, and used “solid silver” shovels to stoke the furnaces. Appealing to Americans’ obsession with cleanliness, “the coal room with the carpet” generated tremendous publicity, publicity that further dignified the Albee-Keith style of vaudeville. If the coal bin of a theater were spic and span, its shows must certainly be above reproach. And people just had to see that incredible theater and the others that soon followed it.

At the turn of the twentieth century, vaudeville theaters proliferated at a dizzying rate, as minstrel houses had before the Civil War. In 1896, New York City contained seven vaudeville theaters; fourteen years later it had thirty-one. Chicago in 1896 had six variety or burlesque houses; in 1910, it boasted twenty-two vaudeville theaters. Philadelphia vaudeville houses expanded from twelve to thirty in the same years. As part of this great expansion, the truly stupendous Palace Theatre opened in 1913 at 47th and Broadway, the center of the nation’s show business capital. The Palace immediately became the most prestigious house in the golden age of vaudeville, a period that symbolically began with the opening of Keith’s Colonial Theatre in 1894 and ended when motion pictures took over the Palace in 1932. As vaudeville palaces popped up around the nation, chains of vaudeville theaters emerged throughout the country, as did burlesque and theatrical circuits in the same period. Most vaudeville chains numbered only a few theaters. But when B. F. Keith died in 1914, his vaudeville empire included six theaters in New York City, six in Brooklyn, two in Boston, two in Jersey City, two in Philadelphia, two in Cleveland, and one each in Atlantic City, Columbus, Lowell (Mass.), Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Louisville, Portland (Me.), Providence, and Pawtucket. As vaudeville boomed and demand for entertainers sharply increased, performers’ salaries also exploded, from a few hundred dollars a week for a star to several thousand dollars a week for top headliners. Vaudeville was so popular that, even with the high costs of theaters and salaries, promoters made large profits. Vaudeville had become a nationwide big business.

Like the owners of other mushrooming businesses of the early twentieth century, vaudeville executives attempted to consolidate their empires and to limit competition. Joining with other theater owners, Keith and Albee formed the United Booking Office (UBO), which exclusively booked all performers for the members’ theaters, as did similar theatrical and burlesque “monopolies.” In effect, the UBO commission on the performers’ salaries was a kickback to the theater owners for the privilege of being booked on the circuit. UBO, led by the dictatorial Albee, whom Groucho Marx labeled “Ol Massa,” took
increasingly large cuts from performers’ salaries, arbitrarily assigned them to undesirable, expensive-to-reach bookings, and could fire them after their third performance, leaving the performers stranded with no income and no booking. Facing such exploitation, some vaudeville performers attempted to organize a union, The White Rats, modeled on British music hall performers’ Water Rats. In 1900, the White Rats tried to organize a strike, but, like many other turn-of-the-twentieth century fledgling unions that tried to oppose powerful big businesses, they were victimized by the power of the employers and by the disunity of the performers. Still, the White Rats grew stronger owing to the employers’ insensitivity to legitimate grievances. Again paralleling industrial unionism, the entertainers’ union found that, when it eventually gained strength, it faced a company union—The National Vaudeville Association (N.V.A.), an organization financed by Albee in 1916. To be booked into any of the Albee-dominated Vaudeville Managers Protection Association theaters, performers had to be N.V.A. members in good standing, which meant not being White Rats. The N.V.A. did remedy some of the worst management abuses and provided entertainers with a valuable new service. Performers could get protection for their material by filing their acts in sealed envelopes with the N.V.A. office, envelopes that would be opened if a performer charged that another entertainer had stolen his routine. With its strong power base, the N.V.A. won the battle with the White Rats, and the Keith Albee circuit spread, dominating big-time vaudeville in the East as the Orpheum circuit did in the West, setting up a far-flung circuit that performers, even the biggest stars, traveled.

“The vaudeville actor,” recalled comedian Fred Allen, who began his long career as

The spotless boiler room, which was open to public tours, attracted a great deal of publicity for its cleanliness. HTC.

“Freddy St. James, The World’s Worst Juggler,” “was part gypsy and part suitcase!” Like nomadic herdsmen continually moving in search of greener pastures, vaudevillians traveled in search of better bookings, better reviews, and better contracts. Vaudeville consisted of much more than the Keith-Albee-Orpheum circuits, much more than the Palaces. There were literally thousands of small, second- and third-rate theaters scattered throughout the nation. And every one of them needed a continual supply of performers—the small-timers that made show business forms truly national institutions. The lives of the entertainers who played in the nation’s Beaver Dams were important parts of the human story of vaudeville, a story that with only minor variations could apply to most other entertainment forms.

Since vaudeville theaters constantly needed fresh faces, performers continually had to travel. But troupes did not tour together, so small-timers lacked the moving
Professor Hermann, performing one of his magic tricks. HTC.

homes that circus performers had. Still, small-timers did live in a world apart, thinking, talking, and dreaming almost entirely about show business, as they literally lived out of their trunks. Many women troupers gave birth in dressing rooms, pullman railroad cars, or in the wings of theaters. Many babies slept comfortably in the tops of theatrical trunks or in bureau drawers. Many children got their baths in sinks, cut their teeth on sticks of greasepaint, and learned to read from pro-

grams, handbills, or scripts. Many troupers could not afford to buy their meals in restaurants so they cooked in tin plates on improvised sterno or gas jet “stoves.” Small-timers even dated their lives by their engagements. A baby’s birthday might be remembered by associating it with the time the act moved up to a better spot on a bill; an election might be dated as the week the act filled in for a star;

Herr Holtum, a cannon-ball juggler.
or a tornado might be recalled by the time a booking was canceled.

Gossip about theaters, hotels, managers, agents, audiences, and other performers pulled traveling entertainers together into a tightly-knit group with its own lore and traditions. The uncertainties and instabilities of life on the road, for example, frequently made the hotel desk clerk, who often had to collect rent from penniless entertainers, into an adversary. Performers delighted in swapping stories about hoodwinking the clerk, stories that freely blended fact, fiction, and fantasy, stories that told about clever small-timers packing suitcases with bricks or with telephone books so the clerk would think the performers had bags full of valuable clothing and would give them credit with their luggage as collateral. Others laughed about sneaking out without paying their bills by dropping suitcases out windows or by putting on as many layers of clothing as possible and casually sauntering out as if they were just stepping out for a few minutes. Small-timers also stayed together even in the off-season, which in pre-air-conditioning days was the summer. Communities of performers sprang up about New York and Chicago, the centers of the eastern and western vaudeville circuits. So many performers spent the off-season on Long Island that they formed their own social club, The Long Island Good Hearted Thespians Society (LIGHTS). One of LIGHTS’ major functions was its huge Christmas party complete with a gigantic tree, beautiful decorations, a traditional feast, and, of course, an unusually dramatic visit from Santa Claus. It was a typical American Christmas celebration—except that it took place on the Fourth of July.

As the entertainment circuits grew and the numbers of traveling performers greatly increased, show-business-oriented inns emerged throughout the nation, providing small-timers with homes away from home, sanctuaries where they could rent inexpensive, clean rooms and get three filling meals a day, where they were not gawked at, and where they could relax and trade boasts and gossip with other performers. Word quickly spread among small-timers about these places, often by means of notes written on theater dressing-room walls, notes that warned about dips in joints as often as they recommended good buys, like Abuza’s Home Restaurant, a typical small-timers’ hangout in Hartford. Mama Abuza provided huge five-course dinners of her home-cooking for twenty-five cents with
When the act went poorly, nothing seemed good. But, even then, many small-timers found solace in their hopes and dreams. After years and years playing in the same sorts of theaters and in the same place on bills, many acts knew they would never make it out of the small time. But few experienced entertainers left show business by choice. Performing got in their blood, and for them there was no other business. Whatever the town they played in, whatever the quality of the theater, whatever their place on the bill, whatever the size of the crowd, performers had their moment on stage with the audience. In the magic glow of the footlights, in the warmth of an enthusiastic audience an ordinary performer could be lifted, at least for that moment, to exhilarating heights. More than anything else, that feeling kept professional small-timers going. “Vaudeville old-timers may not be wallowing in affluence in later life,” concluded Fred Allen, “but each small-timer has his store of memories that will help him to escape from the unhappy present into the happy past.”

For its patrons, the show, not the lives of the performers, was the important thing. Vaudeville presented its audiences with an incredible variety of performers and material, ranging from slapstick comedy to dramatic readings, from trained animals to opera singers, from sexual impersonators to ballet dancers, from ethnic humor to production numbers. Ironically, the show business form that seemed the most unstructured, that seemed little more than an entertainment hodgepodge, was in fact meticulously planned and highly structured to offer a balanced variety, to build excitement and expectation, to pulsate with its own rhythm, and to convey a sense of order and unity. The form of the vaudeville show was a new ritual for the new age. Like the nation itself in the age of immi-
THE VAUDEVILLE SHOW

...gratiation and modernization, the vaudeville show combined an odd assortment of distinctive pieces. In this sense, it was a hodgepodge! But unlike the nation, the vaudeville show managed to arrange the pieces into a cohesive, unified whole.

Vaudeville had the rapid-fire pace of the modern city as well as its diversity. The entire show whizzed before the audience like the view from an elevated railroad. But its carefully crafted structure focused the potentially blurred vision into a pleasing, balanced composition. While the audience was still entering and being seated, an action-oriented "dumb act" opened the show, an act that did not depend on being heard for its appeal. Whether animals, dancers, or acrobats, the first act was set on the full stage area, which conveyed a feeling of spaciousness as well as of action and vitality, suggesting that a full exciting show was to come. To settle down the audience, the second spot featured "a typical vaudeville act," often a male and female singing duo or a comedy team that could perform in the narrow space in front of a drop curtain while the stagehands set up the scenery for the production to come, so there could be rather elaborate scenes without slowing up the rapidly paced show. "With number three position," observed George A. Gottlieb who booked the Palace Theatre, "we count on waking up the audience... from now on it [the show] must build right up to the finish." A comedy sketch usually filled this slot, but it had to be very different from the first two acts so that the audience would already feel the rich variety of the show and anticipate what was still to come. The fourth spot went to the "first big punch of the show." The next act, which climaxed the first half of the show, was "as big a 'hit' as any number of the bill" to leave the audience buzzing at intermission.

The show was constructed to set up the stars. If a production number closed the first half, for example, a top comedy act might precede it, and the third spot would not be a comedy sketch but some other upbeat number. The second half opened in front of a drop curtain with an act, often a comedian, that would maintain the gaiety and pace but not be so good that it would prevent the rest of the bill from building. Next, the stage blossomed into a well-mounted production, often a playlet featuring a comic or dramatic headliner. In the eighth spot on the nine-act bill, the booker offered his biggest star, usually a comedian or comedy team. A "showy act" completed the program, leaving the audience with a feeling of abundance, while also allowing early leavers to exit without disrupting the show. "A command of the art of balancing a show," a vaudeville writer observed, "is a part of the genius of a great showman." The structure produced a pace, rhythm, and unity that greatly enhanced the appeal of each act and of the show, providing still another example that there was much more to show business than met the eye.

The vaudeville show drew material and performers from all other show-business forms—musical comedy, burlesque, drama, the minstrel show, and even the circus. In this sense, vaudeville was a smorgasbord of the richest American entertainment fare. But it was, at the same time, something unique, something with its own distinctive format, pace, and performance techniques, something that made demands on performers that no other show business forms made. Vaudevil lians appeared only once in each show, regardless of how famous, how well paid, or how popular they were. And they appeared for only a very limited time, normally about ten minutes for lesser acts and twenty to thirty