Famed Ringling Bros. circus closing after more than 100 years

"I have made the difficult business decision that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey® will hold its final performances in May of this year," CEO Kenneth Feld said.

High operating costs and the decline of ticket sales "made the circus an unsustainable business for the company," Feld said.

The full cast of the circus is between 250 and 300 people. With three performing units, the circus visits about 115 cities each year.

Ringling Bros. was founded in Baraboo, Wisconsin, in 1884 by five of the seven Ringling brothers. The family ran the circus until 1967 when it was sold to Feld Entertainment.

For years, the elephants have been in the spotlight and their dance routines featured prominently in the shows. Off stage, the Ringling Bros. runs an elephant conservation center which sits on 200 acre of rural land in Florida, between Tampa and Orlando.

Created in 1995 by Ringling, the facility focuses on the care and study of Asian elephants - an endangered species that it had used in its shows.

But due to mounting criticism, the Ringling Bros. phased out the elephant acts entirely.

Public Outcry

Several animal rights groups repeatedly criticized, picketed and sued Ringling Bros. for its treatment of the animals. The animal rights group, PETA, spent years petitioning against the treatment of circus animals.

In 2011, Feld Entertainment agreed to pay a fine of $270,000 for alleged violations of the Animal Welfare Act. The company did not admit wrongdoing but promised to implement new training for all personnel who handle animals.

Before taking the final bow, the Ringling Bros., will perform 30 shows across the United States between now and May.

By Tony Marco and Azadeh Ansari, CNN
(adapted version)
Updated January 16, 2017