

CIRGUS LINGO

The carny vocabulary is traditionally part of carnival cant, a secret language, and is an ever-changing form of communication, in large part designed to be impossible to understand by an outsider. Thus, as words are assimilated into the culture at large, they lose their function and are replaced by more obscure or insular terms. Most carnies no longer use cant, but many owners/operators and “old-timers” still use some of the classic terms. **Here are some terms you would find back then and that you can use at your Murder Under The Big Top party!**

86 D	Banned from the carnival midway
ADVANCE MAN	The person who arranges the rights to play a certain town or fairgrounds
ALIBI	A carnival game that has very little chance to win
BABY Q	A type or model of a merry-go-round ride
BACK END	Rides and games
BACKLOT	The area behind the midway where the carnies keep vehicles and living quarters
BILLBOARD	Trade magazine for carnival owners -- Now called “Amusement Business” or “AB”
BLOW	An item of stock given away in order to attract more customers
CALL	A carney’s sales pitch to get customers, or marks, into his joint
CARNEY	A person who works in a carnival
COOK SHACK	Food joint where carnies eat
CORN GAME	A bingo game -- In the old days, corn was used to cover each number
CUT	The amount, usually a percentage, paid by a concession to the boss
DONIKER	Toilet
DONIKER JOINT	A bad location for a joint away from the flow of the crowd
DOUBLE	A \$20 bill
DRAW	Money provided to a carney by the office before it is earned
ELY #7	A type or model of a ferris wheel



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FIN	A \$5 bill
FLASH	A prize, usually hung in a joint, to attract customers or marks
FLAT STORE	A carnival game that cannot be won by a mark
FRONT	The length, in feet, of a joint along the midway
FRONT END	Concessions and office
G NOTE	A \$1000 bill
GIBTOWN	Gibson town, FL where many carnival people locate their winter quarters
GRIP	A wad of money
GEEK	Sideshow performer that bit the head off a chicken -- Geeks were considered the lowest of the low among carneys
GRAB JOINT	A concession where food is served directly over the counter -- The popcorn wagon or cotton candy stand
GYPSY	Usually, an illegitimate operator -- It can also mean a person who jumps from show to show for work Joint - A concession or game located in a trailer or tent
HANKY PANK	A game where you win a prize every time you play
HEADLINER	A large carnival ride or attraction that attracts a crowd of people
JUMP	Moving the show from one town to the next
KID RIDE	A carnival ride designed for small children
KIZZARNEY	An outdated carney language similar to 'pig Latin' -- (Seldom used since the Depression Era)
LAY DOWN	The counter in front of a joint where marks play the game
LOT LICE	People who visit the midway but do not spend money
LOT LIZARD	A woman who "sleeps around" on the midway
LOT MA	A carney who marks the spot where rides will be set up
MARK	A civilian or towns person visiting the carnival
MIDWAY	The location of the carnival rides, concessions, and shows
NUT	Operating expenses of a show or joint owners -- A show always seeks to "make the nut" or profit



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OFF ICE	A trailer from which the carnival owner runs his business
PLASTER	Cheap prizes
PLUSH	A stuffed animal given as a prize in a game -- A soft, furry teddybear
PITCH GAME	A joint that sells merchandise instead of offering items as prizes to win
POSSUM BELLY	Compartments under a semi truck trailer used to haul cargo
PUNK	An immature young person
RAG	Cheap stock, usually a stuffed animal made from plain material -- Also called 'slum' or 'plaster'
RIDE JOCKEY	A carnival ride operator
ROUTE	The itinerary of towns to be played for the season
RUBE	A pejorative term for a carnival customer -- The cry, "Hey, Rube," is a signal to help a fellow carney in a fight
SAWBUCK	A \$10 bill
SCHLOW (SLOUGH)	To take down or tear down the show -- Pronounced like "Ow! I hurt my finger!"
SHILL	A person who pretends to play a game as an enticement to others
SIDEWALL	A wall of canvas that hangs just below the top of a joint
SINGLE 0	A dollar bill -- Also refers to a show that has a single attraction
SLUM	Cheap, inexpensive prizes used in a game
SPOT	The location of a carnival -- That was the best 'spot' we played all year
SWING	To steal money from the owner/boss
THE MAN	Any person of authority
TOP MAN	A carney who, when setting up a ride, positions himself high in the air
TUB	The passenger compartment on a thrill ride
TURN THE TIP	To attract a good crowd
WINTER QUARTERS	The town where the show locates in the off season
YARD	A \$100 bill