The lowland gorilla, Gargantua (1929-1949), a much loved attraction of the Ringling Brothers Circus, saved the circus from bankruptcy after The Depression. The Ringling Brothers Circus promoters claimed he was the largest gorilla in captivity, and puffed him up in the media as a snarling, ferocious man-eater. These claims of ferocity were much aided by an acid scar which marred his face.

Gargantua was born c. 1929 in the Belgian Congo, captured as a baby, and given to Captain Arthur Phillips as a gift. Phillips named him “Buddy” and the Captain’s whole crew was very fond of the baby gorilla who was kept caged on their freighter ship. One of the crew, out of great cruelty and anger towards the captain, threw nitric acid at Buddy, causing the scarring on his face. Buddy almost lost his eyesight and the attack, scaring him emotionally, lead to much more aggressive behavior. Phillips was eventually forced to give Buddy to Gertrude Lintz, a wealthy eccentric who lived in Brooklyn, where she cared for injured animals.

Buddy had double pneumonia by the time he arrived in Brooklyn and Lintz nursed him back to health, even going so far as to chew his food for him. Lintz, who treated Buddy and other animals in her care as her own children, was known to dress Buddy up and drive around the city with him. This living arrangement ended abruptly in 1937 when Buddy, terrified by a thunderstorm broke out of his cage and got into bed with Lintz, seeking comfort. Lintz soon sold the 460 lb Buddy to the Ringling brothers who renamed him Gargantua.

Although he never mated in captivity, Gargantua had a female companion Toto, who was publicized as Mrs. Gargantua. And when Gargantua and the Ringling Brothers came to the Boston Garden in 1938, he like Jumbo, was much hyped in the Boston Globe:

“Gargantua has a two-room apartment. Here he can amuse himself after a fashion and can have his favorite toys ...free; he would be quite capable of dissecting a man like a fruit if he got his hands on him. He has to be confined so he can’t take an arm off an unwary visitor. Huge, shaggy...gargantuan is all in all the most impressive and startling beast ever seen in Boston.”

Gargantua died in 1949 of double pneumonia. His skeleton was donated to Yale’s Peabody Museum in 1950 and is now exhibited only on special occasions.