

## THE HARTFORD CIRCUS FIRE OF 1944

Karen Goldberg

On July 6, 1944, while 8,000 people gathered in Hartford, Connecticut under the big top of the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus, disaster struck in the form of fire. The worst fire in circus history totally consumed the big top, eventually killing 169 people and injuring 682.

High on their apparatus, the Flying Wallendas, the third act of the circus show, were testing their wires. The spotlights had been focused on them and their figures were outlined against the hot sun glowing on the big top. Alfred Court's lions, tigers, jaguars, and leopards had just barely cleared the staged runs through which they re-entered their wagons. Suddenly a flame, which at first had been just a little fire that might have been extinguished with a bucket of water, caught on to the sidewall behind Section A of the circus. "It was hardly bigger than a cigarette burn, then it burst through, suddenly in a big common flame and went flying around the place," said patrolman James F. Healy, who was near the tent at the time of the fire.<sup>1</sup>

The flames then leaped up in one great roaring column toward the tent leaves forty feet up. Kenneth Grinnell, Mike Dare, and Paul Runyan, three ushers, had started for the blaze with buckets, but the hot breath of the flame scorched their clothes and drove them back. Before they could stop it, the fire spread at incredible speed. It raced upwards, then along the sides and top of the great tent quicker, according to some of the horrified witnesses, than the eye could follow. Patches of canvas fell in hot gobs blanketing the children and others on the seats.

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Karen Goldberg is a graduate of Barnard College. She wrote this paper for Mr. Richard Schweidel's American History Course at the The Frisch School in Paramus, New Jersey during her Senior year, 1989/1990.

At first the audience did not react to the flames. There was little screaming or outcry, because of the amazing speed at which the flames spread. A few moments later, however, people realized the magnitude of what was going on and began screaming and trying to escape. One eyewitness of the fire exclaimed that the din of shouting and shrieking was deafening.<sup>2</sup> Men, women, and children plunged or were pushed from the grandstands towards the center of the tent. Spectators threw grandstand chairs into the ring in an attempt to clear the way down; they then stumbled on these chairs when they reached the bottom. A breeze blowing through the tent's main entrance from the west forced the fire toward the back, the direction taken by thousands who were not completely panicky. "The flame licked down at them with tremendous tongues."<sup>3</sup> Canvas dropped and covered two to three hundred at a time. Fortunately, in most cases the victims were able to hear the canvas tear away and could dash for the exits. The ropes began to burn and then the poles began to fall. As the sixth pole fell, all the canvas came down consuming the victims with flames.

Merle Evans, the bandmaster of the circus, saw the fire move from the main entrance, in the west, to the extreme eastern end, where he sat on a raised platform with the twenty-nine other circus musicians. As soon as Evans saw the fire, he called for the band to play "Stars and Stripes." "Stars and Stripes" was known as a disaster march, the traditional circus warning to performers outside the tent that there was trouble inside. "The bandsmen blasted away with the brasses and with the amplified organ notes in a vain attempt to keep the customers calm."<sup>4</sup> Evans' men did not jump off the bandstand until the last center pole began to sway.

The entire tent, with all its poles, was reduced to ashes within ten minutes after the first gust of flame was noticed. "In ten short minutes the unscheduled third act had ended Hartford's first 1944 circus matinee."<sup>5</sup> Of the dead and injured in this tragedy two-thirds were children. More than one thousand animals, including forty lions, thirty tigers, thirty leopards, twenty bears, forty elephants, and lesser beasts were in the corral just south of the big top when it burst into flames, but fortunately they were kept under control. The animals were terrified, however, and roustabouts and animal trainers had to exert a great deal of effort to keep them safe and under control.

Witnesses agreed that many deaths were caused by women and children running blindly under burning canvas that covered their heads. They ran into one another and great numbers crashed against steel-ribbed runs. It was around three runs or chutes, according to the police, that most of the dead were piled. In some places they lay two to three deep and the fire had eaten at their garments, their bodies, and their faces.

Except for the "blues" sections immediately inside the main entrance, no part of the grandstand was spared by the flames. Every section, every steel rail, every steel cage where the animals had performed, was blackened, bent, and charred. Even the bandstand, at the far end of the main entrance, directly opposite the point where the fire started, a full five hundred feet away, was burned to cinders. The band got away, as did all other circus performers and ushers. Even the Flying Wallendas, high under the canvas slid down the poles as the flames raced toward them and reached the ground and exits. "It was like you had opened hell's doors," a big roustabout said later, "and you had all you could do to get your hands over your face and run the other way."<sup>6</sup>

At the time of the fire no one seemed certain as to its cause. The night of the fire State's Attorney H.M. Alcorn, Jr. and his staff stayed on the grounds to continue their investigation. There was speculation that a cigarette dropped near the sidewall of section A, where the fire began, might have been the cause. People were also leaning towards the possibility that a short circuit caused the fire. The State Attorney charged on July 7th that the fire-fighting equipment of the circus and the personnel to operate it were both inadequate, and that he had information that the treatment that had been given to the circus tent made it "highly flammable." James F. Kennedy, Hartford Police Prosecutor, confirmed initial reports that paraffin water-proofing on the big tent might explain the incredible speed with which the blaze spread. Circus men who were interviewed said that the big top underwent a treatment with paraffin thinned with three parts of gasoline to make it water-proof. The tent had been used ten times since then without treatment. On the other hand, there were reports that comparatively fresh paint on the tent equipment could have attributed to the speed of the flames.

Another problem was that there appeared to have been inadequate fire-fighting equipment provided on the grounds by the circus management, and inadequate personnel to operate the small amount of equipment which was available. Furthermore, some passageways designed as exits were blocked by animal cages. This was viewed as another neglectful act of the circus management.

On the morning of July 7th, warrants charging manslaughter were issued by Police Court Prosecutor, S. Burr Leikind, calling for the appearance of five officials and employees of the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey circus in the Hartford Police Court. Those taken into custody were James A. Healey, the vice-president of the circus, George Smith, the circus' general manager, Leonard Ayelsworth, the boss canvasman, David Blanchfield, the chief wagon and truck man, and Erward Versteeg, the chief electrician.

On July 8th, it was revealed by an investigation conducted by a special committee, that no pre-examination of the circus premises was made by the city fire marshal and that there was no fire company pumper standing by for emergencies near the main entrance. Statements were also made that had firemen been there, they would not have been able to stop the fire anyway. However, that does not excuse their absence. Another problem was that there were no fire hydrants inside the circus grounds. Hoses had to be connected to hydrants three hundred yards away, outside the grounds.

Robert Ringling, the president of the circus at the time of the fire, testified that had he been unable to obtain flame-proof canvas, because the government had other priorities for the country was at war. The fact that it was wartime also left the circus very shorthanded. The standard rule of the circus was that during the performance, tractors with the circus' fire-fighting equipment were to be stationed outside the tent. For some reason, and this was part of the criminal complaint against him, David Blanchfield had not ordered them into position. Fire extinguishers which were normally placed under the seats were not unloaded from the train because the circus was so shorthanded.

Complaints were issued that the circus, "neglected to supply sufficient exits; that the exits were barred and obstructed; that adequate precautions were not taken against fire; that there was failure to have sufficient personnel on duty for the protection

of the public; and that the defendants used dangerous and combustible materials and equipment.”<sup>7</sup>

Eventually, Karl Loos, the circus lawyer, called his colleague Daniel Gordon to attempt to work out a plan for paying the claims. They were able to negotiate the agreement known as the Hartford Arbitration Agreement. Under it, the circus accepted full responsibility for damages and left it up to a local arbitration board to decide what was to be paid. The circus was then to pay a “receiver,” out of earnings, the amounts necessary to pay off these claims. The circus further agreed not to enter into any unusual expenses during the term of this agreement and to pay every cent of net profit to the claimants.

A receiver was eventually appointed for the circus upon a request made by Julius Schwartz, attorney for several claimants against the circus. Edward S. Rogin, an attorney, was appointed as receiver. A committee of three was appointed from the Hartford County Bar Association to work out a formula for handling death and injury claims resulting from the fire disaster. The main goal with expenses mounting was to get the circus out of Hartford as quickly as possible. After one million dollars worth of insurance policies, cash and securities had been deposited to cover possible damage suits against it, the circus was permitted to move on to Sarasota, Florida — the next stop on its tour. In the end, the circus ended up paying over five million dollars in damages.

A condition of the circus’ assuming these vast liabilities was a “gentlemen’s agreement” that Healey, Smith and the others would not be sent to jail. The Connecticut officials, however, were not gentlemanly. When Healey, Smith, Ayelsworth, Blanchfield, and Versteeg were brought to trial in late 1944, the counsel for the defense claimed that they were indispensable for keeping the circus running so that it could earn money to pay damage claims. Nevertheless, they were sentenced to jail terms, but allowed to go to Sarasota to get the show on the road. Blanchfield was the only one who got off, because he testified that he was not indispensable, and the judge commended him as the “only one who told the truth.”<sup>8</sup>

Although there was much speculation about the cause of the fire and blame was attributed to certain individuals, it was not until six years after the fire occurred that the mystery was finally solved. A Circleville, Ohio man, Robert D. Segee, confessed to

starting the Hartford circus fire of 1944. Segee claimed to have been an arsonist and a killer since the age of six. Segee's long statement, obtained after days of questioning, told a weird story of a nightmare Indian riding a flaming horse. The Indian appeared to Segee at night urging him to set fires. Segee's mind then went blank. When his mind cleared, a fire 'had been set.' Segee confessed that it was this "flaming Indian" which made him set fire to the big top in Hartford on July 6, 1944. On November 3, 1950, Segee stood before Common Pleas Judge William D. Radcliff of Pickaway County. Segee was sentenced to two consecutive terms of two and twenty years in the Ohio penitentiary. This was the maximum penalty one could receive under Ohio law.

The Hartford circus fire of 1944 was a tragedy which left the whole countryside numb. "Flags flew at half-staff and faces encountered on the street bore the look of the bewildered."<sup>9</sup> Everywhere one went talk was chiefly of the fire. "The tragedy touched not only immediate kin and friends of the dead and injured, but those who survived unharmed. Everyone seemed to know some person who was in the tent when the disaster came."<sup>10</sup> Everyone was ready to help out in the surrounding cities as well as in Hartford.

Hartford, however, was a city of funerals. "Every hearse, every livery car was in constant use; undertakers toiled night and day, some funeral parlors were holding services at fifteen-minute intervals. The quiet crowds gathered, dispersed, and gathered again in the cemeteries."<sup>11</sup> One dead child was never identified, and on every July 6th, Hartford fire and police officials lay flowers on her grave. She serves as a symbol of this disaster.

The Hartford circus fire was a grave tragedy; and even graver when one realizes how easily it could have been avoided. Obviously, if the deranged Edward D. Segee had not set fire to the big top, 169 lives would not have been lost. However, even after that horrid event, negligence on the part of many circus officials contributed to more deaths. Each of those deaths is even more tragic when one realizes where they occurred: at the circus. A place which is supposed to bring nothing but laughter and smiles brought nothing but tears and sorrow on July 6, 1944.

- <sup>1</sup> "Circus Dead at 152; Inquiries Pushed," The New York Times, July 8, 1944, p. 1
- <sup>2</sup> "Children Caught in Frenzied Mass," The New York Times, July 7, 1944, p. 1
- <sup>3</sup> "139 Lives Lost in Circus Fire at Hartford," The New York Times, July 7, 1944, p. 1
- <sup>4</sup> "Circus Dead at 152; Inquiries Pushed," p. 1
- <sup>5</sup> "Death Stops a Circus," Newsweek, July 17, 1944, p. 31
- <sup>6</sup> "139 Lives Lost in Circus Fire at Hartford," p. 11
- <sup>7</sup> "Hartford Circus Fire Dead Reach 157, Churches Hold Services Amid Funerals," The New York Times, July 10, 1944, p. 9
- <sup>8</sup> Henry Ringling and Alden Hatch, The Circus Kings, Our Family History (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1960) p. 325
- <sup>9</sup> "Circus Dead at 152; Inquiries Pushed," p. 1
- <sup>10</sup> "Circus Dead at 152; Inquiries Pushed," p. 1
- <sup>11</sup> "Six Minutes," Time, July 17, 1944, p. 19

