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flame near the peak of the tent hardly bigger than a cigarette burn and that it seemed to spread slowly. “Then it burst through, suddenly, in a big common flame and went flying around the place.” He likened it to the horrific flash when a gasoline tank explodes.

Felix Adler, in the circus for 31 years, was in his dressing room when the fire started. “We heard a roar, like the applause when one of the big acts comes off. Only we knew the animal act was over and there shouldn’t be any applause. We knew something was wrong. Then we smelled smoke. I thought the menagerie fire in Cleveland was the worst thing I could ever see, but no one in the circus business has ever seen anything as horrible as this.”

There was little comfort in the fact that the percentage of lives lost was low in comparison to some other historic conflagrations. (See listing of notable fires on previous page.) Nor was there balm in the knowledge that the circus had correspondence to prove that ever since Robert Ringling took charge, the management had been trying to obtain materials with which to fireproof its canvas.

There was horror aplenty—also courage and coolness. Countless acts of kindness and helpfulness were seen among the audience and performers, attendants and on-lookers. Homes surrounding the area were thrown open. Emergency first aid groups were at work within minutes. Disaster machinery of the city and state worked magnificently—fire-fighting apparatus, delivery trucks, ambulances and army Jeeps were on the scene in minutes. Following a disastrous flood in 1936, the City of Hartford had drawn up rules of procedure to deal with any disaster. These were put to use during a severe storm in 1938, so the city had had some ex-

perience in disaster response.

The *Chicago Herald-American*, as did most U.S. newspapers that day, had headlined the war with Japan. The bottom third of the front page told of the circus fire—and on Page 5, where the article was continued, the headline read: **Scores Die in Circus Blaze—Fiery Tent Falls on 10,000.**

Reaction was swift and angry. Someone had to pay—not only money, but in time behind bars.

For days the great giant lay helpless, its officials under technical arrest and all its funds surrounded by legal barbed wire, guarded by the courts.

Six of the circus’s key men were charged with criminal negligence. Ringling, at his home in Evanston, was stunned by news of the tragedy. Aylesworth rushed back to Hartford and was served with a warrant when he arrived. Aylesworth, Haley, Smith, Blanchfield, seat boss William Caley and lighting boss Edward R. Versteeg were charged with involuntary manslaughter. All were released on bonds of \$10,000 to \$15,000.

On the day after the fire, seven Superior Court actions seeking \$120,000 damages for the victims were filed against the circus corporation and its officials. Five days later

the court placed the circus in receivership to preserve its assets and protect the claimants. According to reports, the circus was extensively insured against both fire damage and liability.

At the outset, the circus accepted liability for the fire and promised payment of claims against it. An office was opened in Hartford to handle this dreary business.

Hal Oliver, show press representative, said there was nothing combustible used by the circus where the fire started and that wires used for lighting were underground, running through ducts about 25 feet from the spot where flames were first observed. Hartford Mayor Mortenson announced after a brief investigation that he was convinced that a carelessly flung cigarette had started the fire. An observer was quoted as saying the tent “went up like a sheet of tissue paper.” A policeman said a spotlight started it, but the coroner agreed with the mayor, speculating that the source was a cigarette thrown into the folds of the tent.

The canvas, which weighed 20 tons, was practically new. It had been processed against water by the use of paraffin applied with gasoline as a solvent. This process, the time-honored method of waterproofing used by circuses, had been done in late April.



The gasoline solvent undoubtedly had evaporated prior to the date of the fire. Newspapers pointed out that the city had failed to provide fire apparatus in the neighborhood of the lot, and that there was only one fire hydrant (actually there were two) within a block of the lot. The lot was always selected with a view to ample water supply since the menagerie required large amounts of water.

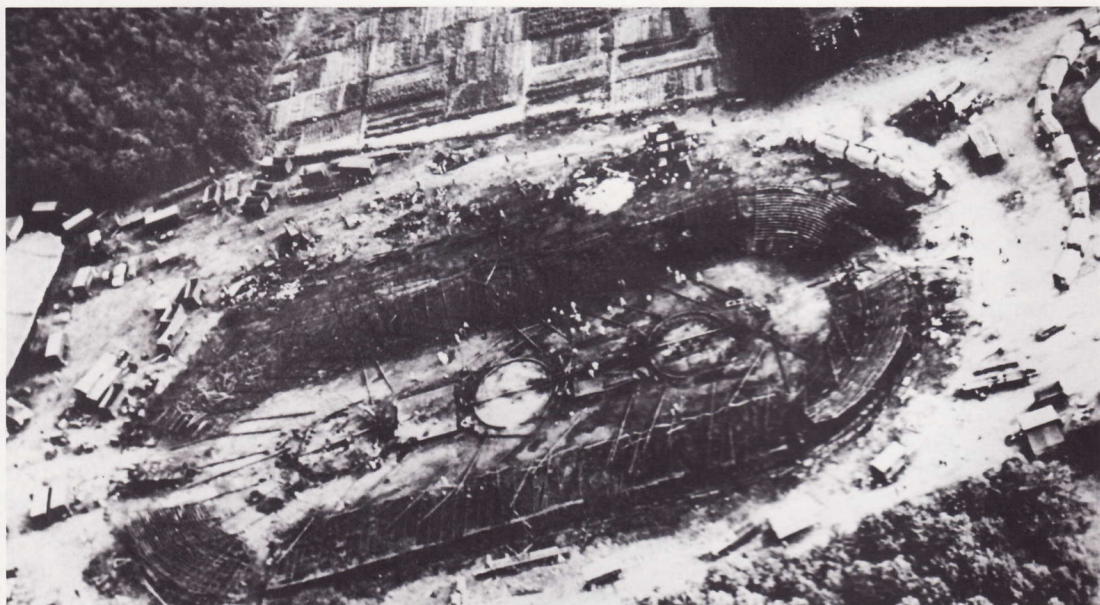
Estimates of loss of circus property ranged between \$200,000 and \$300,000. This included the big top with its 42 miles

of hemp rope, six center poles, rigging, performing rings and seating for 12,000—all rendered useless by the fire. The tent alone was valued at \$50,000, which was the amount of property insurance coverage carried by the show.

After securing all claims against it up to \$1 million, the circus was permitted to leave Hartford on July 16 and return to Florida to refit for business. Back in winter quarters, everyone went to work. Miracles of speed and ingenuity were performed. All employees were paid in full and within four weeks the show was back on the road. It opened at the Rubber Bowl Stadium at Akron, Ohio, on Aug. 4, and played the rest of the season in the open, in coliseums or stadiums. Rigging was hung from two rows of poles, 10 in each row, and this proved very successful.

Former Connecticut Lt. Gov. William Hadden of the defense counsel told the court that neither he nor his clients believed they were guilty of any culpable or criminal negligence and he had so informed the state's attorney, Hugh Alcorn. Hadden said it had been decided not to contest the state's charges because of the circus's avowed purpose to aid the victims of the fire. Pointing out that the circus had joined in the receivership action that released it from attachment and enabled it to resume operations, he also noted that the circus had proposed the arbitration agreement under which awards already had been made in death cases.

"We're going to dedicate every resource of the circus to the victims of the fire. That is why we can't try this case," Hadden



Geometry of a tragedy—a long, black oval and three rings.

declared. He estimated trying the case would take eight to 12 weeks and require the absence from the circus of the six defendants, all of whom were key men in its operation. The result would be no circus this year and no circus hereafter, he warned. "If we tried these cases and won, we'd still suffer loss and so would the victims of the fire."

In his statement, Alcorn laid heavy blame for the tragedy on the corporation itself, as well as on the six individuals. (Among the repercussions would be a rash of new ordinances and state laws requiring fireproofing of tents, and for weeks nearly every

*"They seem to feel sincere regret over this happening."
—State's Attorney Alcorn*

tented circus found city fire-fighting apparatus parked on their lot on show day.) Alcorn continued by noting, "This case has been investigated and reinvestigated by one agency after another, and by the defense as well." He remarked especially about the inquiries of State Police Commissioner Edward Hickey, acting as state fire marshal, and Coroner Frank Healey, which he said enabled the state to obtain a complete picture of what happened.

"There is a very wholesome thing about this case and that is the attitude of the accused," he asserted. "I don't know of another criminal case in my experience in which the state has encountered such a wholesome attitude. I personally questioned

some of them at the circus grounds soon after the fire and from that day to this there has never been any disposition on the part of any one of them to evade the penalty. They seem to feel sincere regret over this happening. Their attitude is not exactly a willingness to pay a penalty, but a resignation to answer for any criminal acts."

A method of settling suits was arrived at that is believed to be unique. Counsel for the circus as well as for the claimants agreed that to try the long list of actions against the circus and its employees would require endless time, involve great expense and at the same time cause anguish to witnesses forced to recount the horrors of the fire. So a special committee of the Hartford County Bar Association drew up a plan for arbitrating the suits rather than trying them, and this plan was eventually agreed to by all parties. A committee was set up including one member named by the bar association, one appointed by the circus corporation and a third, a Superior Court judge, to be named by the chief justice of the State Supreme Court. Under the plan, the circus agreed not to dispute liability in the case of those claimants who signed the agreement. The committee determined the amount of liability of each suit by considering several factors—age, earning power, financial conditions, family, etc., governing itself closely by Supreme Court decisions concerning damages awarded by juries. The court also set a deadline—July 6, 1945, one year after the fire—for potential claimants to file their suits.

With the legal machinery in place, the committee went to work. But it was slow

going. By July 6, 1945, claims totaling only about \$25,000 had been settled from a total list of 475 suits asking more than \$4.5 million.

The claims that had been determined or settled were secured by \$475,000 in cash and a \$500,000 insurance policy the circus held with Lloyds of London. The circus continued to operate under receivership.

In Superior Court on Feb. 21, 1945, the circus officials had been sentenced to serve up to two years in prison. After hearing further testimony for the men, Judge William Shea sentenced Haley, Versteeg, Smith and Aylesworth to a year and a day. Blanchfield, who testified that he was *not* indispensable to the circus, so impressed the court with his frankness that the judge revoked his sentence. Caley elected to begin serving his sentence at once. The corporation was fined \$1,000 on each of 10 counts. Shea granted a stay of sentence execution for the others until April 6, 1945. Counsel for the circus men had asked for the stay in order that those key men might help get the new show on the road and “fulfill in last measure their obligations to the unfortunate people of Hartford and vicinity.”

The sentences of Smith and Aylesworth were again suspended until June 7, 1945, to permit them to return to Florida and continue their work of getting the circus on the road. Neither Haley nor Versteeg received any further suspension. On June 7 Smith and Aylesworth returned to Hartford where they began serving their sentences. (Sarasota area voters eventually elected Haley to the U.S. House of Representatives.)

For the 1946 season, Robert Ringling was succeeded by Haley as president of the corporation. Already the show could state that 25 percent of the claims were paid. All funds in excess of those needed for the next season were paid to the survivors of the fire victims.

John North purchased the bulk of Mrs. Aubrey Ringling’s stock in the corporation. She was the widow of Richard Ringling, who was Alf T. Ringling’s son. Thus, North controlled 51 percent of the voting stock, and he again became president of the circus. With this job he also inherited the balance of the \$4.5 million debt from the Hartford fire claims.

This arbitration reached its conclusion 10 years to the day after the fire. On July 6, 1954, the final debt was wiped out and the receivership was ended.

In the final chapter of the disaster, Super-

rior Court Judge John Cullinan approved a judgment for the payment of \$100,000 by the circus to Julius Schatz of Hartford, who served as counsel for Edward Rogin, receiver of the circus for six years after the fire.

Of all the victims in the fire, only seven were unidentified—a dismembered infant who was cremated almost immediately at the Hartford hospital, and a man, two women, two girls and a boy.

Public grief over the tragedy focused on one of the girls, possibly because she was so recognizable. A pretty, blue-eyed child, she was a victim of the crush. No one came forward to claim her. Newspapers ran her picture, circulars were distributed, radio appeals aired, inquiries were made at schools and Sunday schools. But there was no response.

She, along with the others, was buried in Northwood Cemetery in Windsor, just north of Hartford on I-91, with the stone inscribed “Little Miss 1565,” her morgue number.

Years turned into decades. Two policemen, Sgt. Thomas Barber and Edward T. Lowe, spent the rest of their lives trying to identify the child, and they placed flowers on her grave every Memorial Day, July 6 and Christmas. Their families and a local florists’ group continued the tradition and

each year the press did its anniversary rehash. Nothing, it seemed, ever was new.

But that all would change in mid-March of this year when Rick Davey, a tenacious arson investigator and history buff, came forward with findings that again drew world attention to Little Miss 1565 and the whole tragedy.

Davey wasn’t born until four years after the Hartford fire. Yet, he spent the past nine

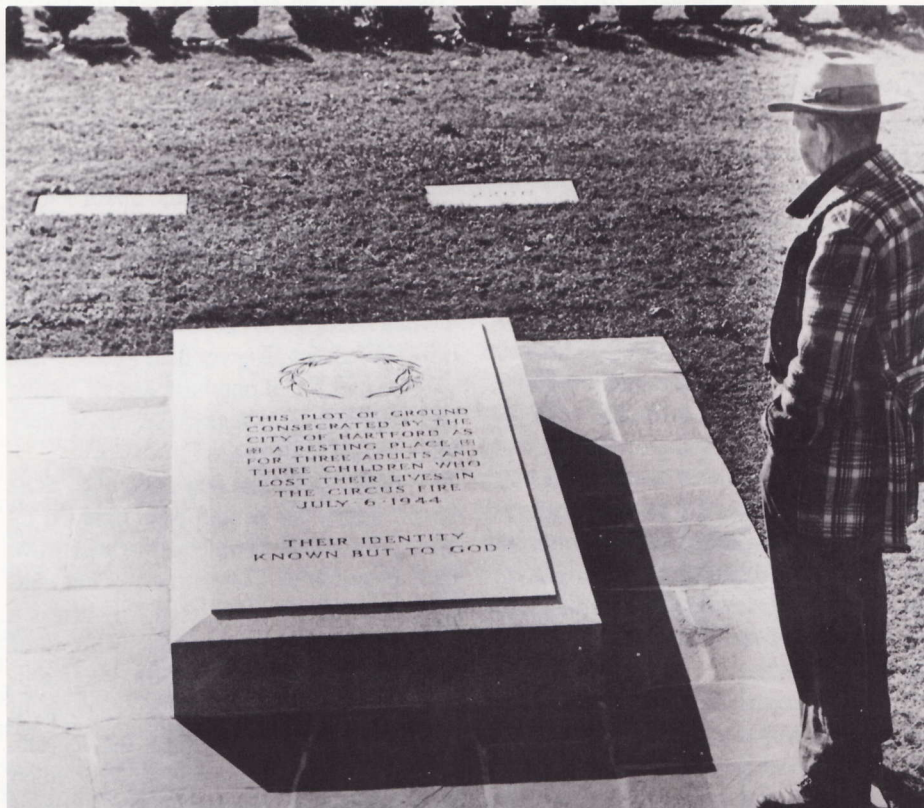
While we read of the little girl, our eyes turned to her mother. . . .

years almost on a personal crusade to determine the cause of the fire and, as emotion crept in, to identify Little Miss 1565.

Rumors, politics, expediency and egos had clouded the early investigations, he found.

This past March, Davey went public with his findings. While we read of the little girl, our eyes turned to her mother, a rather sad figure who underscores the human frailty that is in all of us.

Little Miss 1565’s name was Eleanor Emily Cook. Her brother Edward died from burns. Her mother, Mildred Cook, was so badly burned she was swathed in bandages except for a slit for her eyes, and



A silent onlooker surveys the granite monument that for years has guarded the graves of the six fire victims. Now there will be five.