

was hospitalized for six months. The children had been living with Mrs. Cook's brother.

Now 85, Mrs. Cook said recently she always harbored the hope that in the confusion Eleanor might have been placed to live with someone else. But deep down she suspected Eleanor might be one of the unidentified victims.

The brother suggests that when members of the family went to the morgue to view the bodies they might have been shown the wrong one.

In any case, Mrs. Cook did not seek out stories of the fire and says she never saw the photo of Little Miss 1565 that accompanied virtually every story over the years.

As for the cause of the fire, Davey and other officials are convinced it was arson, that Robert Segee, a listless local 14-year-old with a history of setting fires who had joined the circus a week before, was responsible. Two small fires had been discovered but quickly extinguished on the circus lot on previous days.

In 1950, Segee confessed his crime to officials in Ohio, after a string of fires there (see story below), and his confession was backed up by Ohio investigators who came

East to do background checks. But Connecticut's fire marshal at the time, Edward Hickey, who later would become state police commissioner, resented the intrusion on his territory and his ego.

Sticking by his original official finding that the fire was caused by a carelessly discarded cigarette, he told the Ohioans to quit meddling and go back where they came from.

The matter seemed forever closed until Davey stepped in and began sifting through the dusty cartons of evidence one more time.

There was little new to go on, so the process was one of dispelling rumors and eliminating alternatives. He said he was convinced two years ago that Segee was responsible and that Little Miss 1565 was, in fact, Eleanor Cook, but then he had to convince his superiors.

The final test came Feb. 26 at a requested closed-door session at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Va. For eight grueling hours FBI experts tried to punch holes in Davey's theories but, in Davey's words, "there were no holes to punch."

Connecticut officials said they were uncertain if any legal action could or would be taken against Segee, who now lives in Ohio.

## Note:

CFAers June and Lyle Coates of Baraboo say this was the first time they had tackled a project such as this. They enjoyed the research and found the topic "most interesting," although there lingers the historian's frustration in having to leave some questions unanswered.

They acknowledge help from Researcher/Historian Bill McCarthy and from Bob Parkinson, who, before his recent death, was director of the Circus World Museum Library and Research Center in Baraboo. Many others—Chick Evans of East Hampton, Conn., was the first of a long list of Fans—supplied newspaper clippings of the latest developments. The Coateses also drew from a number of other sources, including:

*A Ticket to the Circus*—Charles P. Fox

*Those Amazing Ringlings and Their Circus*—Gene Plowden

*Circus Doctor*—J.Y. Henderson and Richard Taplinger

*The Ringlings*—Alvin F. Harlow  
*Fortune*, 1947

## Drifter Tells Ohio Authorities of Having Strange Fiery Dreams

From *The Milwaukee Journal* of June 30, 1950

COLUMBUS, Ohio—Robert Dale Segee, Circleville, Ohio, has admitted he set the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus fire that killed 168 persons and injured 412 (sic) others in 1944.

Harry J. Callin, Ohio fire marshal, made the disclosure Friday. He said that Segee admitted also setting between 25 and 30 major fires in Portland, Maine, between 1939 and 1946, and others in New Hampshire and Ohio, and that he is personally responsible for the slaying of four persons.

A LIFE magazine article entitled "The Strange Case of the Circus Arsonist" said that Ohio police and medical authorities listened with increasing horror as a stoop-shouldered 21-year-old youth named Robert Dale Segee unfolded a grisly tale of arson and murder.

They came to believe his story through a mass of corroborative evidence, particularly a series of crayon drawings he made. With them, Segee told of a life of crime which began with a murder when he was 8 years old and reached a terrible climax in

1944 when he set fire to the big top of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

The article continued that this crime might never have been solved had it not been for a tip given by a friend of Segee, who himself had been picked up for setting a small fire at Circleville, Ohio.

Arrested, Segee seemed to welcome the attentions of psychiatrists. He told them he had never gotten beyond second grade, that his father had never held a steady job, that he had killed one little girl by hitting her with a rock, had strangled three other people, and had set scores of fires.

He also told them that as far back as he could remember he had been haunted by strange fiery dreams which sometimes drove him to crime and later tortured his conscience. After the Hartford fire, it was a glowing face of a woman that came out of the flames to condemn him. Segee remembered the dream so vividly he was able to draw his impressions of it for the doctors. By this time his brain was so disoriented that doctors and officers couldn't be sure of his confession.

He never was charged.

## Confesses He Set Circus Blaze That Killed 168

Columbus, Ohio—(P)—Robert Dale Segee, 21, Circleville, Ohio, has signed statements admitting he set the Ringling Brothers circus fire in Hartford, Conn., that killed 168 persons and injured 412 others in 1944. Harry J. Callin, Ohio fire marshal, made the disclosure Friday.

Callan said that Segee also admitted setting between 25 and 30 major fires in Portland, Me., between 1939 and 1946, other fires in New Hampshire and Ohio, and that he is personally responsible for the slaying of four persons.

Callan said that all of Segee's statements had been carefully checked by his investigators since Segee was taken into custody last May 17 on the farm of a relative near East St. Louis, Ill.

A Pickaway county (Ohio) grand jury Friday indicted Segee on two charges of arson, stemming from fires in Circleville, Ohio.

Prepared Statement  
Callan's prepared statement about the Hartford fire said:

"Segee was employed by the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus from June 30 to July 13, 1944. He joined the circus on June 30 at Portland, Me., and the day he joined the circus there was a fire on tent ropes that was extinguished without loss.

The circus moved from Portland, Me. to Providence, R. I., and while there another small fire occurred on the tent flap, which again was extinguished without loss.

On July 6, 1944, at Hartford, Conn., the major fire occurred, which took the lives of 168 people. "A thorough and comprehensive investigation of the facts concerning Segee has disclosed, according to his own admission, that he is responsible for that and other major fires, places and dates of which were given."

Tells of Girl's Slaying  
Callan said Segee said his first slaying was a 9 year old girl, beaten to death with a stone during a fit of anger. He identified the victim as Barbara Driscoll, 9, slain on a river bank at Portsmouth, N. H., Sept. 5, 1938.

Other victims, identified by Callan were:  
A watchman who caught Segee setting a fire in a warehouse in Portland, Me., Mar. 16, 1943; a 12 year old boy, strangled to death on the beach at Cape Cottage, Me., in 1943 "to the best of his (Segee's) recollection," and a Japanese boy, killed in Japan in 1949 while Segee was in United States army of occupation.

The last three victims listed by Callan were not identified by name, but the fire marshal said all three were actual slayings as shown by his and army investigations.

**Segee's confessions were accepted everywhere, apparently, except in Connecticut. This story in The Milwaukee Journal is typical of the coverage. It is interesting to note that the editor used this Associated Press wire service dispatch but thought the story important enough to assign his own reporters to do their own story, which is printed here in the adjacent columns.**

1510

1503

2200

2109

4512

## and what of the others?

With Eleanor now resting next to her brother Edward in the family plot in Center Cemetery in South Hampton, Mass., five "unidentified" bodies remain in Northwood Cemetery in Windsor.

Officials have a list of five names (along with physical descriptions) of victims who never were claimed.

So logic would allow us to match the five names and physical descriptions with the five bodies and the book could be closed forever. But no.

"They don't match up," says Lynne Tuohy, a reporter for *The Hartford Courant*. She goes on to explain that newspapers at the time contained numerous reports of the wrong body being claimed by families caught up in the shock and horror of those first few hours and days.

"I've seen the lab photos and believe me, it's almost charitable to say some were burned beyond recognition," Tuohy says. "I can see how a family member would not be able to look too closely. It's safe to assume some of them claimed the first body they came to and got out of there. No one could blame them, really."

So the families who "identified" their loved ones and took them away for burial probably were satisfied they had buried their own.

The names of the remaining five who were never identified

have not been made public.

So staying behind in that plot surrounded by a low hedge in Northwood Cemetery are five of the victims with only numbers:

1510: Probably white, male, about 11 years old, about 70 pounds, 4 feet 4.

1503: Probably white, about age 9, 55 pounds, 3 feet 11.

2200: Probably white, male, about 170 pounds, 5 feet 3.

2109: White, female, about 30 years old, about 140 pounds, 5 feet 1.

4512: Probably black, female, age 30-35. Probably a new mother. (It is believed a seventh unidentified victim, a dismembered infant who was cremated, may have been her child.)

The five always rested in the shadow of Little Miss 1565, because her face was so recognizable and her photo had been so widely circulated. So with Eleanor gone, it was feared that the flowers sent to her plot would stop.

But Tom Horan, president of the Allied Florists Association of Central Connecticut, which had provided the flowers since the original investigator, Lt. Thomas Barber, died, vowed last month to continue the ritual of bringing flowers each year on the anniversary of the fire.

## and the memories

From Raymond S. Mills, West Simsbury, Conn.

I was 7 years old. I remember hearing a lot of noise coming from the other end of the big top, then seeing something happening at the top of the tent.

Everyone started yelling "Fire!" I looked at my father. I don't remember being scared because I knew my dad was used to being around the circus. (He was a Wild West Aftershow performer with RBB&B and traveled in the East with Miller Bros. 101 Real Wild West Show in the late '20s and early '30s.)

We walked from our seats toward the exit just before or next to the bandstand. Merle Evans and the band were still playing.

As we neared the exit I saw a lost little girl and brought it to my father's attention. He reached down and picked her up.

The band walked out of the tent right behind my father, the little girl and me. It was just a matter of seconds later that the tent was completely gone and the poles had dropped to the ground.

My father looked for a phone to call the family of the little girl and to let my mother know that we were unhurt. He figured she must have heard about it on the radio and would be worried sick. As events turned out, my mother, sister and two brothers were having a cookout with the family next door and learned of the fire when they got back home and my father finally got ahold of them by phone.

We stayed until met by someone to take the little girl home.

Details of this seem to have been lost by me. I now believe we put her in a taxi cab following instructions from her mother.

I have enclosed a photocopy of the letter the little girl's mother sent to my father after the fire.

Rockville, Conn.  
7-12-44

Dear Mr. Hills,

*I am the Mother of Betty Lou, the girl you were so very kind to on Thurs. of last week. Mr. Hills, I don't know how to express our gratitude and only hope that some day in the near future you will be repaid in full for your thoughtfulness.*

*I have not had the courage to write before. The party that Betty Lou was with (3 children & their Mother) were not so fortunate. The Mother was burned and trampled to death on Thursday and the oldest girl (12 yrs.) was severely burned and passed away on Monday at 1 p.m., leaving 2 small children—a girl 9 and a little boy of 5.*

*Mr. Hills, in this letter I am enclosing some money not as payment for your kindness but as a gift to your little son who was with you. We were very much surprised to receive Betty Lou's billfold thru the mail yesterday from a little boy 14 years old from Hartford.*

*I just don't know how to express myself for so much kindness*

and can only thank you again and hope that if you are ever in Rockville you will look us up so that I can say in person what I just can't seem to write.

Thank you very much and please stop in if you are in Rockville.

Sincerely,  
Mrs. Herbert Harmstedt  
26 White St.  
Rockville, Conn.

From Alice W. Stone, Rye, N.H.

Dear Mr. Foster,

My Circus Fans brother, Arthur Stone of Louisiana, and sister, Gertrude Stone Gilman of New Hampshire, knew Mildred Cook when she worked at the Hartford Seminary Foundation where I was dietitian.

I knew Mildred took the three children (9, 8 and 6 years old) to the show and were caught in the fire. Though I'd left there, I immediately recognized their photo in a recent news article which told that #1565 had finally been identified as little Eleanor.

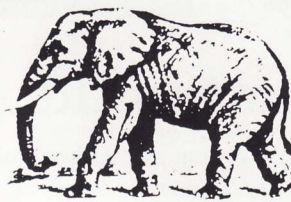
Right after the fire, Donald (9) claimed the body was his sister, and an aunt wasn't sure. Mildred, who had been severely burned and in the hospital six months, was unable to get to the morgue.

In her reply to my letter after the identification, she said, "The puzzle has been completed, but the sadness and pain remain."

She has scarring, but is courageous.

Sincerely,  
Alice W. Stone

Bill Brinley's Famous Miniature



## CIRCUS & WILD WEST SHOW

at

*The New England  
Carousel Museum*

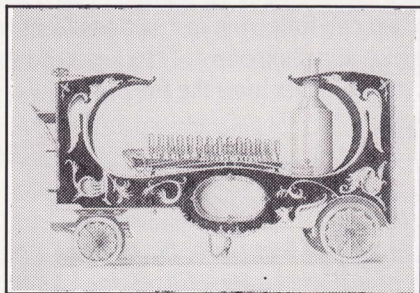
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## Circus Prints

### RINGLING BROS. 1902 CALLIOPE & SIX UP ON THE CALLIOPE



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This Ringling Bros. turn of the century calliope was built in 1902 by Moleer Bros. of Baraboo. The 32 note Nichol instrument was installed in 1912. Painted red and trimmed in gold, this elegant wagon was lost forever sometime after 1918.

*Hathy Elaine*, ARTIST

\$30.00 each includes shipping charges or order both prints for \$50.00. Please send check or money order.  
Allow 3-6 weeks for delivery • Indiana residents add 5% sales tax



SIZE 11 x 12

Also available, this view of 6 black Percherons from high atop the Dave Morecraft calliope of Peru, IN.

*Hathy Elaine* (Morecraft), ARTIST  
and calliope crew member

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