

# Tranquil Setting Belies Imminent Disaster

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and written  
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Photos  
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The 41 tents large and small on the Hartford lot that afternoon of July 6, 1944, were strategically positioned for accessibility from town. There were 6,789 paid admissions, but later attendance estimates varied from 6,000 to 10,000. Circus personnel numbered roughly 1,300.

Underlying this tranquil setting, however, was a series of factors—"sets of commission and omission" is how the court later would describe them—that carried the potential for disaster.

+ Boss canvasman Leonard Aylesworth was not around; he was in Evanston, Ill., conferring with

Robert Ringling.

+ A standing rule—during the performance, tractors with the circus fire-fighting equipment were to be marshalled outside the tent with engines turning—had been ignored. For some reason tractor boss David Blanchfield had not ordered them into position.

+ Because the show was shorthanded, fire extinguishers normally placed under the seats had not been unloaded from the train.

+ There were only two fire hydrants in the area.

+ Since the waterproofing of the new fire-resistant big top had proven to be unsatisfactory, management had gone back to the old paraffin-benzine treatment.

## *Ubangi Curse Blamed for Fire, Other Misfortune*

Samuel W. Gumpertz, a noted Coney Island promoter, is said to have brought more human oddities to the American market than any other man. He became an intimate of John Ringling and supplied the circus with many of its sideshow attractions.

Among these were Ubangis, natives brought from Africa in 1930. The Ubangi women were particularly eye-catching because their lips had had wood disks placed in them and protruded eight or more inches.

After being stared at in the sideshow for a few months, these poor women grew homesick and asked to be sent back to Africa. But they were told they couldn't go until their contract was fulfilled—and the contract ran for three years.

Unhappy with this refusal, they gathered in a circle and had an excited powwow, with much gesturing and some wailing. Probably they were just talking over their grievance, but word spread among circus employees that they were putting a curse on the show.

For years thereafter the Ubangis were blamed for every accident, wreck, fire or misfortune, the first occurring in February 1931 in Copenhagen when Lillian Leitzel was fatally injured in a fall on Friday the 13th.

There were many more incidents, both fatal and costly—the crippling or death of noted performers, the assassination and suicide involving trapeze star Alfredo Codona, the fatal poisoning (from eating tainted grass at Greenville, S.C.) of 10 (some reports say 11) elephants in the fall of 1941, and the menagerie fire the following August in Cleveland in which 65 animals perished.

Then there was that dreadful day in Hartford, Conn., when the big top burned, leaving 168 persons dead and 487 injured.

In his book about the Ringlings written in 1951, Alvin F. Harlow says, "To this day no one can declare with certainty how this fire started, but there was plenty of testimony as to the bravery of officials, performers and workmen who thought of the audience first and saved hundreds, perhaps thousands, who might otherwise have died."

The 1944 season had started off well for *The Greatest Show on Earth*. After banking a nice profit at Madison Square Garden, it was playing to capacity crowds on the road. Though the shortage of manpower was acute because of the war, Robert Ringling, who was president of the circus, was satisfied to keep the show on the road.

Because of health problems, Ringling had returned to his home at Evanston, Ill., leaving Vice President Jim Haley—or the *Ubangi ghosts*?—in charge.

## The Hartford Fire

With an eye on threatening weather, General Manager George Smith and Ringmaster Fred Bradna decided to cancel three of the opening displays. The audience didn't notice. Following the opening spec, clowns amused the crowd—mostly mothers with children—while Alfred Court's cats were brought in for the wild animal act. A runway of steel mesh through which the cats entered and left the center cage led across the back hippodrome track. The track was partially blocked while the runway was in place.

The show was about 20 minutes old. Mary Kovar took her bow after working the cats and the spotlight shifted to the Wallendas on the high wire.

From near the end of clown alley, a photographer named Dick Miller, presumed to be a local resident, was watching the



*People who were lucky enough to get out glance back at inferno. Notice elephants at right.*

Wallendas when he chanced to see a tiny tongue of flame above the sidewall at the entrance to the 500-foot-long big top. At about the same instant Bradna, inside the tent, noticed a whiff of smoke up toward the main entrance.

Bradna's shrill whistle brought the Wallendas cascading down the guy wires as Merle Evans and his band struck up "The Stars and Stripes Forever," the traditional circus disaster march.

Someone grabbed the public address

system and urged the crowd to leave quickly.

With canvas burning overhead, Mary Kovar continued to prod her leopards back to their cages. She feared for what would happen if the cats got back out into the runway with all of those people jammed against it.

Outside, meantime, the bull men quickly sized up the situation and began ushering their 40-elephant herd off the lot to city streets out of the way.

What followed in the big top was com-

plete chaos. With the sun-baked canvas roaring in 100-foot-high flames, members of the audience panicked and began trampling through the tent toward whatever exit they could see. Those in the back rows jumped down from the seats and ducked under the sides of the sidewall and made it out that way. A boy named Don Anderson brought out his jackknife and slit large escape holes in the sidewalls. He was credited with saving more than 300 lives.

Some men made chutes of the side canvas

and many people slid down these to safety.

Aerialist Rose Behee, whose two children were visiting the show that day, ran into the flaming tent and came out with a child under each arm—not her own. Hers were found later, unharmed, in the backyard.

Mrs. Bradna helped clowns, sideshow performers and razorbacks push wagons into nearby fields and woods. A Coke and candy butcher helped push wounded servicemen in wheelchairs out under the sidewalls, uninjured. Clowns carried victims from the inferno. Patty Darnay, one of the spec cast, grabbed wash buckets and made a dozen round-trip dashes to the back door, throwing water on flaming trunks and prop boxes. There were bucket brigades manned by sideshow people, clowns and CFAers.

The organ-calliope of Pete the Organist, was aflame. The kettle drums had exploded but the snare drums were playable. The bandmen played until the poles started coming down. Then they leaped to the ground, regrouped in the backyard and continued to play with what instruments were left. When the smoke became too dense, they tossed their instruments aside and worked as stretcher bearers, first aid helpers, guides for lost children, and did whatever else they could do.

Most people made it out. But for those in the front rows there was no place to run but to the center of the arena itself. It didn't matter; they already were doomed. The tent was burning too fast for them to reach the exit runways. And the exits were jammed anyway. Those who stormed toward the main entrance piled up against the



animal chute. Bradna, his hair singed, dragged 11 people out of "the monstrous

pile in front of the animal chute," shoving them to safety. Photographer Miller rescued many others.

One survivor thanked the trombone player for saving his life. The music kept him going. "That's all I remember—just hearing that trombone player as I ran out."

It was over in minutes. The big top had vanished, quite literally gone up in smoke. In its place was an area of blackened earth with Court's great cage grotesquely askew, and against the chute a ghastly heap of humanity. Most were burned beyond recognition, some were strangely unscarred but crushed to death and a lucky few were alive but injured.

The toll: 168 dead, 487 injured. Many of the victims were children who had been seated in the front rows.

A policeman outside the big top told a reporter that he had noticed a small spit of

### Notable Fires Down Through The Years\*

- 1,670 died, theater, Canton, China, May 1845
- 250 died, (\$196 million damage) in Chicago fire, Oct. 8, 1871
- 295 died, theater, Brooklyn, N.Y., Dec. 5, 1876
- 850 died, Ring Theater, Vienna, Dec. 8, 1881
- 200 died, Opera Comique, Paris, May 25, 1887
- 200 died, theater, Exeter, England, Sept. 4, 1887
- 602 died, Iroquois Theater, Chicago, Dec. 30, 1903
- 320 died, penitentiary, Columbus, Ohio, April 21, 1930
- 294 died, New London, Texas, school, March 18, 1937 (1)
- 491 died, Coconut Grove Night Club, Boston, Nov. 28, 1942
- 323 died, circus, Niteroi, Brazil, Dec. 17, 1961
- 322 died, store, Brussels, Belgium, May 22, 1967
- 164 died, nightclub, Southgate, Ky., May 28, 1977
- 157 died, nursing home, Kingston, Jamaica, May 20, 1980

\* Not a complete list.

\* Source: *The World Almanac and Book of Facts*, NEA

(1) Classified as an explosion.