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In the chaos of the Hartford circus fire, a 6-year-old boy disappeared; now, 75 years later, his family wants to find out what happened to him



By **DAVE ALTIMARI** | HARTFORD COURANT | JUL 07, 2019 | 6:00 AM



Beverly Zell, the niece of Raymond Erickson Jr., holds a pair of shoes found after he disappeared in the hospital while being treated after the Hartford circus fire. (Mark Mirko/Hartford Courant)

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When you walk into Beverly Zell's Middletown home, one of the first things you see is a pair of very old sneakers tied with a funny knot, preserved under a glass case in her living room.

It is an odd sight. And if they look like what a child might have worn in the 1940s, it's because they were. An uncle she never met, Raymond Erickson Jr., wore them on July 6, 1944, the day he went to the circus in Hartford.

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The day he died. Probably.



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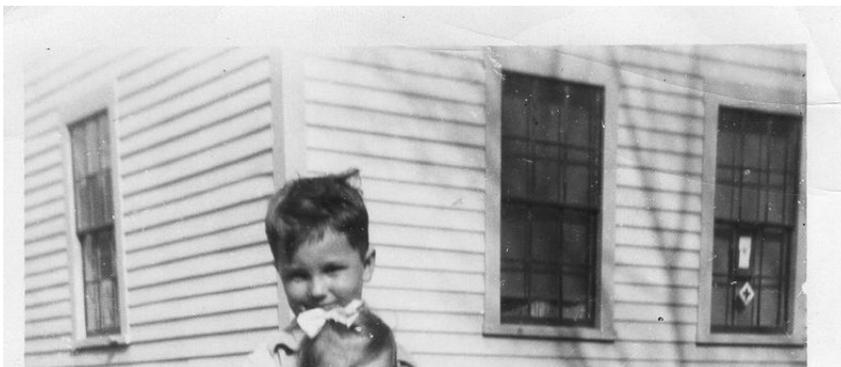
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Raymond Erickson is pictured riding a bike with his sister, Joann Erickson. (Provided by Beverly Zell)

The fate of 6-year-old Raymond Erickson is one of the more mystifying stories that emerged from the Hartford circus fire. Raymond survived, was given last rites and then disappeared from the hospital. Unable to find the boy's body, officials would eventually offer the family a replacement child whose body had gone unclaimed.

[Interactive map: How the Hartford circus fire started, spread and was seen through the eyes of those who were there »](#)

Now, 75 years later, his family wants answers. They wonder if a body buried in a grave marked only by numbers may, in fact, be Raymond — the youngest of the six people considered missing from the circus fire — or more likely that he was misidentified and buried as someone else.



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This is a grave marker memorializing the unidentified victims of the Hartford circus fire at the monument in the Northwood Cemetery in Windsor. (Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant)

When the big top burned that day, killing 168 in one of the nation's worst mass casualty disasters, 6-year-old Raymond somehow escaped. He'd gone to the show that day with his uncle, who raced with him to Hartford Hospital. Amid the chaos of the dead and wounded, a nurse directed him to lay the boy on a mattress in a fourth-floor hallway.

It was the last time anyone saw him.

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Raymond Erickson Jr. is pictured with his parents and his sister. (Provided by Beverly Zell)

Police searched the dead lying at the State Armory, hospital morgues and funeral homes. They even had his mother Sophie Erickson view every child in the hospital to make sure he hadn't been misidentified.

His mother found his sneakers with dark-colored socks stuffed inside them in a cardboard box a few days later.

[The living survivors of the Hartford circus fire still carry the scars from the tragic day. Hear their stories in this interactive oral history. »](#)

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This is a copy-photograph of a temporary morgue set up in the state armory after the Hartford circus fire. The original photograph is now in the State Archive's Hartford circus fire collection. (Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant)

Eventually, Hartford County Coroner Walter Weissenborn proposed an unusual solution in a letter to the head of Hartford Hospital. There were six unidentified people buried as numbers in a Hartford cemetery. One of those six, No. 1510, was a little boy. Weissenborn asked if the Erickson family wanted to bury body No. 1510 as their son.

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WALTER WEISSENBORN, M. D.
50 FARMINGTON AVENUE
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT
TELEPHONE 2-6498

September 8, 1944

Dr. A. L. Burgdorf
Municipal Building

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Hartford, Conn.

Dear Dr. Burgdorf:

The Erickson family of Middletown have made several attempts to obtain a proof of death of their son, Raymond Arthur Erickson, Jr.. The State Police feel that he was identified. The child was taken to the Municipal Hospital by his uncle and later someone else claimed him.

After consulting Mr. Healy I have filled out the proof of death stating that it was my belief, with the evidence presented to me, that this child died in the circus fire.

In all probability their son was buried by somebody else. Do you think the family should claim the body #1510 to take the place of their son? If so, should we write to ask them if they would do this? Even if they are unwilling we could take one off our list of unidentified. I suppose this really cuts down our unidentified to six, including the portions of the body - the skull, etc.. Do you agree?

Very truly yours,


Walter Weissenborn, M.D.

WW:pp

1. Heat rolls into Sunday. When will it end?



2. Iconic 'Door Tree' in Hamden cut down in act of 'saddening' vandalism



This is the letter Hartford County Coroner Dr. Walter Weissenborn sent to Hartford Hospital, asking if the family would want to bury an unidentified body as their son, Raymond Erickson. (Provided by Beverly Zell)

“In all probability, their son was buried by somebody else. Do you think the family should claim the body #1510 to take the place of their son?” Weissenborn said. “If so, should we ask them if they would do this? Even if they are unwilling, we could take one off our list of unidentified.”

Sophie Erickson refused. She also declined when police said they would exhume bodies of some of the children that had already been buried to see if her son was one of them.

“They wanted her to take a body that she knew wasn’t her son and bury it so they could get one off of their list,” Beverly Zell said in a recent interview.

“Oh my god.”

But now, 75 years after her uncle was mysteriously lost, Zell wants to ask Chief State Medical Examiner James Gill to search for him again using the latest in scientific technology. She plans to ask Gill to exhume the person buried as 1510 in a Hartford cemetery and see if DNA can be extracted.





A Hartford county coroner offered the body buried at this grave to the Erickson family to claim as their own son, Raymond Erickson, who was last seen at Hartford Hospital on July 6, 1944. The grave marker rests near the Hartford circus fire monument at the Northwood Cemetery in Windsor. (Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant)

“If they get DNA from that person they could find it’s a descendant of someone else buried as a circus fire victim who then could really be Raymond,” Zell said.

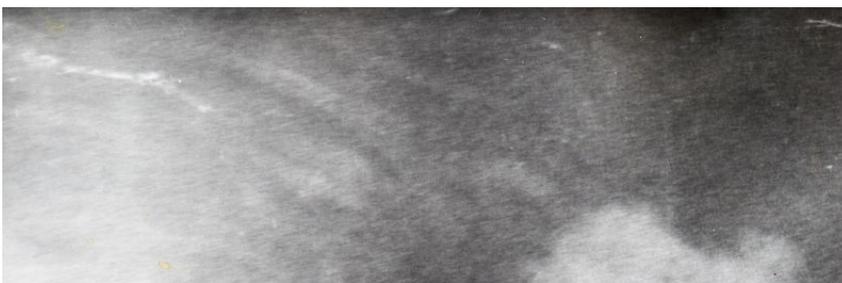
“My family has never known what happened, and if this is a chance to find out, then we should try and do it. I feel badly to disturb someone else’s grave, but I would like to have a conclusion to the story and know that I tried as much as I could to try and find Raymond,” she said.

Last rites

Raymond went to the circus that day with his uncle Stanley Kurneta, his 4-year-old son Anthony and a cousin Mary, who was 20. They sat in a reserved section near the animal chutes, where so many people would eventually die.

[The day the clowns cried: The story of the Hartford circus fire »](#)

Zell said her uncle noticed the fire and started herding everyone down the stairs, but they got stuck at the lions’ cages. Zell said, according to family lore, Stanley picked up his son and threw him over the cages and told him to run.





This copy-photograph shows the scene on Barbour Street as fire engulfed the big-top tent at the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus on July 6, 1944. This photograph is now in the State Archive's Hartford circus fire collection. (Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant)

He then turned to get Raymond and Mary, but they were gone. Stanley got out of the tent and then tried to run back in, getting badly burned when it collapsed.

As he frantically searched outside the tent, Kurneta found Erickson lying on a board where someone had apparently put him. Raymond was still alive, but he was barely breathing and his eyes were rolling back in his head, Zell said.

The right side of face was blackened. Stanley picked him up and put him onto an Army truck to bring him to Municipal Hospital. The governor had declared a state of emergency, and vehicles came from everywhere to help transport victims, and the state armory was turned into a temporary morgue.

“Stanley took him to the fourth floor, and a nurse said to put him on a mattress in the hallway, which he did,” Zell said. “Stanley then said there was a priest in the hallway, and he told the man to give Raymond his last rites.”

Kurneta told family members he left the boy with the priest and returned to the circus ground to try and find the rest of his family. A police officer saw how badly injured Kurneta was and had him taken to Hartford Hospital, where he stayed for two weeks.

Mary Kurneta died in the fire. Her body was identified two days after the fire at the State Armory by Raymond Erickson Sr., who had returned from military duty to search for his son Raymond.

But Raymond Jr. was nowhere to be found.

A broken shoelace

As part of their search, police officers escorted Sophia Erickson through the hospital to search every room, looking for Raymond. At one point, a social worker brought in a box that contained items left behind by victims, and that is where she found Raymond's sneakers and his socks.

"She knew they were Raymond's shoes because the shoelace had broken that morning and she had tied it in the middle and trucked it inside the shoe so nobody would see it," Zell said.



This is the pair of shoes found at the hospital after 6-year-old Raymond Erickson disappeared while being treated after the Hartford circus fire. His niece, Beverly Zell, said it was a knot in the midsection of the right shoe's lace that confirmed it was Erickson's shoe. (Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant)

While the shoes proved that the boy had been in the hospital, it got them no closer to solving the mystery.

"My grandmother always felt it was quite an odd story and that perhaps he had walked out of the hospital and some other family had claimed him as their own son," Zell said. "They never had a service for him, just didn't do anything because I think they hoped someday

him, just didn't do anything because I think they hoped someday something would turn up about what happened to him."

They kept the shoes and his baseball bats and some of his school books in a closet in a new home they built in Middletown using the money they got from their circus fire settlement.

Zell and her husband live there now.

Raymond's sneakers preserved behind a glass case on the living room mantle.

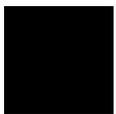
Zell has written to Gill seeking to have him reopen her uncle's case as he has done with Grace Fifield, one of the other six people missing from the circus fire. Fifield's granddaughter has agreed to give a DNA sample, and Gill is seeking to exhume two unknown females buried as numbers in unmarked graves in a Hartford cemetery.

One of the other unmarked graves is that of a little boy who was badly burned. Zell wants Gill to exhume that body in hopes of getting DNA from it. While she doesn't think it would match her uncle, she is hopeful through genetic DNA testing that the unknown victim's relatives could be found and find out if they buried a child long ago, believed to be someone else.

"It was too painful for my grandmother to even speak about Raymond Jr. When she finally learned about what happened, and of the unresolved nature of Raymond's disappearance, she would speak to me of how she would sit at home and wonder if one day a man would come knocking on the door and reveal that he was Raymond, that he had been taken as a replacement for someone's dead child and grew up living with another family, with a different name," Zell said in her letter to Gill.

Zell said she always felt she was a replacement child to her grandparents, and she feels obligated to never give up trying to find out what happened to Raymond. She studied history in college and did

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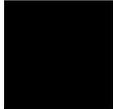
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6:00 AM

a family history project, which led her to spend years researching what could have possibly happened to Raymond.

“With the passing of each July 6, I continue to wonder and research. At 52 years old, I now have two children of my own, and they have grown up with the story of Raymond and how he went missing,” Zell said.

“I have the sneakers he was wearing that day that my grandmother recovered from a lost and found box at Municipal Hospital. They sit in a glass case in my living room as a reminder that Raymond is not forgotten and that I am still in search of him, hoping to bring him to rest someday beside my grandparents, where he belongs.”

Dave Altimari can be reached at daltimari@courant.com.



Dave Altimari

CONTACT



Dave Altimari is a reporter on the Courant’s investigative desk. He has reported on stories that have been named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, won a George Polk Award as part of a team that exposed corruption in the administration of former Gov. John G. Rowland and a National Headliner Award for coverage of the Hartford Distributors shooting.