

EYE-WITNESS REPORT OF THE "CIRCUS FIRE", JULY 6, 1944

BY JACK E. MAHAR.

"The Greatest Show on Earth" -- that is how the three ring circus of the Barnum & Bailey Circus touted themselves in the year of 1944. It was a big affair that included the most famous of all clowns, Emmet Kelley. The circus came into Hartford, Connecticut by train and set up their huge "Big Top Tent" on a vacant lot on Barbour Street.

In 1944, I was a child of six years old and I was estatic to learn that my Dad was going to take me to the circus. I was going to see my first circus. We entered the big tent and found our seats in the bleachers to the left of the entrance.

The circus acts got under way, and as I recall, a car drove to the center ring and twenty or so clowns got out of the car that was designed to hold four people. The next act was with lions and tigers in an enclosed cage. As the act was ending, the big cats went into wire cage tunnels that led to 4 wheeled cages. The cages were then pulled off the center ring. Just as the live animal act was ending, the high wire act was commencing. The acrobats climbed their rope ladders to their perch, high above the floor of the tent. The band changed their tune to indicate a change of act. We all looked up to see the high wire act with the bicycles and the balancing of two men and women on a steel cable. I was thrilled and could not believe they were 200 feet above the floor with no net and riding a bicycle across a 1/2 inch cable.

Just as they started across the high wire, my attention was diverted to my left. Something orange and yellow circled the main entrance of the tent. It rolled and turned. I thought it was part of the circus act but I looked and looked and then realized it was fire.

My Dad realized we had a serious problem. Then the circus band stopped playing the tune and went into a tune that by pre-arrangement meant to all their employees that a serious problem had arisen. Of course, we did not know this change of tune meant a problem but all of us knew that the tent was on fire.

As I mentioned before, the big cats were being led down tunnels to their 4 wheeled cages. At this point, people were aware of the fire and started to panic. They started to jump into the center ring to escape the fire which still was down at the main entrance. They ran across the animal cages and most unfortunately dislodged the wire tunnels from one center ring cage to their 4 wheel cages. The animals were loose.

At about this point, the fire went from a curling above the main entrance to a "V" that shot down the entire length of the tent. (Back then we did not have jet aircraft, but the sound sounded like a jet aircraft on take-off.) People started running away from the fire. They jammed up against the fence in the performance area in the ring, they crawled on top of people trying to get away from the intense heat, then the animals, lions and tigers crawled on top of people. People and animals were being trampled to death. Burning canvas dropped on top of this mass of humanity and animals. It was the most horrible thing I had ever witnessed.

I owe my survival to my Dad who in an instant realized to run away from the fire would be foolhardy. My Dad picked me up and put me on his shoulders and ran into the fire. As he ran toward the main entrance, the big poles that held up the tent were starting to sway back and forth. He stopped to see which way they were going to fall and then made a decision as to which side to run past the poles. When he stopped, a piece of burning canvas fell from the tent roof and landed on my knee. (To this day I have no feeling in my right knee; this was a minor injury when I think back to those unfortunate people who lost their lives.)

My Dad made it out the main entrance with me on his back and the first thing we encountered was a herd of elephants being led away from the fire by a handler. I'll never forget my father asking permission to duck under the elephants to get to the street. The handler yelled "Of course, go ahead!"

We made it across the street where there was a pay phone. The line at that phone had to be more than 100 people including reporters. There was no way we were going to be able to use that phone to call my mother or grandmother. We couldn't get our car out of the parking lot as it was blocked by ambulances and fire trucks. All available doctors, interns and first aid people were on Barbour Street setting broken arms, legs and treating burns. My Dad told one of them I had a burn on my knee and they put salve and a bandage on it. The whole time this was taking place we watched the tent across the street fall to the ground in sections but the worst of the whole scene was the screaming of the people who were trapped in the tent.

I'll never forget those screaming people. We couldn't help. For many years after I had total recall of that fire in my dreams. It was so sad. My Dad has since passed on but I think back and if it weren't for his sharp mind, I would have been a victim of that fire.

At this point, my mother and grandmother feared we both had perished in the fire. We couldn't call them on the phone even after we left the area in the car because all the telephone lines were busy. We arrived at my grandmothers house which was close to the Hartford Town line. She was on the phone with my mom and screamed and hugged us both. We spoke to my mother and she was crying but she was happy we were alive.

In the aftermath, I learned my cousin from Bristol, Connecticut was in the fire. He had been trampled and burned. He lost his hair and both of his hands. He received the largest monetary

We later found out that the circus coated the canvas with parafin wax (candlewax). This kept the tent waterproof during rain storms. It kept the tent dry but it set up a dangerous situation in the event of a fire.

It was many years before Hartford, Connecticut allowed any circus into the city. Too many sad memories.

Jack E. Mahar
Father of Spencer Mahar