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## Woman Recounts Day at the Circus That Turned Fatal

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THE LEDGER

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LAKELAND | Pieces of yellowed newspapers fell to the floor as Joan Verret carefully unfolded the pages and laid them on a coffee table recently inside her Lakeland home.

She rarely looks at them anymore, she said. The black and white photos and bold print headlines depict a day she doesn't like to remember.

It's been 70 years, and she still tears up when she talks about it.

It was a warm Thursday afternoon in Hartford, Conn., on July 6, 1944. About 7,000 people, including Verret, her mother, Ida, 5-year-old brother, Fred Jr., and aunt, Myrtle Verret, had filed into seats on bleachers and folding chairs underneath the big top tent to watch the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

The lions and tigers were up first, followed by the Great Wallendas. But before the acrobats could perform, a fire broke out.

Within 10 minutes, the tent was gone.

At least 168 people were killed and more than 500 injured. Most were burned or trampled as they scrambled to find a way out of the tent.

Newspaper articles published after the fire detailed a gruesome scene of bodies piled in front of exits and children wandering outside, unable to find parents. Many of those killed or injured were women and children, and six who died were never identified.

Verret's mother and aunt were among those who died.

Reports say investigators first thought the fire might have started from a discarded cigarette. Years later, an Ohio man claimed he intentionally set the fire, but his confession eventually was recanted, and investigators have yet to determine the fire's true origin.

Historians and people who have studied the incident say it was one of the worst fire disasters in American history, and it prompted numerous fire code changes, including bans on smoking inside circus tents and a need to properly identify exits.

After the incident, officials arrested several Ringling Bros. executives on involuntary manslaughter charges.

During World War II, resources in the U.S. were spread thin, and Ringling Bros. wasn't able to have the tent properly fireproofed. And investigators said the



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Joan Verret, 78, holds up the front page of The Hartford Courant from the day a fire broke out at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Both her mother and aunt died; she and her brother survived.

technique used to waterproof the canvas — kerosene and paraffin wax — helped the fire spread even faster.

The charges against the circus executives eventually were dropped when they agreed to accept full financial responsibility for the incident, paying nearly \$5 million to victims and their families.

But money couldn't change what happened that day.

A day Verret said she'll never forget.

#### A DAY AT THE CIRCUS

Verret was 8 years old and had recently moved to Hartford to live with her family. Her father, Fred, mother and younger brother had been living in the city for a few months while Joan finished out the school year in Pennsylvania.

For the Fourth of July holiday, Verret's aunt, Myrtle Verret, flew to Hartford from Pittsburgh to visit the family.

The circus was also in town that week, and Verret's uncle, who worked for Ringling Bros., gave the family four tickets to the July 6 show.

That afternoon, Verret, her mother, her aunt and 5-year-old Fred Jr. sat underneath the big top tent laughing at clowns and awaiting the start of the circus.

About 30 minutes in, just as the Great Wallendas were about to start, Verret said her mother stood up and pointed.

Verret said she remembers

looking across the tent to see a tiny flame, as if someone had just struck a match.

And then the panic started.

Verret said she heard her mother tell her aunt, "I'll take Freddy, you take Joan," and then they started making their way to the exits. People were pushing and bodies were smashed together.

That was the last thing she'd hear her mother say.

Verret said she remembers holding her aunt's hand, until all of a sudden she wasn't anymore. She said she turned around and a man was pushing her. She told him to calm down.

Being a small child, Verret said, she eventually found a way to weave in and out, under people and through legs, until she reached one of the exits.

She said she remembers crawling over the animal cages, which were blocking most people from getting out.

As she stepped outside the tent, a semicircle of people were staring back at her. Nervous and unsure of what to do, she said, she started moving backward toward the fire, then a man came and grabbed her.

When she finally turned around, the tent was gone.

She said the man took her to a police car, where she waited for someone to find her.

"I saw my mother so many times coming for me. Of course, it wasn't her."

Ida Verret and Myrtle Verret never made it out of the tent.

Joan said she remembers searching for several days after her father picked her up before they finally found the women's bodies.

It took them another day of searching local hospitals before finding Fred Jr. He was alive with burns covering about 80 percent of his body.

Fred Verret Jr., now 75, doesn't talk about the fire much, but said he remembers his sister coming to visit him in the hospital every day after school for about a year while he recovered.

The pair stuck together growing up and remained close after both moved to Lakeland several decades ago.

Joan Verret said she's visited the site of the fire, and she tells people her story whenever they ask. It's a day she said she doesn't like to recount, but it's one she hopes people will never forget.

"It was awful. It was quick and it made a change," she said. "It was one of the worst fires in our history."

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