

When the Greatest Show on Earth burned: The Hartford Circus Fire of 1944

By Jan Wenzel Special to The Journal

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On July 6, 1944, The Hartford Circus Fire seared itself into the memories of thousands of families. This is the story of two of them.

The thump, thump, thump of helicopter blades over our townhouse in West Warwick woke me out of a sound sleep 17 years ago. The wails of firetrucks and ambulances racing up and down Route 2 carried a piercing, haunting song into the cold night air.

I shook my husband awake, urging him to listen to the sirens. Ron agreed something catastrophic probably had happened, then rolled over, saying we'd learn about it in the morning.

After a fitful sleep, I awakened to the horrific news of the Station nightclub fire. When I heard patrons were trapped at the single-door exit, my mind immediately began to replay the story of the 1944 Circus Fire in Hartford. Six members of my family were there, and only four returned home. The remaining two were among the 168 people killed when the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus big top caught fire and collapsed.

Few people remember the circus fire today. Perhaps because most of the attendees were women with small children, perhaps because World War II was on everyone's mind and in every news cycle, perhaps because the fire's searing impact is lost to time, gone nearly without a trace.

But I can tell you my family's circus fire story, retold to me over the years, and how it was woven into the fabric of our lives, together with information gleaned from newspaper and magazine articles, reports, and online sources to create a tapestry of the tragedy.

Confusion is calamity's handmaiden. So it follows that facts about the fire remain hazy. For example, the number of attendees range from 6,000 to 9,000, deaths from 167 to 169, injured from 487 to 700. Whether Little Miss 1565 was actually identified years after the fire remains a mystery.

There's unanimous agreement, however, that Thursday, July 6, 1944 was a steamy-hot summer day. After finishing breakfast, my mom, Lilla Burke, 30, pondered what kind of cake to bake for my first birthday while my dad, John Burke, 33, read the morning newspaper, enjoying rare time off from Pratt & Whitney, where he worked overtime helping to produce aircraft engines for the war effort.

The newspaper noted the arrival of the Ringling circus the day before with photos of a caravan of performers and animals parading two miles from Union Station to a vacant 9-acre city-owned lot on Barbour Street where the circus would be set up.

Because the circus train of 60-plus cars arrived late from Providence, the scheduled afternoon matinee was canceled. Circus superstition considers a missed show severe bad luck, yet the evening show ran smoothly and was well-attended.

Dad decided the circus would be a great distraction for Ronnie, my almost 5-year-old brother, so after lunch they drove off to Hartford, about 10 miles from our home in Rocky Hill, to attend the 2 p.m. circus matinee.

But dad didn't know that around the same time, his sister, Dorothy Kuhnly, 36, also decided to attend the matinee with her daughters Georgianna, 12, and Roberta "Bertie," 9, and son Barry, almost 5, along with their neighborhood friend, Betty Lou Wormstedt, 14. They boarded a bus from Rockville, a small suburb 16 miles northeast of Hartford, eager to see The Greatest Show on Earth.

Large crowds were streaming into the mammoth, 550-foot-long, 200-foot-wide tent, its roof coated with 1,800 pounds of paraffin wax thinned with 6,000 gallons of gasoline, a common waterproofing practice at that time.

Inside, dad and Ronnie settled into their seats, dazzled by the sounds and sights of the circus: clowns chasing each other up and down the aisles, bejeweled showgirls riding bareback on prancing horses, acrobats cartwheeling across the floor, men walking on stilts, popcorn popping, trumpets, trombones and tubas tooting.

"We had great seats," my cousin Bertie recalled in the book "Circus Fire Memories, Survivor Recollections of July 6, 1944," edited by Don Massey. "Barry and I were on the floor bench, with mother, Georgie and Betty Lou up behind us."

French lion tamer Alfred Court and his assistants employed all three rings for his simultaneous acts with lions, tigers, leopards and cougars that traveled back and forth from their outside cages to the rings through nearly four-foot-high chutes set up in two of the main aisles.

The famous trapeze artists The Flying Wallendas had just begun their gravity-defying high-wire act when dad noticed a bright flare near the main entrance. He thought it was part of the act until he glanced back and saw the flare was now a ball of flames racing up the side of the tent.

Scooping up Ronnie, dad frantically searched for an exit but couldn't see one. The chutes used by the big cats were still in place, blocking access. He heard the band begin playing Stars and Stripes Forever, a musical alarm to circus employees, signaling an emergency.

Suddenly dad spotted a clown motioning to him. Pulling back an opening he had sliced in the tent's canvas with his pocket knife, the clown ushered dad and others to safety. Once outside, dad looked back and saw a roaring fire beyond the opening, but he couldn't see the clown.

"The acrobats were just set to start," Bertie recalled. "Suddenly screaming broke out. The crowd was ... pushing, screaming, and sweeping up everyone in its frenzy. Our family was completely separated. I couldn't see anything but trousers, belts and the back of skirts.

"The fire started behind us, so we were being pushed across the tent until we were squashed against the animal runways. I caught my foot climbing up and I thought I would be run over, but I finally managed to get up, over and down. I looked up just as a soldier held my brother by his hands and was dropping him down. What a great sight! We clasped hands for dear life and didn't let go until we were at the police station."

Once the fire reached the tent's waterproofed top, flames spread rapidly. Patches of burning canvas soaked in gasoline and paraffin rained down on spectators, igniting hair and lightweight summer clothing.

The 19-ton big top collapsed within 10 minutes, trapping hundreds. While many were able to escape, others were burned, trampled, asphyxiated and suffocated. Some 60 bodies were found jammed against the runways.

Outside, Emmett Kelly, dressed in his Weary Willie outfit, saw the blaze and grabbed a bucket of water, but the fire was so advanced there was nothing he could do with it. A photo of the sad clown holding the bucket appeared in numerous newspapers, giving the fire its moniker "the day the

clowns cried.”

Neighborhood friend Betty Lou managed to escape the inferno and find Barry and Bertie. The three frightened children stood by a tree, waiting for Dorothy and Georgianna to appear.

Eventually they were taken to the police station where they saw a neighborhood boy whose father gave them a ride home. “Dad greeted us with hugs. Funny, it’s the last hug I remember from childhood,” Bertie lamented.

Mom was ironing when she heard the news on the radio. “Within moments, my next-door neighbor, Margaret DiMartino, was at my side, promising to remain with me until we heard more. Minutes seemed like days,” she noted in the *Circus Fire Memories* book.

“I can still recall the joy I felt when my husband drove into the driveway,” said mom who was then 93. “Ronnie was crying because he lost a shoe. Both John and I laughed, assuring our young son that we would buy him many more shoes.”

My parents’ joy ended abruptly with a shocking phone call later that afternoon. Frank Kuhnly was on the line, saying Dorothy had taken the children to the circus. Bertie and Barry were safe, Georgianna was badly burned in the hospital. He was desperate to find Dorothy. The State Armory was set up as a makeshift morgue for victims of the fire. He couldn’t go alone, he needed my father.

“When my husband came home (from the armory) hours later, he couldn’t speak. He had seen the unspeakable—bodies of charred victims, his sister, Dorothy, among them.”

My bedridden grandmother asked mom to bring a handmade doll to Georgianna at Hartford Hospital. “She was badly burned, and her breathing was labored. I believe she was in a netherworld, free from pain, free from earthly concerns. I knew death would come soon,” mom related. “Just as we returned from Dorothy’s funeral, we got word that Georgianna had joined her mother.”

No Hartford Circus Fire story would be complete without mentioning Little Miss 1565—a small blonde child about 6 years old whose name was derived from the number assigned to her body.

No-one claimed her, even after a post-mortem photo of her nearly unblemished face appeared in publications nationwide. Although five other victims were unidentifiable, she became the symbol of the tragedy — the innocence of her youth, the loneliness of her death — and mourned by thousands of strangers.

Investigators called the fire a terrible accident, possibly caused by a carelessly tossed cigarette, but they didn't let Ringling off the hook. Four circus officials pleaded no contest to acts of negligence including leaving all 50 circus fire extinguishers in a storage unit, inaccessible, and parking the circus fire engines a quarter of a mile away. The four were pardoned shortly after their convictions. In addition, the company agreed to pay \$5 million in compensation to 600 victims and their families.

Not long after the fire, Bertie and Barry moved to our grandparents' farm in Granby, Connecticut, where our family spent nearly every Sunday. Ronnie and I marveled at our cousins' resilience, as well as their storytelling ability that often made the entire family convulse with laughter.

Ronnie couldn't recall the fire, but he remembered dad buying him a toy lion-tamer whip and losing his shoe.

Barry said the only thing he remembered about the fire was hearing his mother shout: "Roberta, take care of Barry." Bertie said she didn't hear her mother's directive in the chaos, but it didn't matter. The two siblings looked after each other the rest of their lives. My family always spoke about barryandbertie as if their names were one word.

Growing up, I asked dad what happened at the armory, the makeshift morgue. He was silent. Thinking he didn't hear me, I asked again and got the same response. Even though I was young, I realized dad wouldn't answer me because he couldn't answer me, so I never asked him again. Mom, being a great storyteller, never left holes in stories unfilled, so she would plug them with her best guess. She said dad couldn't speak for two days after identifying his sister Dorothy by her wedding ring.

Bertie, who never married, and I became close friends in our later years, talking hours on the phone. She grew an abundance of flowers on the hillside of her home overlooking a lake in Holland, Massachusetts, filling the house with bouquets and adopted animals, often abandoned and mistreated, that she lovingly nursed back to health.

I asked her once to tell me about her sister Georgianna — any stories she could share. I heard silence on the other end of the line. The kind of silence I recognized.

In 2005, a Hartford Circus Fire memorial, designed to mark the exact location of the big top on Barbour Street, was erected. Flowering dogwoods outline the size and shape of the tent. Where the center post stood, four granite benches ring a bronze disk engraved with the names and ages of the

victims.

“It finally helps to know that others have had similar experiences,” said Bertie shortly before the dedication, noting that she’d watched only two movies in a theater in her lifetime. “I heard (actor, comedian, director) Charles Nelson Reilly say that, after being in the circus fire, he doesn’t ‘do audiences,’ meaning he never sits in an audience. ‘I thought, my God, that’s me.’”

When the memorial was dedicated on July 6, 2005, each victim’s name was read aloud, accompanied by a single, haunting ring of a Hartford Fire Department bell. Mom gently tapped me and nodded her head toward Bertie and Barry. They were sitting together two chairs away, tightly holding each other’s hand.

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