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After 70 Years, Circus Fire Still Clear In Wethersfield Man's Memory

Lichtenbaum Donates Memorabilia to Display At Town's Library

By CHRISTOPHER HOFFMAN, Special to The Courant

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WETHERSFIELD — Seventy years later, Harry L. Lichtenbaum can still see the flames licking up the canvas wall of the circus tent. advertisement

"The picture of that tent burning is so clear to me in my mind," said Lichtenbaum, 83, of Wethersfield. "I can see the people scrambling to get out."

It was 2:40 p.m. on July 6, 1944, the day fire consumed the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey big top in Hartford, killing at least 168 people and injuring hundreds more.

Lichtenbaum, 13 at the time, and his sister, Doris, were lucky. They were near an open exit — at least two were blocked by animal chutes for the lions — and they walked to safety unscathed.

If the pair had stayed in the bleachers on the other side of the big top, where they originally sat down, both might have perished, Lichtenbaum said. They had moved to get a better view of the show.

"It was by the grace of God that I'm alive," he said.

Memories of that tragic day seven decades ago this month hold Lichtenbaum deep in their grip. Over the years, he became obsessed by the fire and started collecting everything he could find about it, and about Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey.

For the fire's 70th anniversary, Lichtenbaum has loaned some of his collection to the Wethersfield Library for a display.

During a recent interview, he proudly showed off his latest acquisition, a CD by Mark Erelli that contains a song about the fire called "Hartfordtown 1944." He also pulled out a copy of novelist Stewart O'Nan's 2001 non-fiction book "The Circus Fire," for which he was interviewed, along with numerous magazine articles dating to the 1970s and Ringling Brothers memorabilia.

His most valued pieces: a peanut bag and his ticket stub from that day.

"I'm a collector," he said. "I have to have anything relating to it."

Lichtenbaum also regularly visited the Windsor grave of Little Miss 1565, a young girl killed in the fire whose body was never claimed. He goes several times a year to a memorial, off Barbour Street in Hartford,

that commemorates the fire.

"It's a hangout to some people in the neighborhood," Lichtenbaum said. "They leave their refuse behind. When I go and I find it, I pick it up. They don't realize what a sacred spot that is."

Lichtenbaum and his sister almost didn't go to the circus that day. His family was poor, but his mother got two free passes at work.

The pair walked the two miles from their Vine Street home to the fairgrounds and sat in the general admission section. When Lichtenbaum, who had never been to the circus, couldn't see all three rings, they moved.

During the lion performance, it became clear that something was wrong, he recalled.

"All of a sudden the lions turned around and went back down the chute," he said. "They wanted to get out of there. They sensed the fire."

Soon after, someone in the audience yelled "fire!" and people began screaming and rushing for the exits. Once Lichtenbaum and his sister were out of the tent, he wanted to go back and help others escape, but could not.

"I could see people climbing on the benches to get out, but it was like an oven door was opened," Lichtenbaum said. "You couldn't do it. You'd melt. So we had to turn around and leave."

At first, Lichtenbaum didn't grasp the enormity of the tragedy. No one talked about it, and no one close to him died. It was only years later that he learned some classmates had been in the big top that day; they appeared with him in a CPTV documentary about the fire

"I'm watching the film and I'm saying, 'I didn't know he was there,'" Lichtenbaum said. "I never knew anyone else from my class was there. We never talked about it."

In his early 20s, Lichtenbaum finally screwed up the courage to attend his second circus.

"It was like reliving my past," he said. "But I didn't want to be afraid. It wasn't easy."

Now, he regularly attends the circus and enjoys it.

Lichtenbaum is quick to add that he doesn't define himself as a Hartford circus fire survivor, although others do. He prefers to speak of his passions for community theater and the Hartford Jazz Society, which he helped found.

The tragedy, however, is never far away, even 70 years later.

"I don't dwell on it, but I don't think a day goes by that I don't think about it," Lichtenbaum said.

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