

crowd moving and calm until the flames on the big top roof began to spread rapidly toward the north and east.

As the fire consumed the tension ropes that held the tent poles in place, the poles ignited and began to fall, crushing any equipment or spectators in their path. With support poles falling one by one, the stretched canvas roof of the big top began to loosen, and as it did, the northerly breeze fanned the flames, chasing them toward the bandstand where Merle Evans's crew continued playing its disaster march. Burning sheets and strips of canvas coated with hot, melted wax fell from the roof above onto those trying to flee, adding to the panic of the crowd. When the center pole collapsed, the remains of the big top fell down in a blanket of flame on scores of people making their last desperate effort to escape the superheated arena. Many of those still inside had suffered debilitating injuries or were trapped by runways and fallen poles and could only watch in horror as the wax-coated, burning canvas enveloped them. Their collective final screams would blend with a chilling swishing sound as the air was pushed out of the tent by the falling big top, followed by a moment of stunned silence.

Ringling Trucks and Tractors Department superintendent David Blanchfield was in the backyard of the circus lot when he first heard the cries of "Fire!" and noticed a solid mass of flames coming from the southwest corner of the big top. He knew when he saw the roof burning that there would be no saving it. All they could hope to do was get the people out, protect the animals and keep the fire from spreading to other tents and wagons. Some equipment trucks that were backed up against the sidewall on the south side of the big top caught fire quickly, and Blanchfield had his men move these trucks out of the area as soon as he noticed they were burning. The water truck that he had stationed on the south side of the lot sprayed water on the wheels of the trucks, still burning after being pulled away from the blaze. Two other water trucks were sent to the north side of the tent to protect the animal wagons; if their cages burned and the animals got out, things would get even worse. En route to the animal wagons, Blanchfield was told that there were people burning in the northeast exit; he stopped the trucks and had them water down the people and bodies that had been trapped by the animal runway when the roof fell. As they sprayed the bodies, most with their clothes completely burned off, Blanchfield and his men searched the pile for signs of life. They pulled two women from the pile—one amazingly had just a small hole burned in her stocking.

State police commissioner Hickey got his party out of its reserved seats in Section G and into a safe area by the victory gardens to the south of