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Portland man recalls escape from Hartford Circus Fire in 1944



The Hartford circus fire in 1944 (AP photo).

By [Cassandra Day](#), The Middletown Press

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Portland native Stephen Clapp, now 75, was 5 years old when he and friends traveled to the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus on July 6, 1944. He recounts his memory of the devastating Hartford Circus Fire that killed 167 and injured an estimated 700 on the 70th anniversary of the tragedy. Courtesy Stephen Clapp

PORTLAND >> For one young man, a 15-mile trip 70 years ago to the big city to see The Greatest Show on Earth was a chance to travel beyond his town's rural confines to behold an exotic array of wild animals and death-defying stunts.

Instead, 5-year-old Stephen Clapp's visit to the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus on Barbour Street in Hartford July 6, 1944, had him on the fringes of a stampede of terror that stands as one of Connecticut's most affecting tragedies — The Hartford Circus Fire.

As the state marks the 70th anniversary of that nearly unfathomable catastrophe that claimed the lives of 167 people and injured an estimated 700 others, the Portland native shares his memories of that fateful day. His recollections are taken from a 1,100-word essay that's part of the 70th anniversary virtual scrapbook compiled by the Hartford History Center at the city's public library.

In 1944, Clapp, the son of the town's Congregational minister in Portland's Gildersleeve neighborhood, was enjoying the languid days of summer when a neighbor suggested he join her on an adventure to the circus.

"Down the street from our parsonage lived a 25-year-old Sunday school teacher, Ruth Campbell, who dreamed up fun things for us preacher's kids that wouldn't occur to our high-minded parents," recalls Clapp, now 75 and living in Jeffersonton, Virginia.

"Ruthie, who lived with her mother and stepfather, hatched a plan to take me and a boy next door to the circus in Hartford on July 6. The neighbor boy's mother declined the invitation because her son was too young. Ruthie then invited an older boy, Bill Conklin, whose father owned the drugstore where she tended the soda fountain."

Clapp, now a retired Washington, D.C., journalist, penned a memoir at age 16 which included his experiences that day. His mother, recognizing her son's literary aspirations, saved the manuscript, allowing Clapp's narrative the details that bring his story alive.

He recalls sitting on the front lawn of the parsonage waiting for a car driven by Ruthie's pipe-smoking stepfather Pop with her mother by his side.

The ride from Portland to Hartford was uneventful, Clapp writes. "We had little time in what was left of the morning to view all the attractions. I don't remember seeing any of the sideshows, but I do recall touring the animal cages and smelling the odor of hay, sweat and poop."

Once seated, Clapp was among some 7,000 spectators and staff working the big top and was soon engrossed in the circus acts, unaware of the danger nearby.

"I never noticed the lick of flame that climbed up the side of the tent, causing panic among the onlookers," Clapp recalls.

Pop pushed him toward the exit and they were joined by Bill, Ruthie and her mother Eva Wersig, who didn't escape unscathed.

"She had fallen down upon landing and been stepped on by the jostling mob jamming the exit," Clapp recalls.

Joining the flood of men, women and children making their way to the parking lot, Clapp looked back. "Eyes turned away from the dirt path to the flames and smoke rising skyward from the doomed tent. I was afraid the inferno would quickly consume the tent, travel swiftly across the meadow and devour us all in one mighty swoop."

As the car joined the mass of vehicles fleeing the fire, Clapp heard the wail of fire trucks and ambulances.

Back in Portland, Clapp's parents were oblivious to the afternoon's disaster as they worked the garden. He recalls Ruthie making a telephone call to

his mother to reassure her they were safe.

Safe — but not untouched.

“I occasionally describe myself as a survivor of the Great Hartford Circus Fire, although I got off very lightly. I wasn’t burned or injured or directly threatened by the smoke and fire. . . . But the fury of those leaping flames, seen briefly from a distance, caused me for weeks afterward to draw pictures of the Big Top destroyed by fire.”

Clapp’s fivesome wasn’t the only local contingent at the big top on July 6.

Stewart O’Nan’s book, “Circus Fire,” published in 2000, is a non-fiction narrative of the blaze that pieces together the events of that day along with the stories of several “parties,” or groups of circus goers, including two from Middletown.

“Everyone had a friend or neighbor who had been there that day . . . People of that generation knew exactly where they were that afternoon, just as, later, they could recall what they were doing when President Kennedy was shot. The fire had that great an impact on the city,” O’Nan writes.

In fact, there were at least 12 individuals who came from Middletown. “Circus Fire” introduces two groups — six from the Norris and Smith clan and the Kurneta and Erickson families.

Nearly half of those didn’t return.

[Several adults and children from Middletown perished that day](#), including Mary J. Kurneta, 18, of 101 Hotchkiss St.; husband and wife Michael Edward 50, Eva C. (Lathrop) Norris, 43, and their daughter Julia Ann “Judy” Norris, 6, all of 101 Ridge Road.

The fire claimed the life of another child, Raymond A. Erickson Jr., 6, of 245 Williams St.

The most enduring victim of the blaze is Little Miss 1565, so named for the number given to her body. This blonde-haired girl clad in a white dress was never definitively identified. Although she was laid to rest in 1991 presumed to be Eleanor Emily Cook of Massachusetts, questions remain as to her identity.

Clapp, who went on to attend the Portland Junior-Senior High School [now Brownstone Intermediate School], says in all the years since he’s never met another survivor of the fire. “I know a couple of people in Portland who almost went to the circus that day but didn’t. My childhood friend Penfield Jarvis was invited to go with us, but his mother thought he was too young. Over the years, he has sent me clippings from the [Hartford Courant](#), which is how I learned of the “virtual scrapbook.”

These days, Clapp says, he doesn’t often have occasion to talk about the fire, “but my memories of exiting the tent and panicking at momentarily losing contact with Ruthie and her parents remain very fresh.”

He just recently learned that Eva Wersig, Ruthie’s mother, received \$2,600 in damages for injuring her back after jumping from the stands and being trampled by the crowd at the exit.

Read the full account of Clapp’s recollections at <http://bit.ly/1seYolv>.

The Middletown Press has compiled a [photo gallery of pictures from the Hartford Circus Fire](#) courtesy of the Associated Press at <http://bit.ly/1seYolv>.

You can visit the [Hartford Circus Fire Memorial](#) on Barbour Street behind Wish School in the Capitol city.

About the Author