

A VISIT TO THE CIRCUS

By Mary Wallace Bushnell, 1994

July 6, 1944 dawned a hot, humid day in Connecticut. My family and a close neighbor were anticipating an excursion to the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus, which was playing in Hartford. This was a special treat for us as World War II was still on. Gasoline, being in limited supply, was reserved for necessary trips only. The thirty mile drive to Hartford did not meet that criteria. Our neighbor had bought a car from a draftee. Along with the car came gasoline ration stamps. There was our ticket to go! Nine of us piled into their extra car and headed for Hartford. We ranged in age from 5 to 47 years old. My Mother had four of her children along, and the neighbor had three of hers. My 16 year old sister was working for the "War Effort" in the tobacco fields in the Connecticut River Valley that summer and did not accompany us. The motto was, "Lucky Strike Goes To War." The neighbor's baby did not go either. He was at home tended by a war refugee who was stranded in the states when the war in Europe broke out. She spoke no English.

I was a skinny, pigtailed school girl dressed in my pink party dress. We parked in the parking lot at the "G. Fox and Co. Department Store" at Hartford and rode a city bus out to the circus grounds. Even that was exciting to me as I had never been on a city bus or used bus tokens. The temperature that day hovered in the nineties, and the circus grounds were stifling. The area smelled of hot canvas, hay and animals. There were circus vendors milling in among the lines of ticket buyers. They were selling balloons of all colors and little fake monkeys made of brightly dyed pink and blue rabbit fur. I wanted one, but there was no extra cash for such frivolous things in my family, and I knew not to ask.

As we waited in line to purchase our tickets, my vision suddenly started to blacken. I had fainted from the heat. My Mother half dragged me to a shaded area outside, and I lay down next to an auxiliary tent on the grass amid the tent ropes. Mother went for lemonade for me. After I was feeling better we strolled around outside. I saw Gargantua, the famous gorilla. I felt very special with all this attention.

Some time later we went inside the main tent to join the rest of our group. They were already seated high in the bleachers. My Mother suggested that we sit down lower in case I were to faint again. We moved down to a row closer to the front.

At last the show started. It was wonderful. One did not know where to look, there was so much going on. There was lively band music, colorful and funny clowns, vendors hawking their wares of pink cotton candy, peanuts, and gaudy toys, which all held a special attraction to me. The tigers were in one ring going through their act. "The Wallendas," were up on their perches ready to start their high wire act. It was incredibly exciting in the eyes of a young girl.

Suddenly, about 20 minutes into the start of the circus, there was a collective cry, and people were pointing down towards the other end of the tent. A lick of flames could be seen racing up towards the top of the tent. I thought it was a part of the show and was absolutely mesmerized watching it spread further. I was unaware of it at the time, but the band switched tunes to the "Stars and Stripes Forever," the traditional call to alarm in circus jargon. I was totally unaware of my immediate surroundings, when I felt someone tugging on my foot from below. I looked around and was startled to see that our group was not in sight. They had jumped down through the bleachers, six feet to the ground, and my Mother was calling for me to jump as well. I did, and we all walked out through an opening where a man was slitting a hole in the side of the tent with a knife.

The scene outside the tent was total bedlam. People were screaming, crying and running from the tent to escape the inferno. The fire intensified and made a tremendous whooshing sound. Flames shot high above into the sky. The thick black smoke billowed over the scene, staining peoples' faces. Flaming bits of canvas wafted over the panicked crowd. We felt the intense heat on our backs.

In the immediate seconds after the start of the fire, our neighbor's two young sons, aged 5 and 7, shirtless because of the hot weather, slipped out of their mother's reach and disappeared into the crowd that was attempting to leave the tent through one of the main exits. We regrouped outside, a safe distance from the tent. Our neighbor was crying and her remaining son, Jimmy was trying to comfort her. The mothers held a hurried conference. It was decided that our neighbor and Jimmy would search in the area for the two missing boys. My Mother would attempt to contact the husbands. They would meet back at the lot where we had parked the car.

My family started to leave the area. The circus elephants were close by and frightened me badly, as I had always heard that elephants stampeded when they saw fire. Their trainers were lining them up trunk to tail and walking them off down the street. As we were crossing to the other side of the street, I looked back in time to see some supporting tent poles fall to the ground. The circus grounds were adjacent to a residential area, and people were on their porches watching the fire. My Mother asked a resident if she could use his telephone. She was lucky to be connected to our home phone as on a follow up attempt, the telephone circuits were jammed with calls. We were on a party line of seven. Incredibly, the local grocery store shared the line. Conrad, the clerk, answered our ring, and told my Mother that the Wallaces had gone to the circus. My Mother, Mrs. Wallace, told him the terrible news and asked him to contact the husbands who were teaching school at the University of Connecticut. We then took a bus back to the department store and went inside where our minor scratches and cuts were kindly ministered to by some employees there.

After searching for some time, our neighbor and Jimmy found the older of the missing boys. He was with a young girl who lived in the area. She took them both to her home, where Jimmy remembers being on the porch. There was no sign of the other son. The husbands arrived after what seemed an eternity, and by then our neighbor with Jimmy and the located brother had arrived back at the parking lot. Jimmy's Father went through the temporary morgue searching for a body that could be that of his younger son, but there was no match. Seven hours after the start of the fire they found him in one of the many shelters which had been set up for lost children. The shelter had been trying to contact them at home. The child did not know his last name but knew their car license number, and they had been able to obtain the home phone number through the Motor Vehicle Department. That was of no help since the baby sitter did not speak any English. There was a happy reunion at the parking lot and we all headed for home at last.

There had been over seven thousand people at the circus that day, and most of them were women and their children. One hundred and sixty-eight were never to see another day. Many were burned beyond recognition. Others were trampled. Several family friends were killed. In this era, no one had psychological consoling for such an experience. One of my sisters had screaming nightmares for months. My other sister was mute for two days. For years I showed off my leg scar where I had been cut during our flight to safety. Life went on and the war came to an end with great celebration in our town.

In March of 1991, the media aired home movies of the fire taken by a bystander. Their existence was previously unknown to us. It was indeed shocking to view these graphic films of the fire at its height. Time does not diminish the horror. New findings have shown the fire to have been the work of an arsonist. Also the identity of the unburned body of a young girl

had been established after a forty-seven year lapse. Photographs of the child's body had been circulated world wide, yet no one came forward to claim her body. She was dubbed there after, Little Miss 1565, her morgue number. She was about my age, and my wondering about her was reinforced almost yearly when the media would publish stories about her as the anniversary of the fire approached. She had finally been identified through the diligent efforts of a Hartford Fire Lieutenant, Rick Davey. He suspected the child was Eleanor Cook, and after contacting Eleanor's brother and her 80 year old mother, the identity was established. Mrs. Cook had been hospitalized with severe burns for six months after the fire. Another of her children, a two year old son, had perished in the fire. She had hoped that her daughter had gone home with some family and that she would show up at the door some day. This new information brought the fire once again into focus for us. I say us, after all these years, because my husband of nearly thirty-six years is Jimmy, the neighbor's son who was with us that day at the circus.

This was posted in the "Courant," at the time of the 50th anniversary of the fire. They paid me \$250 for the story.