

• Portland • Portland • Portland • Portland • Portland • Portland • Portland • Portland

Resident Remembers the 'Day the Clowns Cried'

by Michael McCoy

Across the nation, this weekend will feature a bevy of fireworks, as people celebrate Independence Day. But here in Connecticut, a far more tragic incident will also be remembered.

Sunday, July 6, marks the 64th anniversary of the devastating Hartford Circus Fire, a blaze that claimed more than 160 lives. Wayne "Duffy" Duff is one of the survivors of that day. Now 74, Duff was only 10 when he attended the circus with his mother Dorothea.

The fire started at the southwest sidewall of the tent during the Great Wallendas' performance, about 20 minutes into the whole show. Though bandleader Merle Evans is traditionally believed to have spotted the fire, it was animal trainer May Kovar that Duff remembers.

"I thought she yelled 'fight!'" remembered Duff, who said it took him a bit before realizing she was actually yelling "fire!"

The incident happened during a Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. The performance was attended by about 8,000 people that fateful afternoon.

Most of the people who perished were sitting near the wall where it started. That was where the Duffs tickets were for. "At the last minute, my mother went and changed the seats," Duff said, adding that they moved down to a better spot, from section 'C' down to 'E.' "If we hadn't changed seats, I wouldn't be here today."

"We happened to be right by a rail," Duff recalled. When Duff realized just what was happening, he flipped over the rail and he and his mother headed for a nearby side entrance used for animals. For this reason, Duff figures they beat the crowd out of the big top.

Most of what followed is a blur for Duff today.

"I remember screaming and everybody yelling," he said. "If you fell, you probably couldn't get up."

While he said that most people find it hard to believe today, Duff remembers running out



Wayne "Duffy" Duff

to a nearby cornfield. "We just kept on moving," Duff said, who said he didn't pay much attention to anything but fleeing.

Duff also figured, "If you fell, you probably couldn't get up," alluding to the many that were trampled. Fortunately, Duff not only made it out, but also never got separated from his mother. "I stayed right with her," Dorothea was a nurse, and she passed away in 1996.

Reportedly, the tent was coated with 1,800 pounds of paraffin and 6,000 gallons of gasoline in order to waterproof it. Within eight minutes of the fire's start, the tent was leveled.

In some areas of the tent, Duff said, people were trampled in piles three bodies thick, though some at the bottom were later found alive, while those above were killed by flaming paraffin. Time Magazine called it "the worst circus disaster in U.S. history."

Today, Duff lives in Portland with his wife, Marie, where he has spent his entire life. They have two daughters (one of whom lives in East Hampton) and four grandchildren.

Duff, who said he's "been a truck driver all my life," retired 12 years ago from Suzio Construction in Meriden. He now works for Logano Waste Management in Portland. In his spare time, Duff follows racing phenom Joey Logano. "Racing's my life," he said.

In 2002, a memorial was built at the site of the circus fire, to honor those who died. Duff has not yet visited the memorial.

Call today for a free estimate!

kwworks

al & Replacement LLC

umber For The Removal & Replacement
& Underground Fuel Tanks.

3348 or 800-652-3140