

BRIAN LANE AND WILFRED GREGG

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

MASS

MURDER

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In a civil action, the victims and relatives of the dead brought a case against the shopping mall owners for failing to provide a safe environment for their shoppers. Evidence was led that on several occasions before the shooting, she had visited the mall, making gestures and acting in a threatening manner. She had visited the McDonald's restaurant in San Ysidro, California, where **James Huberty** had killed twenty-one people. At the restaurant, she had intimated she would like to do the same thing in Springfield and pointed her finger like a gun while saying 'rat-tat-tat'. Lawyers for the mall owners contended that it was not practical for them to apply to have Sylvia Seegrism committed to a hospital and that even if she had been detained, she would not have been held very long. In addition, they claimed the only way to have prevented the shooting would have meant turning the mall into an armed camp. Nevertheless, in February 1990, the jury returned a verdict for the plaintiffs and awarded undisclosed damages.

SEGEE, Robert Dale In July 1944 the famous Ringling Brothers circus arrived with its brass bands, elephants, liberty horses, clowns and tumblers in the small town of Hartford, Connecticut. The big top mushroomed as if by magic, watched by an entranced audience of children of all ages. And when the huge tent had been erected the seating was installed in readiness for the first show scheduled for 6 July. By early afternoon queues were forming, and soon the crowds of children, parents and grandparents were settling into their seats in anticipation of the spectacle to come.

At around 2.30, after the orchestra had blasted out the overture and the eyes of the audience were straining upwards to catch every daring and dangerous movement of the trapeze act, a sinister figure huddled in the shadows was starting a fire against the canvas wall of the big top. The heavy material might have proved difficult to ignite, but in compliance with local regulations it had been coated with paraffin wax to ensure it was waterproof. A few moments later there was a shrill cry of 'Fire! Fire!', and the audience, circus hands and performers watched with

amazement as they saw a flame flickering upwards near the main entrance. At first there was little concern, it seemed to be a small enough fire, and surely somebody was attending to it . . . Suddenly there was a strong gust of wind, a fury that set the big top billowing and flapping, and fanned the fire into a sudden burst, igniting the wax coating and sending strips of blazing canvas snaking down on the shrieking audience. Now the crowd was on its feet, scurrying blindly for the steel runway which served as the exit; on the runway the panicking mass of desperate bodies jammed themselves to a standstill, a crowd so dense it was impossible to move, impossible now even to breathe. Flaming debris continued to rain down, setting alight hair and clothing . . .

Within five minutes of the fire being lit 169 people were dead, either as a direct result of the inferno or by crush asphyxia in the attempt to escape it. More than 250 more were ferried to hospital for emergency treatment, many of them suffering from serious injuries.

Although the police suspected arson there were no early indications of a likely suspect, and the investigation was not helped by the fact that many of the circus hands were casual employees who moved around the country never staying too long with any one circus. It was not until six years later, when detectives were running a cross-check on all suspected cases of arson in which any of the circus hands employed on the fateful day at Hartford appeared, that they came up with a name – Robert Dale Segee, called 'Little Bob'. Enquiries indicated that Segee was a morose individual who nursed a growing hatred of people he thought were, in his own phrase, 'treating him as no account'. In June 1950 he was traced to Ohio and taken in for questioning. Segee admitted he was responsible for the circus fire and that he had also started a few more. And just for good measure Little Bob laid claim to an impressive list of other homicides – a young girl in 1938, a nightwatchman who had tried to stop him lighting a fire in Portland, Maine, in 1943, and two young boys, one in Portland and one in Japan while he had been serving with the army. Segee claimed that

for years he had been haunted by nightmares in which he was told he must start fires.

Although there was little enough evidence on which to indict **Robert Segee** on any of the crimes to which he was prepared to admit, he was eventually charged with ten counts of arson. Certified fit to stand trial, Segee pleaded guilty and on 4 November 1950 was sentenced to two separate terms of two to twenty years' imprisonment.

SHEARING, David William On 6 August 1982, two families met up at the Wells Gray Provincial Park campsite near Clearwater, British Columbia. George Bentley and his wife Edith had been eagerly looking forward to meeting their daughter, Jacqueline Johnson, her husband Richard and, most of all, their grandchildren, eleven-year-old Karen and thirteen-year-old Janet. The Johnsons arrived by car and the Bentleys in their 1981 red and silver Ford camper van, with a boat and outboard motor strapped to the roof.

They were never seen alive again, and a widespread search of the wilderness area failed to uncover any clue until 13 September, when the Johnsons' car was found burned out some way outside the park area; inside the vehicle were the charred remains of Mr and Mrs Bentley and the four Johnsons, though their bodies were so badly burned that they could only be identified from dental records. Subsequent post-mortem examination established that several of the victims had been shot before the car was set ablaze.

At this stage in the investigation the Bentleys' camper was still missing, and when the police were informed that two French-speaking men had been seen driving a similar vehicle in the area, they initiated a country-wide search. Police officers staged a televised reconstruction, and even had a team of men drive a similar camper across Canada in an attempt to find witnesses. However, it was not until October 1983 that any trace was found of the camper. Two forestry workers reported finding the vehicle, burned-out like the Johnsons', in a ravine about twenty miles from where the victims had been found. This effectively narrowed