

underneath the southwest bleacher seats until about 2:15 p.m. and then left the area and went to the northwest bleachers, checking the jacks along his way to the animal runway at the northwest exit. Cook's fellow seat man under the west end bleachers, William "Red" Caley, a muscular former coal miner, left his post under the southwest bleachers a few minutes later and joined Cook at the northwest animal runway. Part of their job as seat men was to watch the seating support jacks when the prop men broke down and removed the steel animal runway that was next to the bleacher section that they patrolled, and Caley thought that Cook might be too inexperienced to handle the task. One false move by the men removing the runways, and a displaced jack could violently upset the patrons seated above. Caley advised him to go back to the southwest bleachers, but Cook stayed to assist with watching when the runways were removed.

At about 2:40 p.m., Ringling usher Kenneth "Shick" Gwinnell first noticed the fire to his right as he was facing the reserved seats on the south side of the big top. The fire was about five feet off the ground on the canvas sidewall of the big top and behind the middle of the bleachers full of seated patrons. The ground was not on fire, just a patch of the sidewall at this time. He ran to fellow usher Mike "Dare" D'addario, who was on the track in front of his section, the southwest bleachers. When D'addario heard Gwinnell holler to him, he saw the fire climbing the sidewall behind his section, and the two ran under the bleachers and were joined by usher Louis Runyan, who had been stationed at the northwest bleachers. The three ushers each grabbed one of the four-gallon buckets of water under the seats, marked "For Fire Only," and D'addario tossed the water onto the burning sidewall canvas. Runyan tried to pull the sidewall down, but it was installed tightly to the roof canvas in this location, with the open-top men's toilet enclosure directly on the other side of this sidewall. By this time, the fire was ten feet up the sidewall, and in the seconds it took Gwinnell to get a fourth bucket of water, the flames reached the canvas roof of the tent and began to spread. The firefighting ushers realized that this fire was not going to be stopped with the equipment at hand, and they immediately resorted to getting the patrons out of the big top.

As the animal act in the first ring finished, May Kovar ushered her big cats into the runway. Seat men Caley and Cook, under the northwest bleachers watching the animals go through the runway, heard screams and what sounded like a stampede above them. Thinking an animal had gotten loose, they went out into the arena and saw the fire on the roof of the big top, right above the other section of bleachers that they were responsible for watching.