

BLAZE AT THE BIG TOP: Woman recalls horror of 1944 Hartford, Conn., circus fire



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As the crowd rushed from the blazing circus tent, 10-year-old Catriona Sieracki stood frozen at the edge of the grandstand.

She knew her only chance to make it out of the inferno alive was to jump from the bleachers onto the lions' cage, then get to the ground and dash for daylight.

But she couldn't muster the courage to leap.

A man who had been sitting next to her as the Flying Wallendas performed their death-defying stunt act — before the fire broke out — now stood

behind Sieracki as the audience flocked toward the exits.

"I just remember he gave me a push," she said. That forced her to hop down and escape the tent before it was fully engulfed.

Sixty-eight years later, Sieracki said she never learned the man's name and doesn't know what became of him. But she recalls many details of the historic blaze, which occurred on July 6, 1944, in Hartford, Conn., and claimed the lives of almost 170 people.

As she sat near several heat-damaged folding chairs that were recovered from the Hartford fire — now kept at Circus World's Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center in Baraboo — Sieracki described her experience during what is known as the worst tragedy in circus history.

Sieracki's tale of survival will soon become part of the historic record following a recorded interview with Circus World staff.

Stars and Stripes

Now 78 years old and living in Manitowoc, Sieracki's memory of that fateful day is remarkably vivid.

Over the years, she has told her version of events to friends and family in details so specific that when her son, Carl, finally saw a home camera's grainy footage of the fire, it was exactly as he imagined.

"It was as if I had seen it before, because it was so well-described," Carl said.

The 10-year-old Catriona — along with her mother and cousin — traveled from their home in

the nearby city of New Britain to Hartford that hot summer day to see the Ringling Brothers Circus.

As she sat in the grandstand, Sieracki said, she saw fire streak across the opposite side of the tent. One of the Wallendas was on his way up to perform a stunt, she said, but began to descend as soon as he saw trouble.

Sieracki recalls the circus band began to play “Stars and Stripes Forever” — known as the circus disaster march — as her mother guided her out of the tent, which was the size of two football fields.

Circus World ringmaster David SaLoutos, who has researched the Hartford fire, said the band’s song switch was a circus tradition designed to alert staff to a problem without sending the audience into a panic.

“It’s the one piece every musician knows by heart,” he said.

Circus World’s library contains a piece of singed sheet music that was on the band leader’s music stand when the fire started.

‘Smoldering ashes’

Once outside in the hot sun, Catriona and her cousin were ordered to run about 400 feet from the tent and take cover in some bushes. Once her mother gave permission, they returned to the scene.

“We walked back,” Catriona said, recalling the sound of sirens. “There was nothing left but smoldering ashes... I just remember seeing the piles of ashes and it was still burning and hot.”

Catriona’s mother searched for a phone to call her husband. But in those days, when an emergency occurred, phone lines were occupied by first responders. She couldn’t get through.

Eventually, they drove to a nearby town to call him.

After taking the children home, Catriona’s mother — a trained Red Cross aide — went back to the scene to help victims. More than 700 people were injured in the blaze.

Five Ringling Brothers executives and employees were charged with involuntary manslaughter. Four were convicted but later pardoned. The circus paid nearly \$5 million in claims to the victims and their families.

‘He saw a red man’

The Ringling Brothers’ tent had been coated with a flammable solution that was intended to protect it from rain. To matters worse, fire extinguishers that ordinarily were brought into the tent were left in the circus train that day.

Although most agree it was this unfortunate combination that allowed the fire to spread rapidly, the origin of the blaze has remained in doubt for the past 68 years.

Robert Dale Segee, a deranged former circus employee, confessed in 1950 that he had set the fire. A convicted arsonist, Segee said he unconsciously lit the tent after he experienced a nightmare.

“He saw a red man, and the red man would tell him to do things,” Circus World archivist Pete Shrake said.

Segee later recanted his confession. He was convicted of separate arson charges in Ohio, but never was proven guilty of setting the Hartford fire. Investigators doubted his confession because of his mental illness.

A sense of gratitude

Catriona knew of a handful of people from her hometown who were killed in the Hartford fire, including a little boy who she described as “cute” and has never forgotten.

For years, certain events triggered her memory of the fire, including a circus in another town years later.

“When I walked into that tent, even though it was in a different town, it brought back all sorts of memories,” she said as she recalled a light that started to burn during that performance. “I was almost out of my seat when I saw that, but nothing happened.”

In the days leading up to the Hartford fire, Catriona had learned to play a song on the piano that was stuck in her head that day. To this day, the jingle makes her sick to her stomach.

Although many of her memories from that day are unsettling, Catriona remembers the man who nudged her from the grandstands with a sense of gratitude.

“Whoever he is, thank you,” she said.

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