

REMEMBERING

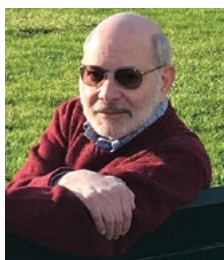
THE HARTFORD CIRCUS FIRE OF 1944

Photos: All photos provided courtesy of the Connecticut Historical Society



Smoke Billowing from Tent
Photographed by Ralph L. Emerson. 2003.108.1

It was an oppressively hot and humid day in Hartford, Connecticut that Thursday, July 6, 1944, one month after D-day. Eleven-year-old Maureen Krekian remembered it well in a National Public Radio interview. She was going to a matinee show of the traveling Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus which had arrived in Hartford only the day before. Maureen had planned to go with her neighbor and her daughter, but when she knocked on their door, no one was home. So Maureen went by herself. Legendary trapeze artists, the Great Wallendas, were performing on the high wire when Maureen noticed a ball of flame getting bigger and bigger. The tent canvas had been coated with paraffin wax thinned with gasoline to keep it waterproof, a common practice at the time.



 Bill Curtis

Melted paraffin and blazing patches of tent rained onto panicked spectators. Two exits were blocked by metal chutes used to transport animals to their cages. No firefighters were on the scene, and fire extinguishers not readily available; they were still in the train cars. Ushers and circus employees vainly poured buckets of waters on the fire, but in fewer than ten minutes,

the huge tent was engulfed in flame. The fire burned through ropes which held up the supporting posts, and the tent collapsed trapping many who had failed to escape. A young man slit the tent with his pocketknife

and pulled Maureen to safety. 168 people died that day or later and hundreds were badly burned; the precise number is not known.

Most of the injured were taken to Municipal Hospital, others to Hartford Hospital. The dead were loaded on National Guard or impounded trucks and brought to the state armory where they were separated by age and sex for viewing and identification. In some instances, dental charts had to be consulted to identify a body burned beyond recognition.

How did the fire start? No one knows for sure. Some believe Robert Dale Segee, a fourteen-year-old who had run away and joined the circus, was the one who started it. Segee had a history of arson, and under intense cross-examination, he initially confessed but later retracted his confession. Segee was never tried. Others believe the cause of the fire may have been a carelessly tossed cigarette. In 1993, Connecticut State Police reopened the investigation to the cause of the fire and dismissed the notion that a lit cigarette



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Onlookers watch the burning tent
 Photographed by Helen Tobacco, 2005.173.7



People examine debris and damage
 Photographed by James B. Hoye, 1988.134.3-O

dropped on dry grass alone could have ignited the blaze. The report's official conclusion was "the exact ignition source was undetermined."

Six employees of Ringling Bros. were indicted for involuntary manslaughter. One had his sentence revoked. The others spent time in prison and all five returned to the circus afterwards. Ringling Bros. officials accepted full financial responsibility for the disaster and paid out nearly five million dollars in financial damages to victims and their families over a period of ten years. The fire led to the implementation of strict state regulations—flame-retardant canvas, seat free aisles, and fire department always on standby—that served as a model for nationwide standards for circuses and carnivals. A memorial to the victims was erected in Hartford at the site of the fire and dedicated on July 6, 2005, 61 years after the catastrophic Circus Fire of 1944.



Tent Collapsing in Flames
 Photographer unknown, 2011.216.2

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