

Charles Nelson Reilly - who grew up to be a famous actor, comedian, director and drama teacher - was attending the Ringling Bros. circus, in Hartford, on the day the big top burned to the ground.

Thereafter, for the rest of his life, he could never sit in a large audience because the memories of July 6, 1944, remained too painful for him.

In this clip—from his lengthy, one-man show, entitled "Save it for the Stage: The Life of Reilly"—he relates what happened that day as he, and a childhood friend, went to the circus in their hometown.

Other individuals who lived through the fire have memories, too, and some have shared their stories via the "[Circus Fire 1944](#)" website. Hereafter are a few excerpts from some of those sources.

The first is a story about a young boy who later became a priest. He was saved by an unknown person:

This is not my story. But it happened to a priest I lived with. Unfortunately, he has Alzheimer's and wouldn't be able to tell it himself.

His name is Arthur Joseph Payne and he was at the circus with his younger brother. He just turned ten on 1 June, 1944. He said everybody ran when the fire caught the top canvas. Chairs were all over the place. He was trapped in the crush up against the stairs over the big cats runway. Then somebody, he doesn't know who, lifted him up over the stairs and the next thing he knew he was standing out in the field. He was separated from his brother, who also escaped. The family didn't find him until later that day.

When the 50th Anniversary came, a book was published about the fire. Joe bought the book. He was telling me about it, when he admitted that he was there that day. He said he hadn't spoken about it ever, the memories were pretty well suppressed. The book brought a lot back. He showed the book to his brother. He asked him about what happened to him that day, and his brother wouldn't speak about it, even over the distance of 50 years.

... I thought someone should tell the story. There were a lot of 10-year old and 7-year old kids traumatized that day. This is the story of 2 of them.



The circus is always an event which attracts children. Many children were watching the circus on the day the fire erupted:

I survived the circus fire, thanks to (probably) the same good Samaritan that lifted Father Payne over the animal cage tunnel—He lifted me over also and I was able to escape. I was told later that he was a reporter from The Hartford Times, and that, after helping literally hundreds to safety over that barrier, he died in the fire. I was 12 at the time, and I had gone to the circus with our neighbors...

Even the memories of a six-year-old run deep:

I went to the circus with my mother (Mary) and my grandmother (Ada). Ada was supposed to go home to Norwich Connecticut but stayed an extra day to take me to the circus. She turned out to be a victim. I was 6 years old and will never forget that day or the days that followed.

We were watching the trapeze act and the lion and tigers who were in the center ring when the fire broke out. The wild animals were rushed out so the array of cages could be removed. The trapeze group were down on the ground very quickly. People started going down the bleachers throwing chairs left and right as they went when I got my leg caught and someone fell on me. My mother had turned around and grabbed and pulled me to safety... The heat inside the tent was so severe that although we were not exposed to flames we were burnt over our body.



Another survivor, who was six years old, credits her Aunt's calmness and quick-thinking for saving lives:

... I was almost 6 years old when I attended the fire with my Aunt ... and two cousins. We were watching the high wire act and we saw a huge orange flash that we thought was part of the show. We were saying "Oooh." Then people were yelling "Fire."

Fortunately, we were not seated very high and not far from an exit. My Aunt ... kept us calm, told us to hold hands, just walk-not run, and not to look back. We were able to walk out safely. People were screaming in the background.

We did look back after we were safe and saw the billowing smoke and the tent collapsing ... I will never forget that terrible event. I still consider my Aunt ... my hero. If it weren't for her calm care, we may not have survived.

The Hartford Circus Fire remains the worst-circus disaster in American history.

Credits:

Clip from "The Life of Reilly," online via YouTube. See the web site of Charles Nelson Reilly to [order the entire performance](#). Copyright, Estate of Charles Nelson Reilly, all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the production.

Images, supplied by Henry J. Hallock Sr. via "[Circus Fire 1944](#)" website.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Charles-Nelson-Reilly-Hartford-Fire>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Charles-Nelson-Reilly-Hartford-Fire>

Media Stream



Hartford Circus Fire

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Hartford Circus Fire Black Smoke

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