

0. GREAT CIRCUS DISASTERS - Story Preface

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One of America's greatest fire disasters occurred on July 6, 1944 in Hartford, Connecticut. When the fire started, it spread incredibly fast throughout a large traveling tent known as a "big top." The tent, depicted in this 1906 photograph, shows how such a "big top" appears when all is well. Image online, U.S. National Archives.

In Water for Elephants, Jacob Jankowski recalls the great Benzini Brothers circus disaster. Keep in mind ... the telling of that tale is just a story.

However ... history includes other fact-based circus disasters. Let's examine two of them.

Hartford Circus Fire, 1944. It was a hot afternoon when thousands of people entered the big-top tent in Hartford. One month after Allied troops had stormed the Normandy beaches in France, an audience was assembling for a Ringling Brothers circus show on the 6th of July, 1944.

The tent - 550 feet long and 250 feet wide - could accommodate 12,000 people and was roughly half-full. Its canvas top had been waterproofed with 6,000 gallons of gasoline and 18,000 pounds of paraffin.

Suddenly, the bandleader - Merle Evans - noticed something unusual. Why was he seeing fire? Immediately switching to a different tune, he alerted circus employees with "Stars and Stripes Forever" - the song they knew meant "emergency!"

With gas and paraffin fueling the flames, the crowd of roughly 6,800 people had little time to react. Many could not get out in time, and the main exit - blocked by a caged runway for the wild animal show - was of little use.

Some people were trampled, then burned, in the panic. The canvas tent - whose roof burned in less than a minute - seemed to evaporate in the intensely burning fire. Within ten minutes, the entire tent was destroyed.

The disaster was the worst in American-circus history, claiming at least 168 lives - two-thirds of them children - and injuring at least 484 others. Parents were overwhelmed with stunned grief as they tried to identify remains at the Connecticut State Armory.

About a third of the bodies were identified by dental records. Some could not be identified, such as a small girl who became known as Little Miss 1565. (Decades later, a new investigation revealed the fire's likely cause - arson - and the likely identify of the child - Eleanor Cook.)

Charles Nelson Reilly, later a famous actor, was in the circus tent that day. His one-man performance, "The Life of Reilly," contains a moving clip about his memories of the Hartford fire.

A disastrous accident also claimed the lives of 86 circus employees during the summer of 1918. This time, a train was involved.

The Great Circus Train Wreck of 1918. Employees of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus were scheduled to give the children of Hammond, Indiana a thrill when they rolled into town on June 22, 1918. America was at war, but families along the Lake Michigan shoreline would have a day of fun.

Asleep in wooden rail cars, which were lit with kerosene lamps, hundreds of circus workers and performers were stopped in their train. Signalmen, working for the railroad, directed other trains throughout the night.

Meanwhile ... an empty troop train was on its way from Kalamazoo, Michigan to Chicago. The engineer in charge was tired. After eating heavy meals, and operating on insufficient sleep, he opened the window of his locomotive. It didn't help to keep him awake.

Not seeing the signals directing him to take a different track, because he had fallen asleep, the engineer plowed into the stopped circus train.

After the initial impact, fire consumed the wooden rail cars with their kerosene lamps, causing a scene of utter devastation. Eighty-six circus employees died and more than two hundred more were injured. Some of the dead could not be identified and many were buried in a mass grave at the Showmen's Rest section of Woodlawn Cemetery in Chicago.

Circus performers, and their animals, are no longer summer visitors, regularly parading through American towns. The circus itself is no longer considered the "greatest show on earth," performed by the "greatest entertainment industry in the world."

But ... don't tell that to all the children who still long to watch all the excitement. And ... don't tell that to their parents (and grandparents) who still miss hearing that "the circus is coming to town!"

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/GREAT-CIRCUS-DISASTERS-Water-for-Elephants>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/GREAT-CIRCUS-DISASTERS-Water-for-Elephants>

Media Stream



Merle Evans and the Great Circus Disaster

Photo of Merle Evans online, courtesy University of Maryland.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Merle-Evans-and-the-Great-Circus-Disaster1>



Hartford Circus Fire - Smoke at the Tent

Photo of Hartford Circus Fire, 1944, at the beginning stage of the blaze. Online, courtesy Library of Congress.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Hartford-Circus-Fire-Smoke-at-the-Tent1>



Hartford Circus Fire - The Big Top Burns

Image of the 1944 Hartford circus-tent fire, online courtesy National Archives.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Hartford-Circus-Fire-The-Big-Top-Burns1>



Hartford Circus Fire - Soldiers Help Children Escape

Image of Hartford Circus fire, online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Hartford-Circus-Fire-Soldiers-Help-Children-Escape0>



Helping Others versus Every Man for Himself

Image of Hartford circus fire, online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Helping-Others-versus-Every-Man-for-Himself1>



Hartford Circus Fire - Funeral of Children

Photo online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Hartford-Circus-Fire-Funeral-of-Children>



Hartford Circus Fire - Aftermath at the Armory

Photo online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Hartford-Circus-Fire-Aftermath-at-the-Armory>



Hartford Circus Disaster - Caring for the Dead

Photo online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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Great Circus Train Wreck of 1918

Photo online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Great-Circus-Train-Wreck-of-1918>



Hartford Circus Disaster - Burning Roof

Video clip of the 1944 Hartford Circus fire, online courtesy CircusFire1944 Channel at YouTube.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Hartford-Circus-Disaster-Burning-Roof>



Hartford Circus Disaster - Newsreel Footage

Historical footage online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Hartford-Circus-Disaster-Newsreel-Footage>



Hartford Circus Disaster - Identifying Remains

Historical footage, following the Great Circus Fire in Hartford (which occurred on July 6, 1944), online courtesy U.S. National Archives.

PD

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Hartford-Circus-Disaster-Identifying-Remains>



Charles Nelson Reilly - Recalling the Hartford Circus Fire

Clip from "The Life of Reilly," online courtesy 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. View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Charles-Nelson-Reilly-Recalling-the-Hartford-Circus-Fire0>



Water for Elephants - Trailer

Trailer, *Water for Elephants*, online courtesy YouTube.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Water-for-Elephants-Trailer>



Benzini Bros. Circus Disaster - Interviews

Video clip of interview with Witherspoon, Pattinson and Waltz, online courtesy YouTube.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Benzini-Bros.-Circus-Disaster-Interviews>



Water for Elephants - Audio Clip

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