

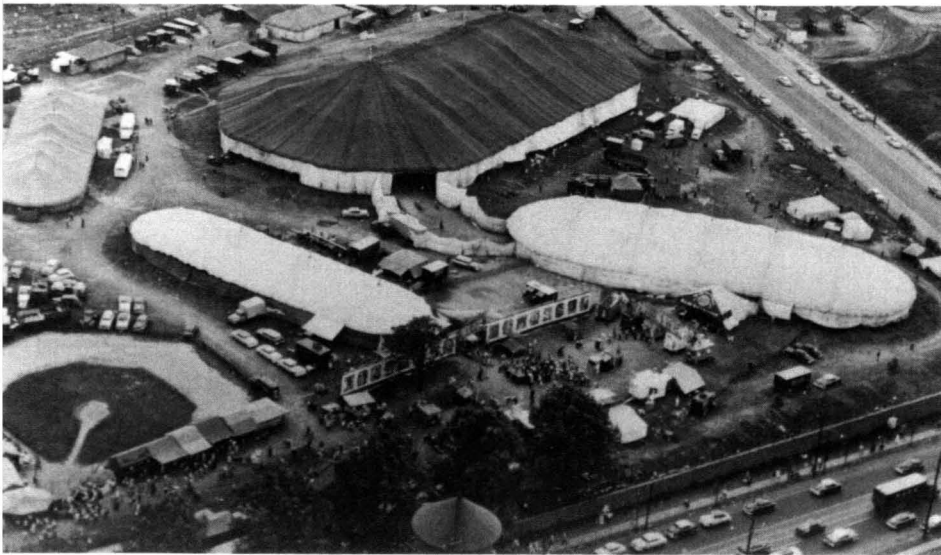
The Last Big Top

by James C. Reynolds

TODAY'S YOUTH have more knowledge of the world's wildlife than most turn-of-the-century intellectuals acquired in a lifetime of study. Yet only a generation ago, live elephants, lions and tigers were an awe-inspiring sight to the farm children who made up most of America's families.

The average American adult for that matter knew little

about the world. This is only one reason among many that the circus — under the “Big Top” — was a popular family event, a source of great wonder, and in many ways, of education. How many people had ever seen a gorilla until Gargantua came along, or a giraffe, unless one had visited a large zoo?



The last show under Ringling Brothers' "Big Bertha" big tent took place in suburban Pittsburgh in 1956. Opposite: Cover of circus program during its last season under the big tent.

The golden age of the circus stretched from the 1920s to the 1940s. The giants in the business were Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey, A.G. Barnes, Sells Foto, Hagenback Wallace, and Clyde Beatty. Most possessed marvelous entertainers: Mable Stark and her tigers; May Wirth delicately hanging in mid-air; the dazzling flying Alfred Cordona; the sad face of Emmett Kelly; the antics of Lou Jacobs and

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RINGLING BROS and BARNUM & BAILEY



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STORIES • FEATURES • PHOTOS • COMICS

Felix Adler; the death-defying Wallendas; the style of ringmaster Fred Branda; the magnetism of Gargantua the Great or Jumbo the Elephant.

Oh, the circus still continues, with a handful of small traveling tent shows that give us a mini-glimpse of the fun it used to be, and Ringling Bros. continues, but no longer as a tent show.

They've even replaced the brassy, wonderful circus band with strings and muted brass. Merle Evans, bandmaster for Ringling Bros., must be turning over in his grave. Circus music was as much a part of the show as the acts, and was never duplicated by any other type of music. Today cassette tapes often provide the tunes on the loudspeakers.

Before recounting the famous last show of the big top, held in Pittsburgh and chronicled in numerous histories of the circus and periodicals of the day, return with me, just for the fun of it through the mist of time, and relive those wonderful childhood memories of when the circus came to town...

It's 1946, the war is over, the country is striving to reacquire itself with peace. Most families do not have a car. Movies and radio are the only available entertainment. Summer days for a young child are long, hot, and filled with games and daydreams of cowboys and Indians.

Suddenly, magically, one morning all over town circus posters appear. Where did they come from? They seem to be in every store — colorful clowns, gigantic elephants, growling tigers, and beautiful ladies. For weeks, all you and your friends talk about is the upcoming big event. What fun it will be. What excitement. You can barely sit still. It's the day before the big day, and you can hardly breathe when you go to bed that night.

Finally, in the murky light of dawn, you hear the train whistle blow and the sound of the huge engines chugging to a steamy halt. You fly into your clothes and hurry to the train yard to witness an unforgettable scene.

The boxcar doors are already open and beautiful horses are being led out by sweating, shouting, burly men. The gray

morning light is punctuated by the roars of the big cats, the screeches of birds, camel grunts, and chattering chimps. Then, suddenly silhouetted against the sky, come the great elephants. They power toward their appointed places, secure in their strength.

The cook tent is already up, and as you roam the grounds, you smell the delicious aroma of hot coffee and sizzling eggs and bacon. If you're lucky, you might even be chosen to water the elephants and receive a free pass, but really, it's much more fun to try to sneak under the tent. Eventually you wander to the open field and stare in amazement at the great spectacle of hundreds of men working in perfect unison to raise the big top. Four men to a group, they swing huge sledgehammers, driving in their stakes in a matter of seconds, the musical sound of their blows ringing in the air while heaving, groaning workers pull the massive ropes which bring the big tent erect and give it life.

By the time you get home, you've already had enough thrills to last for the summer. You can hardly wait for the evening performance, but finally it arrives, and you and your family head back to the grounds. Your eyes can scarcely believe the lot, transformed into a glittering fairyland of brilliant multi-colored lights and huge heaving tents beckoning you to enter.

The show was all you had expected. You decided then and there that when you grew up, you would be a clown. But then the glorious trapeze artist flew effortlessly through the air and you changed your mind. Then came the bareback riders, the jugglers, and acrobats to again and again confuse your choice. Finally you decide to be a daring lion-tamer and you stride into the steel cage subduing the lions, tigers, and leopards. When your parents carried you home that night, you dreamt only of adventure.

But the strongest image, the most vivid of the memories, was the tent — the huge, domineering tent that seemed to become a living, breathing giant with its own personality. It represented the very essence of this magical experience.

In 1956, the tent measured 206 feet by 386 feet and generally



seated 8,000 to 10,000 people. Ten acres of land or more were required, and of course it had to be level. It couldn't be too sandy or a filled-in dump that might cause disaster in a heavy rain. It had to be close to railroad tracks since the circus generally traveled by rail, water had to be available nearby, open spaces were needed for heavy equipment to operate, and it should be convenient to bus and streetcar lines.

Many major cities were bypassed over the years because such lots became increasingly hard to locate due to suburban expansion. Years earlier, circus visionary Otto Ringling had suggested the circus should purchase lots to assure a venue each year; it is interesting to speculate on the value of such holdings today if his idea had been heeded.

After every detail of the lot was checked by an employee known as the "24-hour man," the first section of the circus would arrive in early morning darkness. Every pole, stake, and piece of canvas was laid out. The center poles, the 62-foot-tall spine of the big tent, were located first. Iron pins with white ribbons were driven into the ground at the exact spots where the poles would stand. Then, with tape measure, lines were marked off at right angles to the line of center poles. The ends of these lines were equal distances from the center poles, and blue-tagged iron pegs marked the locations at the end of each line for the stake-driving crew. Iron pegs with red ribbons marked where the main pole guy wires were staked out.

In years past, one of the most intriguing sights of watching the circus tents erected was the sledge gangs driving stakes.

One reporter noted that "sledge gangs work with the precision of automations, one sledge stroke following that of the next by a fraction of a second, all the sledges constantly swinging and yet it seldom happens that one is caught by its successor. A remarkable performance, when it is considered that the strokes come with a rapidity that sounds like stick scraped along a picket fence. In a very short space of time a forest of iron bound stakes rears" its head.

This method of driving stakes eventually gave way completely to mechanical drivers. The removal of stakes from the ground is done by a hydraulically operated beam on the rear of a tractor. The beam, to which a chain is fastened, is lowered over the stake. The chain is looped around the stake and the beam is then raised, pulling the stake from the ground. This operation is faster than the old two-wheeled, hand-operated stake pullers.

Once the 5-foot-long stakes were driven approximately 3 feet into the ground, and the main poles were up and guyed out, the crew laid the quarter poles on the ground. The quarter poles encircled the center poles in two lines. Some 20 poles 47 feet long formed an inner circle and 34 poles 37 feet long formed an outer circle. The hippodrome tract was outlined between the two rows of quarter poles. The sidewall poles were then spotted. More than 100 of them, each 17 feet long, held up the outer edge of canvas.

The tent, in the form of huge bales of canvas, was unloaded from trucks and laid on the ground, unrolled, and laced together into one gigantic piece. The sidewall poles were thrust into sockets around the edge of the canvas and pushed into vertical position. The big tent then resembled a huge saucer. By winch power on a jeep, the canvas was slowly raised or pulled up the main poles. When the canvas reached approximately the halfway point, the quarter poles were partly positioned; then they were permanently positioned when the huge canvas reached the top of the main poles. "Heave it, weave it, shake it,

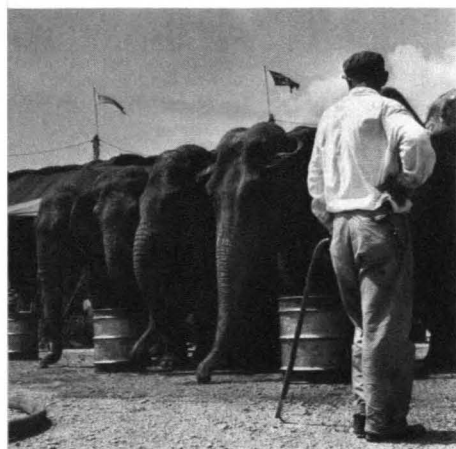
take it, break it, make it. Move along." Such was the chant of the gang boss who directed the tightening of the guy ropes around the tent. He chanted in a rhythm timed to coordinate a concerted pull on the rope by 12 or 15 husky crew



A photograph collage in a local (though unidentified) newspaper depicts the last big tent circus. Above: sledge gangs set up shop, 1951.

members. On the last intonation, "make it," the half hitch on the stake was shoved down on the stake as far as it would go. When this crew had encircled the tent and taken up the slack on some 600 guy ropes, the boss canvasman knew his big top was secure.

Ringling used 60 to 70 miles of rope on the great show under canvas. There was tent rope for raising and holding the tents, bolt rope for edging canvas, general purpose rope for tackle, and yacht manila or hemp ropes where softness and extreme smoothness were required for trapeze use, etc. In the tent itself 75,000 yards of canvas was used, and this replaced every year. The roof was a strong blue twill, while the sidewalls were a tightly woven white twill. It was the finest flame-resistant canvas available. When dry, the big top weighed 20 tons, but after a few days of rain it weighed 3 1/2 times as much, which added tremendously to the complications of moving it.



Watering the elephants, Heidelberg, Pa., June 1951. Opposite: famous clown Emmett Kelly.

This magnificent spectacle and accomplishment of precision and skill was so unique that during the late 1930s, U.S. military commanders observed and studied this operation to improve military movements. Gen. George S. Patton stated that many of his famous speed maneuvers and quick attacks were based on studies of how quickly the massive circus could dismantle and reassemble.

But all of this skill and knowledge came to a sudden startling stop in Pittsburgh when, because of many different factors, it was decided

to strike the big top once and for all. The year was 1956.

That season saw the show attacked from the opening day by labor and union troubles, high costs of operation, a blow-down during a storm, continual accidents, and even an elephant stampede. Along with these problems was an acute shortage of older employees who knew how to keep the show rolling. By the middle of July, the circus was several million dollars in debt.

It was amid rumor and fearful speculation that "Big Bertha," as the tent was called, was raised July 16, 1956, on a drab parking lot of the old Heidelberg Raceway in suburban Pittsburgh. Late that morning, John Ringling North made a terse announcement

that the evening performance would be the last ever under the big top. It immediately became front-page news across the nation.

That night, a huge crowd of 10,000 filled the tent. Emmett Kelly, the beloved clown whose circus notoriety also provided him a brief film career, was there, as always chewing on his lettuce and sweeping the spotlight away with his broom. The famed balanced *Unus* was on hand balancing his body on one finger. Also featured were Capt. Konyot and his wild animal act, the acrobatic Nocks Trio from Switzerland, the Flying Palacios, 14 European acts, and the lovely Pinto del Oror, who read a newspaper while doing a handstand on a free-flying trapeze with no net. Of course, there were dozens of mirthful clowns and 200 tons of "Ponderous Performing Pachyderms."

The performers were said to have given a little extra that night. The opening spectacle featured all 700 of the company in their beautiful costumes, along with more than 60 bedecked horses and 50 elephants. All evening, the fliers flew more daringly, the equestrians were more graceful, and the women never lovelier. One could almost believe the ghosts of the seven Ringling Brothers, P.T., and James Bailey were somehow watching over the farewell.

Late in the evening, the entire company assembled and the band struck up "Auld Lang Syne." There wasn't a dry eye in the tent, as the funny old clowns and the beautiful young circus ladies joined in. The Layolas Family members buried their faces in their horses' necks, and the faces of hardened roustabouts and razor-backs were streaked with tears. A photographer from *Life* captured some of the agony with shots to be featured across the country.

At 11:15 p.m. July 16, 1956, the big top came down for the last time.

The nation's press mourned the passing. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* perhaps said it best: "Future generations of children will never know the real circus, the magic and the thrill of greeting it at dawn, the sideshow, the managerie, the walk through the sawdust." Cy Hungerford ran an editorial cartoon showing Uncle Sam with hat in hand and tears streaming down his face as he stood before a grave stone inscribed with the Ringling Brothers name.

Although the circus continues and is now prospering, it has never really been the same. Cold, sterile halls and buildings, and huge arenas can never recapture the warmth, the togetherness, and the magic that were the tent show. It was a unique form of American entertainment that was lost forever on a warm summer night in Pittsburgh. ❁

