



*Circus  
Fire  
Reminiscences*

## INTRODUCTION

Stewart O’Nan’s The Circus Fire was chosen as this year’s focus by the Town of Manchester’s “One Book, One Village” project. One aspect of that project was the collection of oral histories from area residents who expressed a willingness to share their memories of July 6, 1944, the date of the Hartford Circus Fire.

Most of the participants were interviewed at the Whiton Memorial Branch where their stories were recorded along with their photographs. Others shared their memories in telephone interviews or submitted written accounts of their recollections. These recordings and written summaries will be archived at the library for future generations. Appreciation is extended to all those participants who so graciously took the time to speak with us and to share their often painful memories.

What follows are summaries of the stories of thirty-nine people who actually survived the tragedy or whose lives were, in some other way, deeply affected by the Hartford Circus Fire. They reflect the terror, the poignancy, the relief, the heroism, the sadness connected to that horrific event.

Lynette Wozick Angel was born in Hartford on JANUARY 14, 1944. At the time of the shooting she was living with her parents in West Hartford and worked at G. Fox & Co. where she worked in the window display department located at Hartford's Main Street.

In the early afternoon of July 6, 1964 she and her co-workers began hearing sirens and watching as fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars raced north on Main toward Hartford Street. They had no idea what was going on, but when they saw the fire trucks and ambulances they knew something was wrong. The only thing we were told it was a fire.

# IN PERSON INTERVIEWS

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## Lynette Angel

Lynette Wenick Angel was born in Hartford on 7/22/24. At the time of the circus fire she lived with her parents in West Hartford and worked at G. Fox & Co. where the windows of her department faced Hartford's Main Street.

In the early afternoon of July 6, 1944 she and her co-workers began hearing sirens and watching as fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars raced north on Main toward Barbour Street. They had no idea what had happened, but with the war on, they feared the worst. "The only thing we were thankful for was we didn't hear airplanes. All we heard was on the ground." An announcement was made over the store's loudspeaker to not use the telephones. "After awhile we were told it was a fire under the circus tent."

At that time, Lynette's father owned an antique business on Mulberry Street. He was upset because the upstairs tenant and her two young children had gone to the circus. She came home with only her daughter, having lost her eight year old son in the chaos. There was great relief at about 8 pm that evening when the little boy was brought home unharmed, probably by a police officer. He had managed to escape the circus tent by crawling out through the animal run and he wandered lost on the grounds until someone found him and took him to his mother.

Lynette had a close friend, who was called "Rusty" because of her red hair. Lynette and her older sister were planning to go to the shore that weekend. Before the weekend they had stopped at Rusty's home "to say good-bye and see you when we get back". Sometime later they learned that Rusty had gone to the circus matinee with her visiting aunt and two cousins who had come up from New York. Rusty's mother hadn't been feeling well so she asked Rusty to go in her place. They learned that when the fire started Rusty got her aunt and cousins out of the tent but she stayed behind and helped some children to get out.

"The heat was so intense . . . her feet were burned and she was completely dehydrated. And she was in the hospital . . . we couldn't see her . . . no visitors She hung in there for about ten days when her kidneys gave out from being dehydrated. It was the first friend I had ever lost . . . it was just devastating. Her funeral was just absolutely the worst thing I had ever been to. She was such a kind, outgoing, sweet girl. She was 22 at the time."

"It was just a horrible time. I mean everybody in the city was mourning. Everybody knew somebody who knew somebody who lost their lives. I'll never forget it. You were hearing, for example, about the little girl that nobody claimed . . . you were still hearing people who had been in the hospital who were still dying. I mean it was something we didn't get over for weeks . . . and just, you know, the summer was lost. As I say, we were all worried about the war and, so far, I had not lost anybody in the war. I didn't know anybody who was in real danger so this was so vivid in my mind that the war just took a back seat."

Lynette today cannot stand the sound of sirens as they frighten her. "I mean it had a lasting effect because here was a girl who was so young and so good and stayed behind when she could have gone on to help people and, you know, that all affected me . . .and little did I know the night we said good-bye to her that we would never see her again."



## Esther (Hastings) Armstrong

Esther (Hastings) Armstrong was born May 3, 1926, and although she wasn't at the circus, she remembers the day.

"I was 18 that year. It was a strange thing – my husband to be was in the service and he was coming to see me, and we thought we would go to the circus. But then we changed our minds.

So I was at work when the first reports of the fire came through. No one knew what it was – you heard the sirens. I was working on Capitol Avenue at Hartford Machine Screw, as it was called at the time – it's Stanadyne now. We couldn't imagine what was going on. We were working on the Victory Shift. We went in at 12 noon and worked to 11 p.m. I worked in payroll. Long hours and overtime during the War.

The Armory, where they brought the bodies, was on Broad Street, near where I worked. Even after I got home, the sirens went on all night, and traffic! I lived on Crescent Street, near Trinity College. And that was a good distance from it, but still we heard the sirens.

I remember...there was such an electricity about the circus fire – "Have you heard?" "What do you know?" "Have you heard any more?" "Anyone you know?" There was no TV, so we found out through word of mouth.... That was all the talk for years. Everyone was so shocked and upset and wondering if any of their relatives were hurt. No matter where you lived in Hartford, there were sirens. It was a horrible thing.

I think probably the most important thing we learned from the circus fire was the importance of exits in an emergency... At that time you jammed yourselves together without thinking about getting out.

I was very young, and you take things in stride, especially during the War. So many things you hear that you wouldn't hear ordinarily...

I wouldn't go to a circus – I told my husband I wouldn't take the children, but he could if he wanted.

The fire affected everyone even if you weren't there."



## **Roslyn Blawie**

Roslyn Blawie was born in Hartford on July 23, 1928. At the time of the circus fire she lived with her family at 171 Martin Street just a short distance from the Barbour Street circus site.

“On that particular day we couldn’t afford to go to the circus so my friend and I were sitting on the front porch and all our other friends were at the beach. It was a hot day. We kept hearing sirens because we were one block away from Barbour Street but several blocks down. My mother came to the windows of the porch and said, ‘The circus is on fire,’ so we stood up and we ran and we just, just kept running and of course the ambulances and the chaos. What I remember is the elephants walking on Barbour Street in the street. I remember people walking by with flesh, you know, ha- . . . it was unbelievable and the utter confusion that was going on.

“There was what was called a home for unwed mothers, of course you didn’t talk about those things in those years . . . and there were people lying . . . they put them (on the ground). It was a gated area and it was like a slope but they had people, you know, waiting for someone to find them . . . right on Barbour Street.

“And then another vivid memory is all the trucks were called in evidently from G. Fox, Sage Allen, Y. Smith’s, Brown Thompson’s and they were transporting the bodies back to the armory. I don’t remember how long we stood there but we were just absolutely, well you can imagine, in awe and it was just so upsetting in the mass confusion.”

Roslyn goes on to explain that, at that time during the war, she and her older sister volunteered with the civil defense air raid program and helped man a post in the neighborhood. In those positions, they were asked to volunteer to help with the fire victims at McCook Hospital for a couple of days.

“Everybody was just in the corridors wherever they could put a bed or wherever they could put a wheelchair and we would bring water and then we would take baskets of bloody bandages down to the incinerator and just be there to run errands and do, you know, whatever we needed to. It was a very moving experience to go through as a teenager . . . I just remember being pleased that we could help, that we were able to do something. To this day, to this day it doesn’t lessen . . . you just feel the hurt.”





## Carol (Podann) Brown

Carol was born on July 3, 1937. For her seventh birthday, she was going to the circus. She remembers that it was a very hot, hot day.

“We went with two other friends of ours, José and Tina Moriera. They didn’t want to sit in the bleachers – they wanted something special – so we sat in the folding chairs on the little risers. Fortunately, we were there, and not in the bleachers.

We were on the opposite side of the tent from the fire. My father was the first one who saw the red glow, and he said, ‘We’ve got to get out of here.’

I remember especially that the band played so loud. I never heard any screams, because the band was playing so loud. And they were sweating, it was so hot. They were at the end of where we were going out.

There were two fences that kept us in. And there was a gateway, and we were close to that. My father picked me up on his shoulders, and we started down the stairs, and he fell.

And my mother held on to those two posts, so that nobody else could get by until we got up. And then he told my mother, ‘Hold on to my belt as tight as you can.’

And then the people started to push. And push. And my mother was so upset. She tried so hard to hold on to my father’s belt. If my mother had not held on – all these people were now coming, and the chairs were falling down, and the risers were getting broken up, and – if she hadn’t done that, we wouldn’t be here.

Fortunately, we got out. I remember going out. I remember a little girl was being held by a nurse, and her arm was burned. It was all red. She had a white dress and blonde hair.

And we walked out, and the people behind us also did the same.

And we found a little boy going back into the fire. We told him to come with us.

He said, ‘I gotta find my uncle.’

We said, ‘We’ll find your uncle,’ and we took him out of the tent.

Fortunately, the boy knew his phone number. So we went out to Barbour Street, but the neighbors would not let you use the phone. They locked their doors. Finally we found a lady who let us call, and we told the little boy’s parents we would stay with him. I remember mosquitoes biting me. It was so hot.

And then, the worst thing of all, I saw all these trucks going in. And I saw an Army truck come out, and there were arms and legs, charred, hanging out of this truck. Charred arms and legs...they tried to cover them up, but there were so many. So many. I will never forget that as long as I live.

My father went back, to see if he could do anything. He said the tent was all burned. There was nothing he could do. The parents came for the little boy, and we went home. We lived in Glastonbury.

The little boy’s uncle perished. We got a note from the parents, saying that the uncle had perished, and that they were so thankful that we had made sure that the little boy got out.

To this day, I’m afraid of fire trucks. Just the sound of them upsets me.

My mother never forgot the fact that people were pushing on her back. She remembered that, and she would never get into an elevator if it was crowded.

She said that at the fire, ‘I couldn’t stand, because people were pushing and pushing. I was afraid I would let go of his belt.’

We very seldom talked about the fire. I think it was just something we didn’t want to remember.”

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## Fred Camara

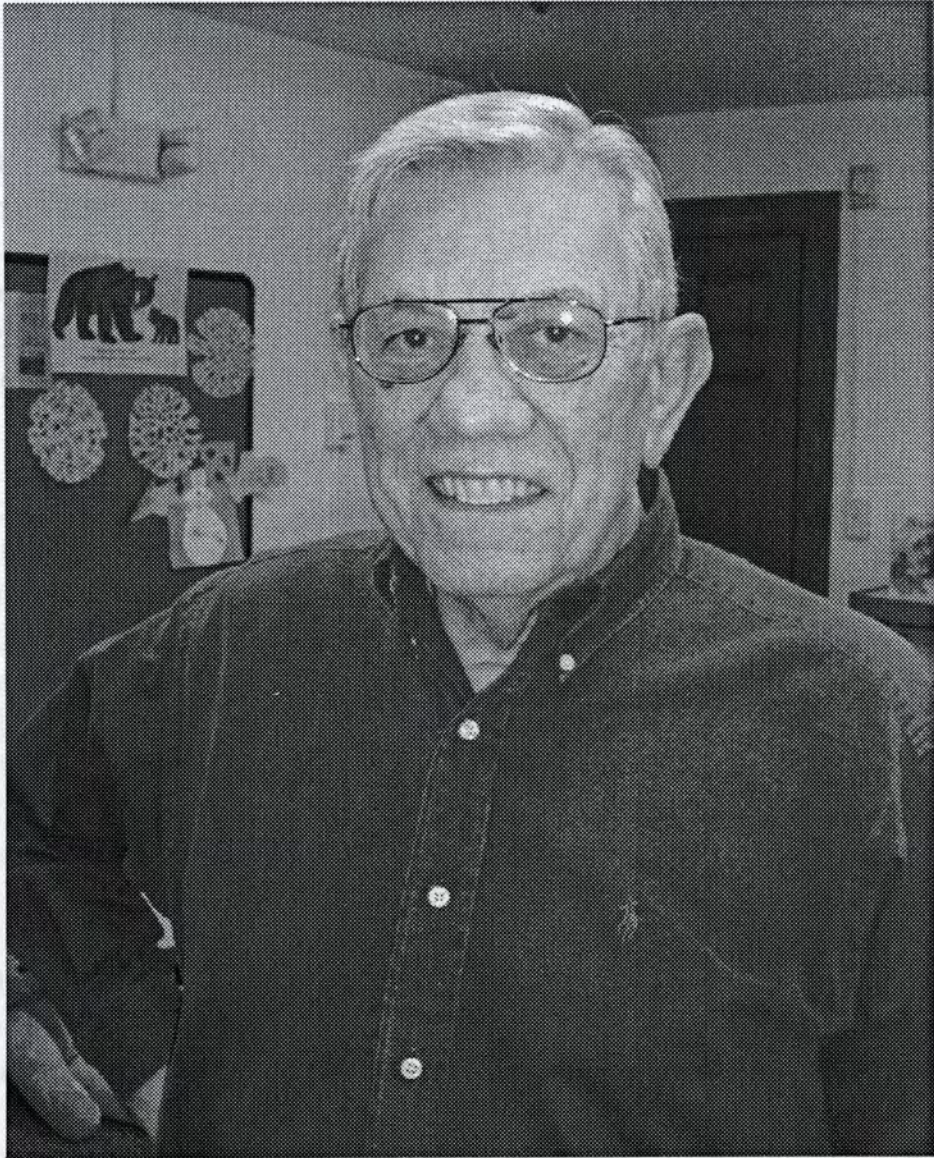
Fred Camara, born February 15, 1930, was the youngest child and only son in a family of six children. In that role he claims he was kind of spoiled and fairly independent as a boy. He took many small jobs including selling the Boston Record, shining shoes, caddying at Rockledge Country Club, setting pins at a bowling alley. He lived with his family on Hawthorne Street in Hartford and often roamed the city on his bicycle.

On July 6, 1944 Fred had ridden his bicycle to the circus. He parked the bike at E.B.McGurk's construction area across Barbour Street from the circus site.

"I wasn't at the big tent. I was in a sideshow and I can't forget that because there was an eight-foot couple that were there ... and I remember getting a ring but I don't know what happened to it. So when I was coming out someone yelled, 'Fire!' The tent was over in that area and in less than minutes that thing came down so fast and after a little while people were running out, some on fire, their clothes.

"My mom knew I was at the circus. I wanted to tell her because the minute she would hear she'd get all shook up. So I went home fast to tell her that I was okay and then I went back. At that time they were all out of ambulances and whatever and they were trying to put people in trunks of cars. I remember this one guy that they had on a stretcher with his arms out like this and he was like burned toast. So when they put him in there one guy pushed his arm down and it broke right off. And they couldn't get the door closed. I just stood back and watched . . . I was too young (to get involved). They wouldn't let me anyway . . . but . . . you seeing people on fire and everything, screaming. You know I'd rather have my arm taken off with a knife than being burned. It was terrible."

In later years Fred earned a Purple Heart in his service as a U.S. Marine during the Korean War. But, even in that conflict, Fred related that he never saw anything like what he witnessed on the circus grounds that hot day in July of 1944.



## June Clifford

June Christoff Clifford and her twin sister, Joan, were born 6/8/39 and lived with their family at 82 Charlotte Street in Hartford, just around the corner from the circus grounds. Each year when the circus was in town, many of the neighborhood people would often wander up to Barbour Street and take in the sights of the circus.

So it was on July 6, 1944 that June's 12 year old sister, Louise, took the twins there to spend some time looking at the animals and other sights. It was shortly before the matinee started in the big top that they headed home. They bought some popcorn at a corner stand and then stopped to talk with an elderly neighbor, Mrs. Hackett, who was sitting on her porch. They were eating their popcorn and visiting when another neighbor, Mrs. O'Connor, who lived across the street on the third floor, called out that the circus was on fire. They stayed with Mrs. Hackett for some time since their mother knew they were there and would not be worried.

"I don't know how much time passed but my brother worked at a factory and they asked for volunteers to go and pick the bodies up to bring them to the Armory. He went there and he saw a girl about our sister's age holding on to someone with each hand and he thought it was the three of us because they were burned beyond recognition . . . he was walking by the house where we were sitting on the porch and we said, 'Hi Dickie, hi Dickie,' and he was so relieved to see us because he thought he was going home to tell our parents that the three of us were dead. You know, I remember that day like . . . animals running through the streets, people screaming. I mean it was utter chaos.

"And, isn't it funny, in that Oklahoma bombing, 168 people died in that, too. I have a thing for numbers. My birthday is June 8, 6/8, so I remember that. You know, to this day I won't have candles in my house, never. I'm afraid of fire. I never realized why because I never connected it with that . . . and I never let my children stay at anyone's house when they were little because I was always afraid of a fire. I said, being a mother, whose children do you go after first? I didn't think they'd be mine."

## Jane Barber

Jane Barber, born 1930, was born and raised in the Vermont/Ontario area. She received her Bachelor's Degree from the University of Vermont in 1952 and her Master's Degree from the University of Vermont in 1954. She was in the circus business in 1954.

Ms. Barber was going to be 8 years old on July 8<sup>th</sup> and she wanted to go to the circus. Her mother said, "If you want to go, you have to be 10 years old."

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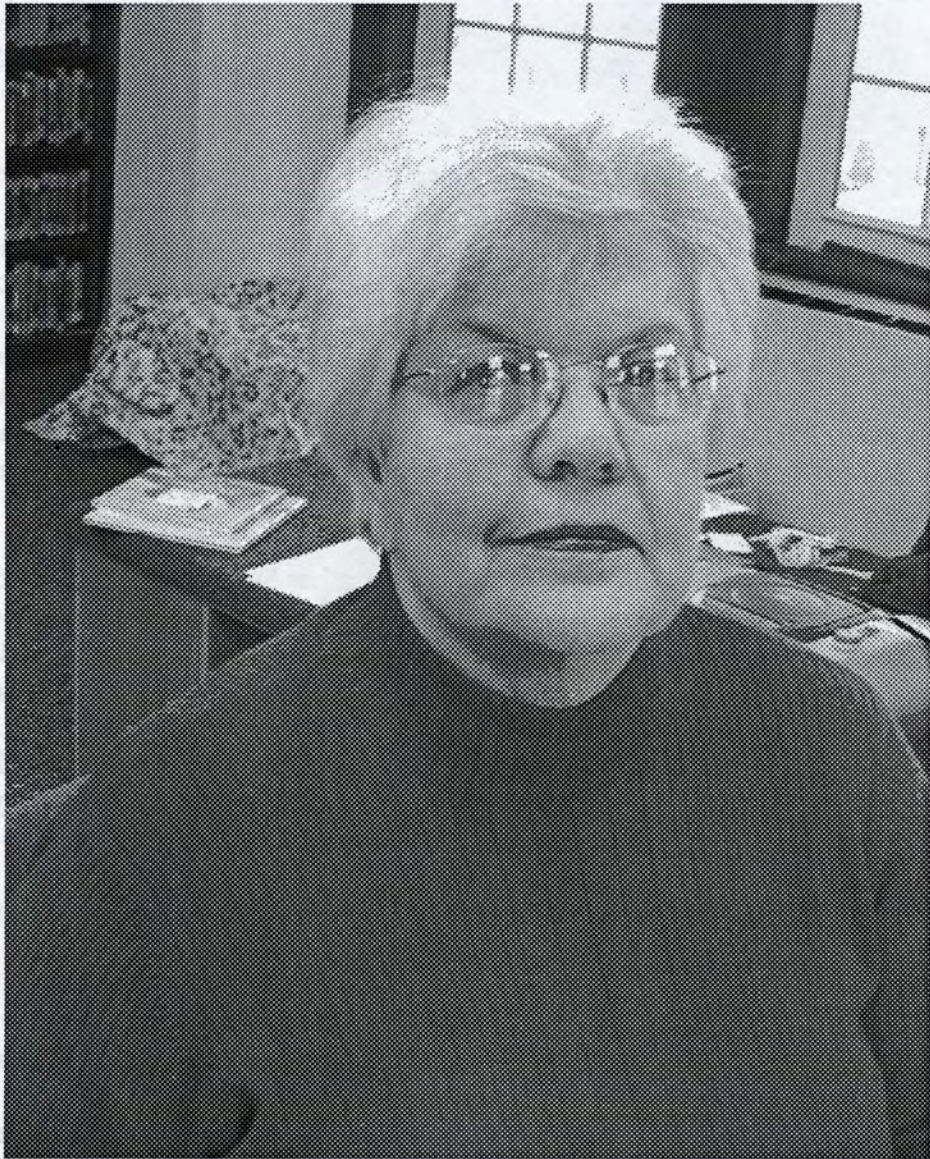
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## **Jane Darico**

Jane Darico, born 4/17/50, was born and raised in the Vernon/Rockville area. She related the story of her mother (Mary Darico), sister (Beverly Addis), and aunt (Clara Lutton) who went to the circus matinee on July 6, 1944.

“My sister, Beverly, was going to be 8 years old on July 8<sup>th</sup> and she wanted to go to the circus, so my mother said, ‘Okay.’ It was a very hot and humid day. They caught the bus in Rockville and they took along two neighbor boys – their names were Kabrick. My aunt agreed to go; this was my mother’s sister. That’s a long bus ride - it took about an hour.

“They were in the tent and they had just finished the tiger act and the tigers were acting strangely and refusing to go . . . there was a chute . . . to go back to their cages. They were fussing and refusing to go over that chute. My mother looked across on the other side of the tent and it was on fire. All chaos broke out. She pushed my sister down the bleachers and they immediately got crushed. She managed to push her over the chute and she told her, ‘Once you get outside, just stay in one place.’ My sister did get a gash on her knee and my mother fell and she remembers several people stepping on her back with high heels but she did manage to get out. My aunt, on the other hand, ran up the bleachers and jumped from the back of the bleachers down to the ground, hurt her back, and lost her shoes.

“When they got outside they managed to find one another but they didn’t have the two Kabrick boys – they feared the worst. So somebody took them to the Armory because that’s where they were keeping all the bodies. They had to go. They had to find the two boys and my mother said that was probably the worst thing she’d ever seen in her life - all the bodies and the smell and them curled in fetal positions – that was awful. And the boys . . . the boys got out of the tent, I don’t know how, but they did get out of the tent, bought a lemonade, and took a bus home. . . And then they had to call one of my mother’s brothers to come and get them and drive them home from Hartford.

“From that day my mother refused to be confined. We would go to little fairs and things but she would not go into any of the tents or into any of the exhibits.”

Ms. Darico is just in awe that they experienced this and that they survived. Her father also had had a narrow escape. In 1942 he was in the service, and he had been at the bar in the Coconut Grove nightclub in Boston. He had left just before a fire killed nearly 500 people. She feels it’s important to record and talk about these historical events.





## **Beverly Fagnoli**

Beverly Wadstrom Fagnoli, born 11-9-30, lived on Freeman Street in Hartford's south end at the time of the circus fire. Her father was a Hartford policeman and he had gotten tickets for her and for three or four of her friends to attend the circus on 7/5/44. Since the circus was late in getting to Hartford that day, they went to the afternoon performance on the sixth. They were seated on folding chairs on the south side of the big top, high on the bleachers. Had they gone the previous day, their seats would have been in the section where the fire started.

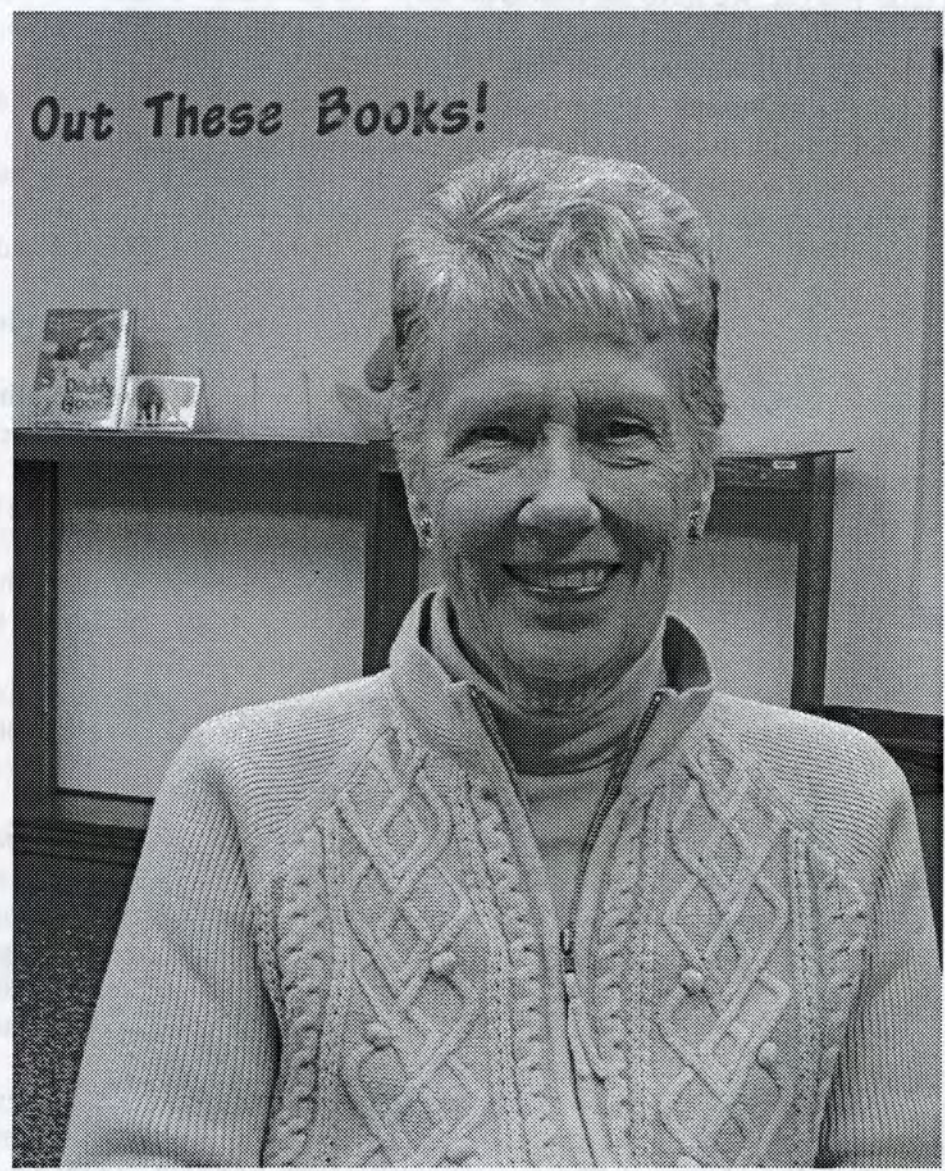
"We girls got separated at the time the fire broke out but luckily we all met outside on Barbour Street...we were so fortunate...I can remember just clamoring down the chairs to get out...all the chairs started collapsing as people were just clamoring down and that's why, I guess, when you look back on it now you think, 'Gee, what a miracle it was that we weren't trapped under the chairs or trampled on.'

"When we got outside, my friends and I were separated, except for myself and one other girl. We kept wandering around looking for the rest of our friends and luckily spotted them a short time later. We also were looking at nearby homes so that we might be able to use a phone to call home. This was not possible because the lines were so long. We heard later that some of the homeowners charged for the use of their phones. At that point we decided to just start walking. We had no idea which direction we were going in but were looking for a bus that might get us home. As we were standing on a corner, we heard someone holler to us from a car, "Don't you live on Freeman Street?" They happened to live on the next street and recognized us. We all piled into the car and they brought us home. What a miracle!

"I can still picture the scene when we were dropped off. My parents were both standing on our front porch crying but at that moment their tears turned to joy and relief. As I said, my father was a Hartford policeman and had been called in to work because of the fire. As he stood with my mother on the porch waiting for word about me, he was in his uniform. He eventually ended up working in the morgue helping people identify bodies. I can still remember him coming home at night smelling so bad that he would have to remove his clothes in the back hall before he came into the house.

"If only there had been cell phones in those days – what a difference it might have made."

## Out These Books!



## Dominic Fulco

Dominic Fulco was born April 25, 1933. He was eleven years old and his brother was eight years old and they went to the circus alone.

“We were living on Pleasant Street in Hartford, right off Main Street. My dad drove us to the circus. My mother was supposed to come with us, but she had a temperature of 103 that day, and she couldn’t come.

My dad said ‘Well, Junior, you’re big enough, you’re eleven years old. I’m going to drive you there and drop you off. We have the tickets already.’ He gave me – I believe it was \$3, which was a lot of money in those days. He told me, ‘You have the tickets, buy whatever you want, after you see the circus and you have your good time, take the bus home.’

He gave us two bus tokens. I knew the city fairly well, because my dad was a salesman, and I went with him on his calls, so I got to know the various places in the city.

When we got to the circus, I was all excited, and so was my kid brother. It was a very hot day, very hot. We both had short-sleeved shirts, and short pants.

We walked past the sideshows to get to the big tent. We went into the tent, and the man said, ‘Your seats are up there, anywhere you want.’

So, we proceeded to walk up the bleachers (there were no paths), and sat on the top, because we wanted to see everything.

The circus had just started, and the Wallendas had just come out to do the flying trapeze. And they were letting the animals start to come. My brother wanted to go down to see the animals, but I told him no.

There was a gentleman sitting right next to me, and my brother was sitting on the other side. The band had just started playing. We were all excited.

And then I looked across the way, and I saw the fire. It was ripping right up the tent across from us. Everybody started screaming and hollering. The man next to us grabbed his son and they jumped down – turned the other way.

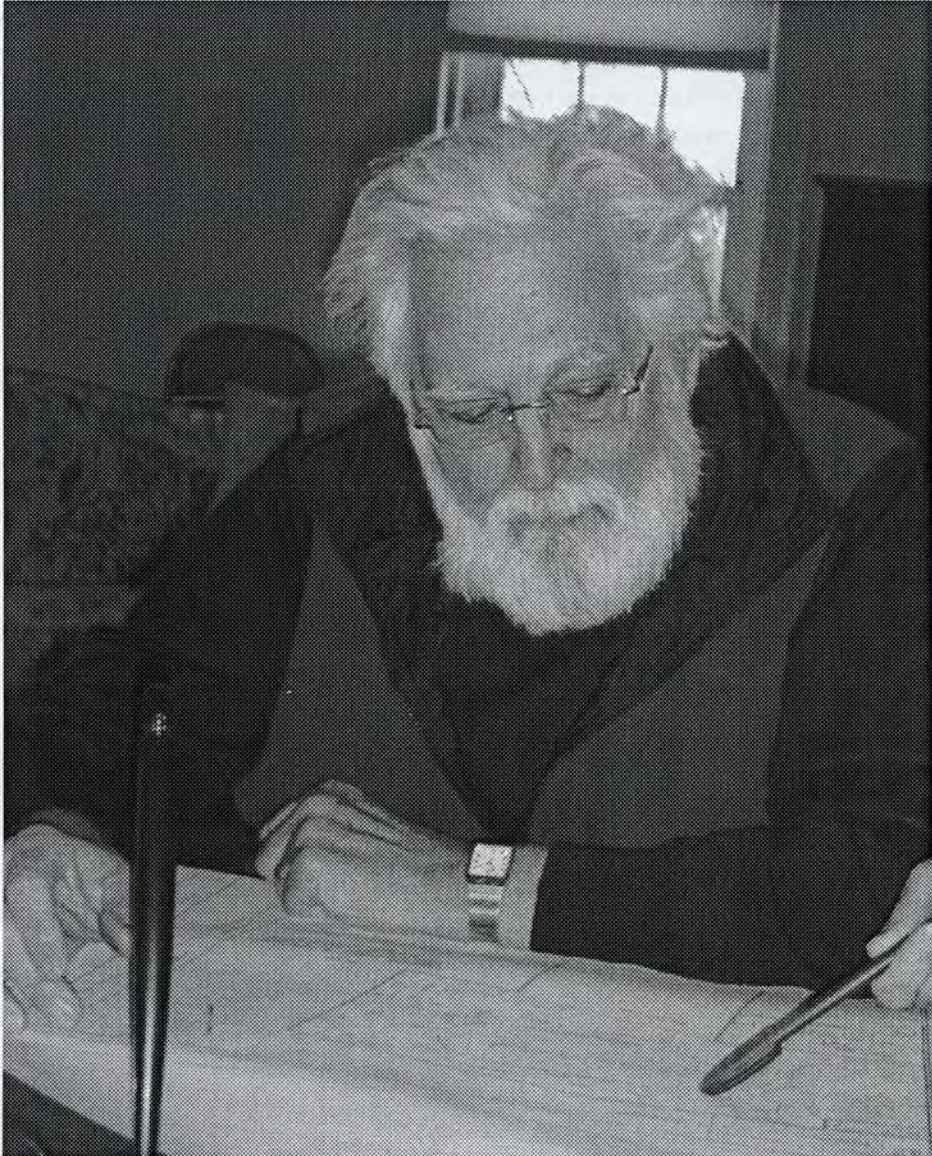
I said, ‘Let’s go, let’s go with him.’ My brother wanted to go down the bleachers – that’s the way everybody was going. But I told him to come, and we dropped down. It was a long way down.

The guy picked up the tent. I said, ‘Mister, hold the tent for us.’ We didn’t go down the same time he did, but he held it for us.

We got out of the tent, and we ran towards the street. My brother wanted to stay and see the fire, but I said, ‘No, Daddy told us to go home. We’re going home.’ I still remember people running in and out, women crying and screaming – ‘My child is in there.’ People were running every which way, and the fire engines were coming, and the fire was going and the smoke... We got out to the street, and we walked all the way down Barbour Street, down Westland Street, to Main Street and walked home. I remember looking back, seeing that black smoke billowing and ambulances coming and fire trucks.

My mother was home waiting for us. She was at her wits end, because she heard about the fire. It took us a long time to get home. My mother said, ‘You go to church now.’ And we went to the Sacred Heart Church up the street. She gave us some money, and said, ‘Light a candle and thank God you’re alive.’

Every time someone mentions the Circus Fire, I remember the tragic part of it, seeing people running in and out, burned... I remember the flames and I remember the sirens. It was a bad experience. I never wanted to go back to a circus. I didn’t even take my children or my grandchildren. I never went to a circus again.



## Phyllis (Brodsky) Germain

Phyllis was born on November 17, 1928. She was 15, when she took her little brother Henry, age 7, to the circus.

"We were there at the circus just before the fire – my younger brother and I. My father was the manager of a clothing store on Asylum Street, and somebody gave him two tickets to go to the circus. He worked for Askins Clothing Store – it was on Asylum Street near Main.

So he gave the tickets to Henry and me. Our older brother was in the Air Force.

We had just moved to Hartford from Glens Falls, New York, and we were staying temporarily in a furnished apartment on Martin Street, just up from where the circus was.

So Hank and I walked to the circus. We did all the outside stuff – looked at the bearded lady, and all that stuff. We had something to eat, and walked around. It was fun. When we went to go into the Big Top, and I handed the man the tickets, he said, 'You can't use these tickets for the Big Top. Those are only for the outside show.'

So we went home, and a little while later we heard fire engines. Henry wanted to follow the fire engines and see what was going on.

'All, right,' I said, 'but you've got to promise me you'll stay out of the way.' I didn't know that it was the circus that was on fire. 'Stay out of the way, and come home soon,' I told him, and off he went.

About 10 minutes later, the phone rang. It was my mother. She said, 'Oh, thank God you're home.'

I said, 'Why? What?'

She said, 'The circus is on fire.'

I must have gone stone white. 'My God,' I said. Everything went through my head...my brother was under an elephant's foot...

I said, 'Oh, we've been home for a while.'

She said, 'Good. And where's Henry?'

'He's downstairs playing.' I wasn't going to tell her where he was. We never did tell her. To the day she died, she didn't know.

We hung up the phone, and I ran down the street. And I could run in those days. I must have broken every record ever made, getting there. And I looked around for my brother. There he was, on Barbour Street not far from the smoldering circus. He was standing on the sidewalk, watching a firemen put a hose down the sewer.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I grabbed him, and took him home. 'I want to stay,' he said, but I told him, 'We're going home.'

Years later, in the family, I remember talking with mom and dad about the little missing girl who had died in the fire. I was very fortunate not to be in the Big Top. God was watching over us again."

Funeral services for Mrs. [Name] will be held at [Location] on [Date] at [Time]. Burial will be in [Cemetery].



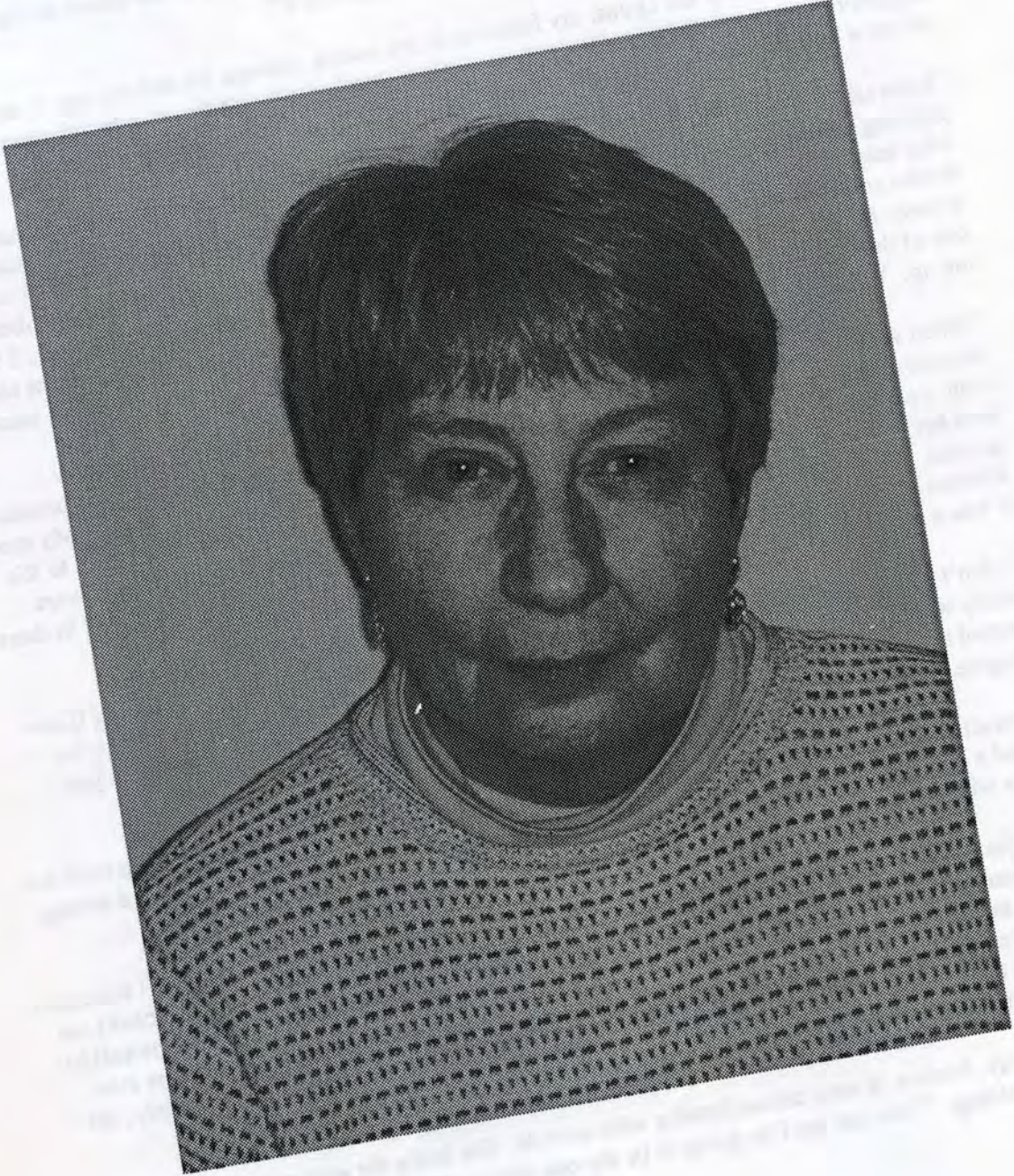
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## Jackie Gribbon

Jackie was born on April 17, 1946, two years after the circus fire occurred. While she was not alive at the time of the circus, her parents' lives were affected.

"My parents lived on Church Street in Manchester and had a nephew, Danny O'Brien, who was also a Manchester resident. Danny was about seven years old and had suffered the loss of his mother two years earlier. My parents had no children at that time and normally would have taken him to the circus, but they were in New York at the time. However, Danny's father's sister and her son had come up to visit from Pennsylvania and the three of them went. All three of them died. Danny was identified by his teeth. My uncle was obviously devastated, however, later in life he did remarry and have another child. My parents often told me the story of that day and always spoke of Danny around the anniversary of the fire."





## Pauline Jones

Pauline Cormier Jones, born 6/21/37, and her family were saddened by the loss of their puppy. He was hit by a car in front of their house in early July of 1944. In an effort to console the children, Pauline's parents announced a surprise – they were going to the circus in Hartford, a first-time treat for the family. It was the afternoon of July 6<sup>th</sup>.

“When we arrived at the circus, my father took my sisters, one age 10 and one age 3, and a neighborhood friend of my older sister, to the top bleacher. My mother and I sat in front of them but on a lower level bleacher, as we both feared heights.

“I can remember, during one of the circus acts, seeing people on the opposite side, screaming and pointing to where we were. Being so far from them and with the music playing, we couldn't tell what they were saying. We thought it was a clown horsing around in back of us. When we turned around we saw the flames, which were directly in back of where our family members were sitting. People were running down the bleachers, pushing other people out of their way. I was one of those pushed and I fell under the bleachers. My mother was able to reach my arm and pull me up. We headed for the exit along with hundreds of other people. There was a lot of panic.

“When we made our way out of the burning tent, we started to look for our other family members. We spotted my older sister after several minutes. She kept hollering, ‘Pa, Lorraine and Joan are still in there. I'm going back in to get them because I know where they are.’ My mother held her hand tightly to keep her from going. A minute or so later, the burning tent fell to the ground. My sister would have been in there if she had left to find them. All we heard were screams and moans. I witnessed people on their knees praying for their loved ones still in there. It was a sight and sound I will never forget.

“I don't know how much time passed, as we were crying and praying also, not knowing if our family was among those trapped under the burning tent. It felt like a lifetime. Just then, we spotted my father with my younger sister in his arms and our neighbor friend. You can just imagine what kind of a reunion that was.

“I recall seeing a young child alone and crying for her mom and dad. We held her hand until we found a policeman to leave her with. I often think of her and wonder if her parents were among those who perished that day.

“We just wanted to get away from the circus grounds as fast as possible. Because of all the chaos with hundreds of people searching and calling out to lost family, the only way that we could see out, was to climb a fence. I recall stopping on the way home to allow our friend a phone call to her parents to let them know she was okay. I also recall crying and saying that we never ever wanted to go to a circus again. We were all very thankful that we survived. Miraculously, the only injuries to any of us were minor burns on my father's neck.”

To this day, Pauline is very uncomfortable with crowds. She looks for exits whenever she goes into a building. “You can bet I'm going to be the one sitting the closest to the exit,” she said.



## William Kirby

At the time of the circus fire, William Kirby, born 2/3/36, lived with his parents and three sisters at 125 Tredeau Street in the south end of Hartford. His oldest sister, Jean, then in her early twenties, took him to the circus. On that hot day in July of 1944 they rode a city bus to the Barbour Street circus grounds.

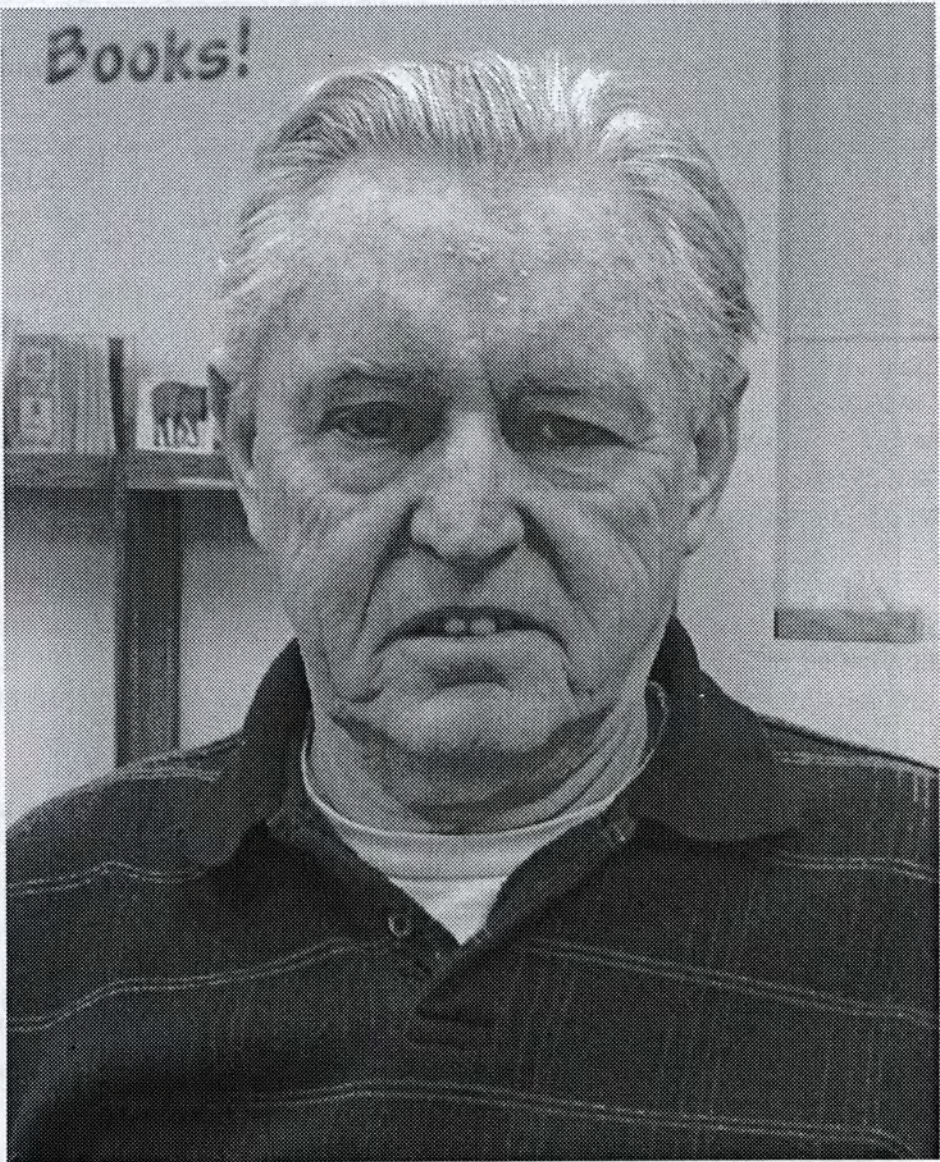
“My older sister took me and she went with her girlfriend and her daughter. They went into the reserved seating – we were in the bleachers. And I remember the aerial act was just starting and I saw the fire on the other side and I went down through the . . . underneath and my sister followed me. Fortunately we were right near where the chutes that the animals came in so we . . . went out. We ended out in the back where all the trailers for the animals and the . . . they slept. And you know, of course, it went quick. And I remember picking up, why I picked it up, it was a like a little gaucho hat with the tassels on it – I don’t know why I picked it up. We walked quite a ways around through all the trailers and campers and ended up on Barbour Street where there was a line at a house and the woman was letting everybody use . . . make the calls home.

“Like I say, the ones I went with I really don’t know if they made it out or not because they went into the reserved section and that was where the most problems, lives were lost because they had to climb up over the animal cages and we were right near it . . . I don’t remember, I don’t really know.”

Mr. Kirby’s father was a captain in the Hartford Fire Department and his was one of the first companies on the scene. He doesn’t recall his father speaking much about the tragedy.

“It was a happy time that turned real sad . . . you know, going in the midway they had all the barkers and things to see and buy . . .”

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## **Bernard Krutt**

Bernard Krutt, born 5/28/26, was entering the U. S. Navy and leaving for basic training in Sampson, New York on July 7, 1944. On the day before, he took his 12 year old brother, Alan, to the circus in Hartford. At the time they lived with their family on Holcomb Street in the north end of Hartford.

“ Well, the next day I was going into the Navy so I took my brother and we went to the circus. We were enjoying the circus and the next thing I noticed was that it got very bright because the fire started behind me. It went up and over us. The next thing I did was to look up. You could see the sky because the tent had burned through . . . oh, it burned very fast. When that happened, I grabbed my brother and we started to go down from the bleachers. Somebody behind me, which I thank goodness for, gave me a shove. My foot, instead of walking on the top, went down between the seats, where you put your feet. At that time I stopped and looked around. People were running all over. I remember looking, when I stopped, and they were jammed up at the exit on the Barbour Street end of the tent . . . the flames were all over . . . the flames had gone up and over the top but the people were jammed against the cages and they were trying to go around them but they were blocking the way. I saw everybody rushing to the main exit, over that way, where the cages with the tigers . . . I think it was tigers . . . were coming out. I looked straight across and there was no one there so we ran across and slid through the bleachers, lifted the tent, and walked out. I mean it was lucky . . . I didn't let go of my brother.

“I went to look for a telephone, couldn't find one. We walked to Main Street and found a phone and I called my mother and said that we were all right, that there was a fire at the circus. We caught a bus downtown and transferred to the Palm & Ashley bus and went home.

“The loss of life . . . I mean my mother would send me the papers up while I was in boot camp and all the headlines . . . and then there was the story that went on for many years about the unknown little girl . . . I never really understood why nobody claimed her . . . who disowns a little girl?

“If your mind is fairly strong, you live with it and it's put behind you, but if it's indelibly impressed in your mind and your mind is not as strong, it will stay with you and frighten you the rest of your life . . . I have memories of the Philippines which, I thank God, my mind represses.”

The history of the Earth and Planetary System is a complex and multifaceted subject that has fascinated scientists and the general public alike for centuries. The study of the Earth's past, from its formation to the present day, provides a window into the processes that have shaped our planet and the life that has thrived upon it. This article explores the various fields of study that contribute to our understanding of the Earth and Planetary System, including geology, paleontology, and planetary science.



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## Arthur S. Lassow

Arthur S. Lassow, a lifelong resident of Manchester, was born 4/22/39. His grandfather had purchased U.S. Savings Bonds which came with free tickets to the circus. With those four tickets, Arthur, his 10 year old brother, Gordon, and Mr. and Mrs. Lassow headed to the circus on the afternoon of July 6, 1944.

“My father borrowed a neighbor’s car to take us into the circus. . . and when you went anywhere, it wasn’t just the circus, your parents dressed you to a T, I mean, a white shirt, a tie, no dungarees, no sweats . . . you were dressed decently. Our seats were almost like in the bleachers, they were high up. At that time my mother was the first in our section to notice the fire.

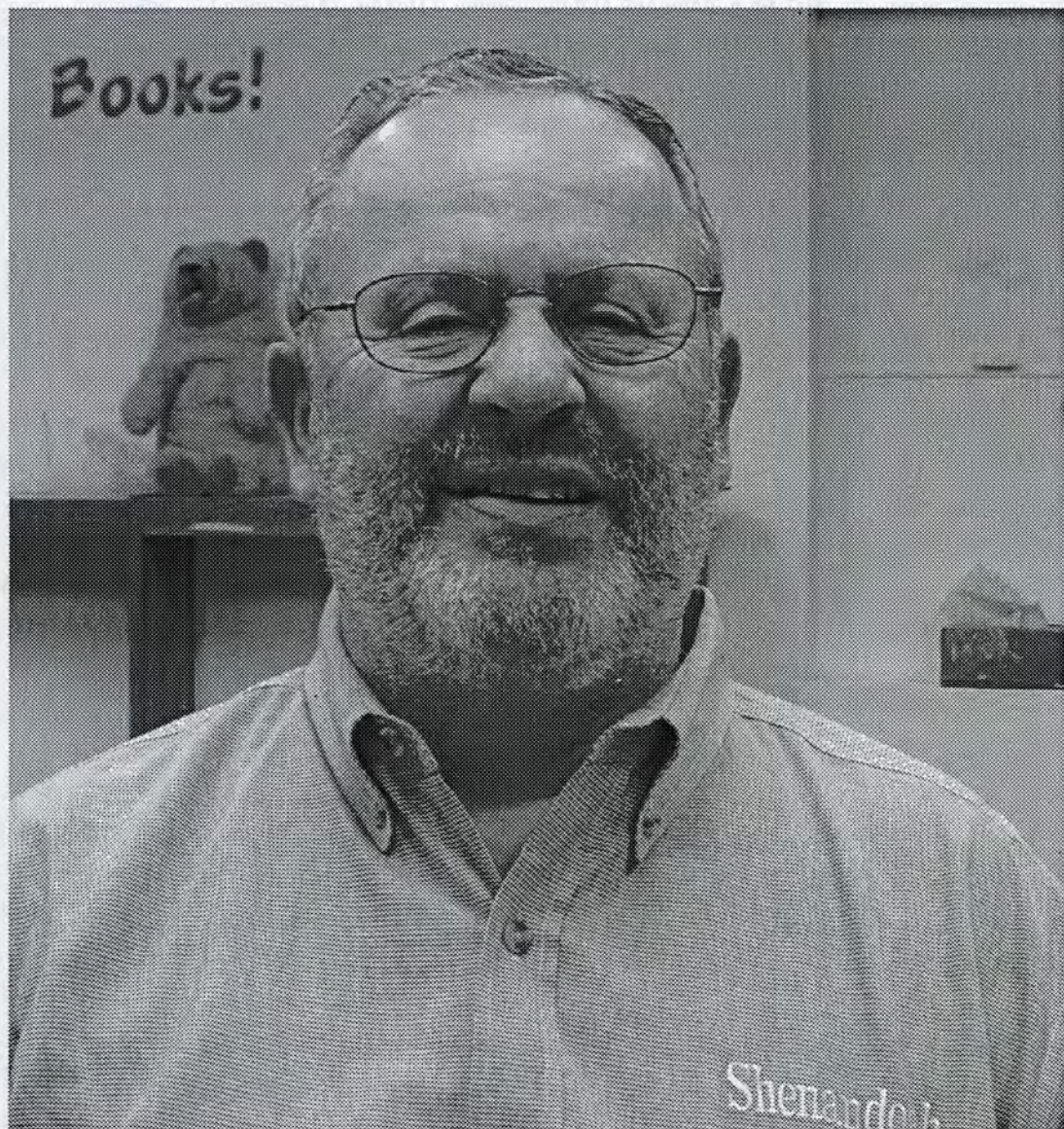
“Actually, at the same time, I remember that Felix Abner and Emmett Kelly, the famous clowns, were portraying an act with a church burning down. They’d go in the little place as big as they were and come out and it was some kind of act with mimicking a small church and they were performing that act at that time. And the animals were waiting to be brought on. And, of course, youngsters don’t have the patience and parents were trying to keep their kids quiet but the excitement was overbearing. And the fire got larger and larger. My father said, ‘Oh, they’ll put that out. There’s no problem.’ Everybody expected it to be put out, that it was just a diversion.

“But, of course, it wasn’t. When our side started to panic a little bit, my father grabbed my older brother under one arm and myself under another arm. He must have had a lot of adrenaline because we were big kids. He just ran, not ran but walked as fast as he could . . . we went down to the openings to the exit. My mother, on the way down, we lost track of her. She stumbled over the railings. When we got out we stood at one place and we were just waiting to find our mother and fortunately we reunited. My mother had her knees and her legs all bruised and banged up from the railings that she hit coming out. I remember the running cage for the animals and how the clowns were working and everybody was working to get the animals through the cage to the cages . . . back out of it. Everything was happening very fast. Remember, it went down before they even had fire engines on the site. . . . We finally got to our car and my father collected everybody and we drove home. But from the time we got out of the tent itself, I can remember the odor . . . and that was, of course, burning flesh and the animal, you know the foul smell from the animals, and the odor in the air wasn’t of popcorn or peanuts or soda - it was just of the chaos.

“My father, as a reminder of the circus, always carried the ticket stubs in his wallet for years and years. Those ticket stubs came in handy because one year – my younger brother was born and he was 2 or 3 years old - our family found ourselves in New York City and Ringling Brothers was playing in Madison Square Garden . . . we didn’t have tickets. My father went up to the ticket booth and they said the circus is all sold out and my father opens up his wallet and takes out the stubs that he’d been carrying since 1944, and he said, ‘Do you think these will help me get in even if we only stand?’ The box office manager took the ticket stubs that my dad had and he called up and who came down to the ticket booth - my father was amazed - it was John Ringling North himself and he said, ‘Don’t worry, people. You’ll have seats in my own personal booth.’ So we did see the circus, compliments of Mr. North. The only thing my father said he was sorry he didn’t get the stubs back from him to have - he’d carried them for so long.”



Walter Brueggemann is a prominent theologian and author. He is known for his work in biblical interpretation and his critique of American culture. He has written several books, including "The Prophetic Imagination" and "The Abolition of Man". He is currently a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



Walter Brueggemann, a prominent theologian and author, is shown in a black and white photograph. He is wearing glasses and a light-colored shirt. The photo includes the text "Books!" in the top left and "Shenandoah" in the bottom right.

## Howard Madsen

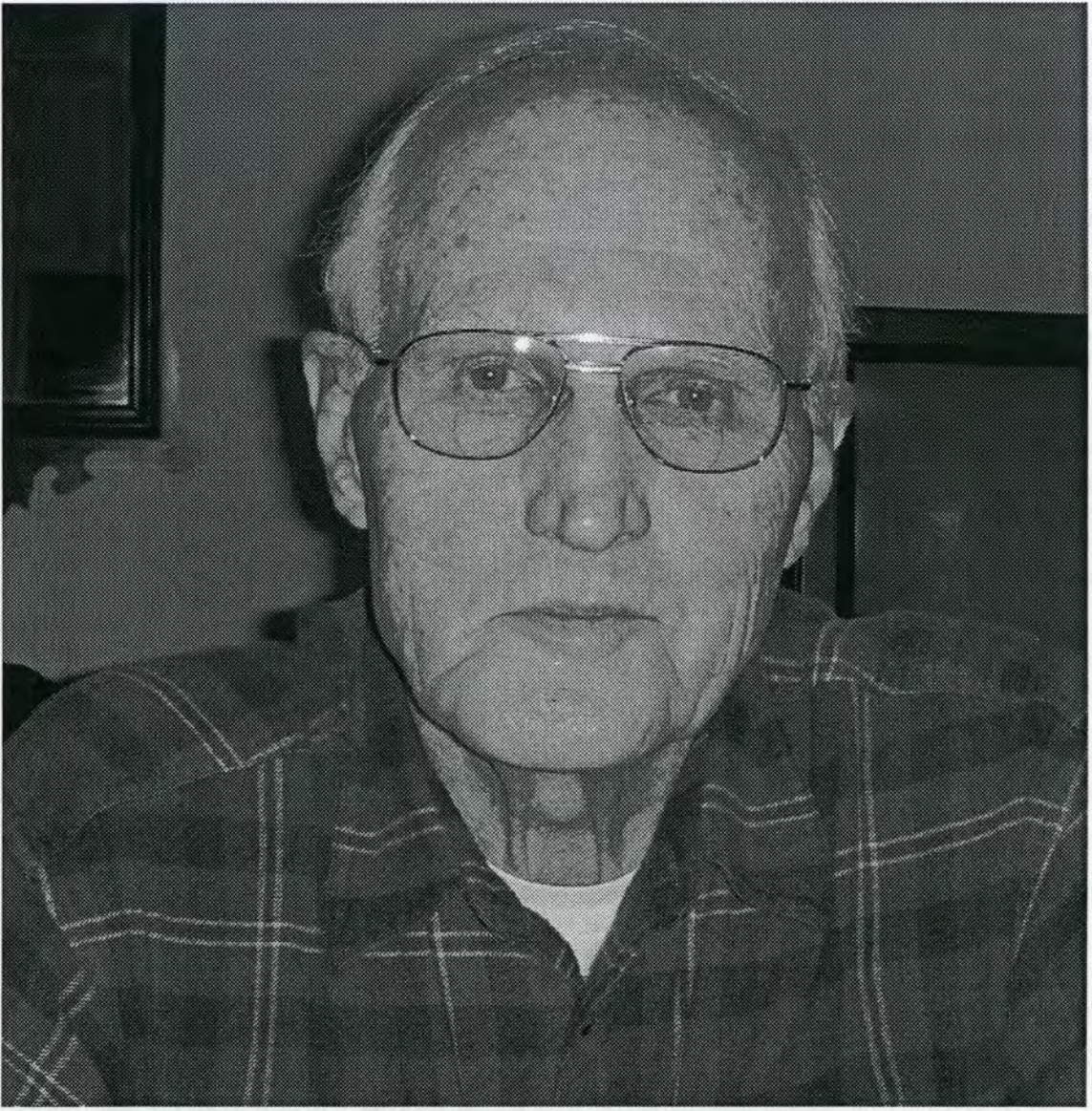
In 1944 Howard Madsen, born 12/26/26, was living in Bloomfield off of Blue Hills Avenue, just about three blocks from the Hartford city line. In those days his bicycle was “his best friend” and he often rode around in the area near the north end of Hartford. So it was that on July 6, 1944 Howard spotted smoke in the sky and he rode down Tower Avenue to Garden Street and arrived at the site of the fire.

“One of the things that I remember the most was I rode up there and there was no semblance of order. Everybody was all over the place . . . policemen - I’m sure some of them were perhaps looking for family members or whatsoever and I walked in with my bicycle and I roamed around and it was just a frenzy – it was crazy. I remember this one - I saw some bodies covered with a tarpaulin – and I remember this one particular body – I could tell it must have been an old man because, at that time, elderly men wore high-button shoes and that’s what was sticking out from underneath the cover. I’ll never forget that and some of the smoldering was still, you know, smoldering here and there . . . and it was unreal . . . I saw some (victims) but then you couldn’t really tell if they were truly victims or if they were there searching. The tent was down, it was gone. There were fire trucks and there were also medics or some (others), you know, trying to aid and trying to get some semblance of order in the area. I did see a few people scurrying around looking for this one or that – a couple of little kids, they were looking and they were all crying.

“I don’t think I stayed there too long. I just, it really bothered me to be there and experience what I did see and know what was going on. I just got back on my bicycle and - Keeney Park is right near there - I took that road that goes up by the golf course.

“How they water-proofed the tent - that bothered me – that they knew it was flammable. The circus, that was a central part of our social life, social structure. I remember, down on Windsor Street, when the circus came to town, all the railroad cars, and the lines of animals, the elephants, the parades . . . it was wonderful. Those are the things I’ll always remember.”

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## Virginia Narkon

Virginia Oleksinski Narkon, born 3/29/30, lived on Center Street in Manchester, where her parents owned and operated Willie's Steak House. Her older brother had been drafted and had left for basic training on the morning of the circus fire.

"July 6, 1944 was an extremely hot and humid day. Early that morning my brother, Bill, left on a troop train for basic training in the Navy. He didn't want us to cry so he made us promise to use the circus tickets for that afternoon's performance.

"My mother drove my younger sister, age 12, and me into Hartford . . . we were still feeling sad. I was worried about my mom for still another reason. She had recently recovered from a heart attack at the age of 42. The terribly hot day and the emotion of seeing Bill off to war weighed on my mind, but we had promised my brother to go and have fun.

"We arrived at the circus just minutes before the big show began. We climbed high up on the bleachers to get a better view . . . but that was suicide. The circus began and we settled in to enjoy the performance. The animals did their show and exited into their cages. Only about twenty minutes into the show I noticed a small fire on the other side of the tent. 'Anything can happen at a circus,' I thought. Quickly the flames spread upward and the screaming began from the crowd. I thought, 'We'll file out very quietly, as we were taught in school, and no one will be hurt.' Suddenly the pushing and out-of-control panic could not be helped as we were all beginning to suffocate. I grabbed my mom's hand and she had my sister's hand as we started down the bleachers. No one was moving and we were jammed . . . more panic. I told my mother I would jump the railing and then reach for her. I jumped but caught my skirt on the railing and could not move. I yanked and pulled to get free and tears began to come as I was losing too much time to save my mother. I grabbed her hand and, with my sister holding hers, we began to move ever so slightly towards the exit. It seemed miles away as we were burning and becoming hysterical. The heat was unbearable! Suddenly my mom's hand slipped away from mine but I couldn't turn around to see why. I grabbed behind me and found her hand and held on. The air was filled with smoke but then I could turn around . . . I screamed because I wasn't holding my mom's hand. I pushed back into the burning tent, as the band played on, but could barely see . . . my mother's and my eyes met and I grabbed her hand, unable to speak. Her face was black but still looked beautiful to me. I was so thankful! We burst free to the outdoors and fell to our knees. The ground was hot as the tent collapsed behind us.

"We were totally exhausted and confused but could finally breathe. I still see the famous clown, Emmett Kelly, walking around, dazed, and carrying a bucket of water . . . his face was painted with that sad, sad look. We found ourselves across the street. Some wonderful people gave us water to drink. My mother never complained how severe the burns were on her shoulder, thinking others needed urgent care.

"I don't remember getting home that night . . . my mother had to drive without shoes and with all of that confusion on the roads. Later in the evening, our family physician tended to our burns.

"Just miles away, a tall, blond teenager had tickets for the next day's performance. His name was Norm Narkon and he and his cousin, Al Backofen, had planned to take a bus to Hartford for the big show. A few years later, Norm and I met and married. I remember saying to Norm, 'When we have children, we will never take them to a circus.'"



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## **Bill O'Brien**

Bill O'Brien, born 10/8/38, lived in East Hartford with his parents and 16 year old cousin. On the day of the fire he had gone to the circus with his father and grandmother. His mother was at work at Hartford Machine Screw.

“Probably the first thing I remember we were sitting across up in the bleachers from where the fire broke out and, what I've always remembered, was it was like up in the corner. It didn't look any bigger, but as a little kid, you know. But it looked like somebody had thrown a cigar, a cigarette or a match. I remember the people who were sitting in the bleachers with their back to the fire were fanning themselves because it was a hot day anyway and they were getting hotter as I remember.

“We were up on the top bleachers across the way and we jumped off and I know we were heading towards - they had this little track where they brought the animals in and they had put that up - and some of the animals had been transferred. And fortunately someone had a knife - reading later what happened, a teenager had a knife, and I remember slashes in the side of the tent and that's how we got out. Otherwise we would have had to crawl over that area where the animals were and, reading the book, it looks like that's where a lot of people got caught and trampled to death. And then we just got out of there. I remember them taking people away in any kind of vehicle. In those days they had like running boards - they were using everything. . . it only lasted a few minutes, it's hard to believe . . . Father, Grandmother and I were quickly led away from the area.”

Mr. O'Brien did have some long-lasting effects from the experience. He hurt his leg when they jumped off the bleachers. That injury eventually led to him being hospitalized at Newington Children's Hospital for two years and spending the next three years on crutches. Much of his childhood was lost and it was only after hip surgery ten years ago that he has finally been pain free. He also finds himself rechecking that the coffee pot is off or that the fireplace is out or double-checking the stove. “After all these years I remain very aware of possible fires and the tragedy that can happen.”

“It was really shocking to see that it only lasted twelve minutes and all these ones that died who were, you know, close to my age and they had - you wonder why they didn't make it and you did...this thing here just stood in my mind since I was five years old . . . It was just unbelievable. I try not to dwell on that day but flashbacks do occur whenever I read about fires and people losing their lives. I was not listed as a casualty of that incident but years of suffering pain certainly altered or affected my life for a long time.”



## Annamay Potocki

Annamay Potocki, born 10/26/23, had a nursing career that spanned over 50 years. As a teenager she worked as a nurse's aide with the Red Cross. She graduated from the Hartford Hospital School of Nursing and later went on to UConn and obtained a degree in public health nursing. She experienced every facet of nursing, except a factory assignment, including serving as a private duty nurse for Mrs. Austin Cheney at her home in Manchester. She assisted her from the time Mrs. Cheney was 98 years old until her death at the age of 104. At the time of the circus fire in 1944, Mrs. Potocki was in training and living at the Hartford Hospital School of Nursing.

“My brother and his wife were going to take me that night to see the circus and then all that happened. . . . We (Hartford Hospital staff) used an old ward that had been all cleaned out. It was probably going to be painted and all - it was, I think it was Ward 4 that they were going to use to refurnish it. They had to put all beds in there and make it into a triage . . . then they started bringing in the victims. We had to help the nurses and the doctors. Well, we assisted the patients in the beds . . . the nurses aides, they came too from the Red Cross and they had already made the beds . . . we were called back to duty . . . it was all that day or another day . . . we were involved probably all that week. Recently, two years ago, I went to a nurses' reunion and someone had read about our reunion. It was going to be in West Hartford and this fellow came with his mother and he had been a youngster (treated at Hartford Hospital after the fire) and he came in and showed us the scars on his back . . . that was a part that I didn't expect . . . he didn't know us personally but he knew that was our class.”

Mrs. Potocki advises, “Just do the best you know how, you know, and always think that you can do something for people and years later it turns out that you have helped them and you didn't realize it.”



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## Iris Schlank

Iris Schlank was 11 years old when she went to the circus on July 6, 1944 with her mother and her 4 year old brother. They took their cousins, a married couple who had just come over from Europe, as they thought it would be a treat to take them to an American circus.

“I remember sitting in the bleachers very close to where the fire broke out and all of a sudden the aerialists screamed, ‘Fire!’ and everybody stood up. We ran down the bleachers and there was just no way to get out. We could see the lions and tigers being led into their cages and many people lost their lives trying to escape near the cages. A young man with a jackknife slit a hole in the tent and we climbed out and ran through fields of gardens and people opened their homes so we could make phone calls. I remember we called my father, who worked in downtown Hartford, and made a place to meet and he picked us up. Our cousins – we couldn’t find them. We were all okay, nobody got hurt. We found them later and they were not hurt either.

“I can remember what I wore – my Girl Scout shorts and top. I don’t remember the people around us. I just remember people screaming. We were very close to the flames and very lucky to get out alive...so the young boy really saved our lives... I don’t remember (how old our cousins were) but I remember, he wore a suit and a tie to go to a circus, and when he jumped up, he lost his jacket and it had all his naturalization papers in it but it was better than losing his life. Our cousin and his wife were separated, too, and they eventually found each other. We ran through victory gardens. I remember my mother tore her stockings. My parents had friends who lived on Cleveland Avenue which wasn’t too far so we walked to their apartment and my dad picked us up there. The whole day was just a very vivid memory of chaos.

“Years later on the 50th anniversary of the circus, CPTV had a documentary and they showed a man named Donald Anderson who, at the age of 13, had slit a hole in the tent where many people escaped. I tried to reach him. In 2004 my husband, who is a mason and a shiner, had gone to a dinner meeting for Omar Shrine Club in Manchester. There was a man on the roster named Donald Anderson and my husband said, ‘You couldn’t by any chance be the same Donald Anderson that was on CPTV?’ and he said, ‘ Yes, I am.’ So I called him, I spoke to him on the phone and thanked him for saving our lives. And then that summer the club had a picnic and I met him in person . . . it gave me the chills to think I would not be here today if he hadn’t acted.”

Asked what her main impression of her experience was, Iris replied, “Well, it’s a story I tell my children and grandchildren to impress upon them that life is full of uncertainties, but we should always take an optimistic outlook.”



## Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith was born June 20, 1935. He was the youngest of five friends who planned to go to the circus on July 6, 1944.

"I was living on Mansfield Street in Hartford at the time of the fire. It was about a one and a half mile from the circus. There were five of us who went together to the circus: I was nine years old, the two Clifford brothers – Bill, age 13 and Jerry, age 11 – another friend Mike Holmes, age 12, and Ray Burns, he was 10.

So we all went together to the circus, but Bill and I also went to what they called the Freak Show, which had a separate admission charge. The other three boys skipped the sideshow, and went along to the Big Top. They wanted to get seats up high to get a good view. Bill and I were a little late and the high seats were taken. We ended up on the north side of the tent, on the lower row.

It was early in the performance...we looked up and we could see the flames on the side curtain. We were both stunned, and we started to run. We ran toward an exit – it was probably no more than 15 or 20 feet away. And already people were piled up in the exit. The exits were not terribly wide, and people were exiting from both sides of the exit.

I'm not sure whether we were in shock, or what, immobilized for whatever reason, but by the time we got there, people were already starting to pile up, they had fallen.

I suspect people were pushing, obviously, it was a mixed crowd, there were a lot of kids there, but there were older people, too, adults. I would also suspect that parents who were there with their kids trying to protect their kids. It was a panic situation. You don't know what's going through people's minds. As a nine-year old, I may have overestimated the pile of people, but it seemed like a lot of people. It might have been 10 or 12 people in the pile, but it seemed like a wall of people. An awful lot of people there. You had to climb over, but there was also a crush behind you trying to get out. Bill was very level-headed, he threw me. He literally grabbed me by the seat of the pants and threw me over the pile.

I landed on my feet, braced myself. Bill ducked in under the bleachers and under the side of the tent, and he grabbed me on the other side, and we ran down Barbour Street, but we stopped short. 'Where are the other kids?'

We turned around and started to go back. And the three of them were all together, fortunately. We sighed with relief, and we eventually ended up home. Bill became a priest later on. He was always a person who was a little older than his age, even as a 13-year old. He always had a lot of presence. He was like a big brother to me.

Although I didn't have nightmares, and even though 63 years have dimmed some of those memories of the fire, I can still visualize the exact moment when I looked up and saw the flames as if I left it 10 minutes ago....the noise...the panic that you feel. There was a lot of screaming and noise coming out of the confusion of the situation.

I'm extremely thankful my friends and I weren't hurt. But as I get older, I wonder about those who died – what would their lives have been like? Would I have known them? I feel bad about them – a lot of young people who didn't have a chance to live, and who died a painful death. Most of the people weren't burned – they were trampled or suffocated. I think about how the fire could have been prevented. Hindsight of course is perfect. The tent was water-proofed with gasoline and paraffin, and those both promoted burning. What went through those people's mind? Maybe they didn't think anything was wrong....maybe that was the extent of their knowledge. But there were people who never had a chance to live.

We were lucky. We have a tremendous amount to be grateful for – personal things, and a lot of things we take for granted."



## Mary Tierney

Mary Callahan Tierney, born 8/13/35, lived on Westland Street in Hartford with her parents, younger brother and sister, and her grandfather. On July 6, 1944, her teenage neighbor, Jean, offered to take her to the circus so the two of them walked the six or seven blocks up to the circus grounds on Barbour Street.

“We got there maybe 15 or 20 minutes before it started. When you walked into the tent, the big top they called it, we were lucky enough to get seats maybe halfway down on the right and maybe about 8 or 10 bleachers up. We were very excited. It wasn’t more than 15 or 20 minutes that the fire started – I’d say probably 2:15 or 2:20. You could hear somebody say, ‘There’s a fire, there’s a fire.’ Nobody could even pay attention. So then we started looking towards where we had come in and up in the tent top you could see a small fire starting. Well, all of a sudden, it was really out of control. It was just huge and everybody started screaming, yelling, and panicking.

“I think Jean and I probably jumped down underneath the bleachers and she and I were holding hands, and we’re screaming and yelling and the fire is coming towards where we were. It’s coming from the front of the tent down the side and, as we got down, we were on the ground and we were crawling and then walking but everybody was stepping on everybody else and so afraid, anxious to get out and pushing and shoving and losing everybody and yelling . . . that was the worst part . . . all of a sudden, she wasn’t there. And, oh my God, I’m screaming, ‘Jean, Jean!’ By this time the fire had really started to come down to where we were. I kept walking. I took a look over to where there was a long, narrow runway that the animals came in and, of course, they were petrified and (people) were trying to get kids over it. I’m sure they were at the children, the lions and tigers . . . that was horrible. The one thing I could never get over – I think his name was Merle Evans, the band leader – at the back of the tent, he kept that music going until the fire was right there at him and all of his men.

“We got outside and just to see the people lying down screaming and crying. So I’m looking for Jean, running around the back field. People were still coming out and there were priests there trying to help the people and they’re giving them the Last Rites . . . it was terrible . . . I kept yelling for Jean – I just didn’t know where she was. I was panic-stricken. I didn’t want to leave. I sat on a curb and cried and cried and a man said, ‘You better get home. Everybody will be looking for you.’ . . . I got to the house and everybody’s standing outside waiting for their family members to come home. My family was very happy, but I said, ‘But Jean. She isn’t here. I don’t know where Jean is,’ and maybe 10 or 15 minutes later, wasn’t Jean coming down the street! I was so relieved.

“It was just something that was probably one of the saddest incidents of my life and I’ll never forget it, I’ll never forget it. I just think about those people who couldn’t get out and the children climbing over, trying to get over the entryway.”



## Calvin Vinick

Calvin Vinick, born 7/16/29, lived with his family at 87 Pliny Street, just off of Garden Street in Hartford. He had always had a liking for entertainment, performed magic himself at that age and to this day still does magic, and he always enjoyed going to the circus. He was aware that the circus had a policy that, if you helped set up on the day it came to town, you could get free tickets to a show. So, on July 5<sup>th</sup> Calvin and a friend worked on the grounds as the circus was made ready for an evening performance. Since they were so tired from their efforts, they decided to skip the evening show and instead go to the matinee performance the next day, July 6<sup>th</sup>.

“We decided to sit at a certain place in the bleachers and for some reason it wasn’t that visible to us so we relocated and went to a different section where we sat on the upper bleachers. Lo and behold, the fire started where we would have sat. . . . They always had an act where they had fire engines and clowns clowning around as if there were a real fire and that’s what I thought was actually happening – that it (the fire) was part of the act . . . I don’t fully recall but I know we got out fast. We walked down from the bleachers and, fortunately, there was an exit right next to us so we were able to just get out.

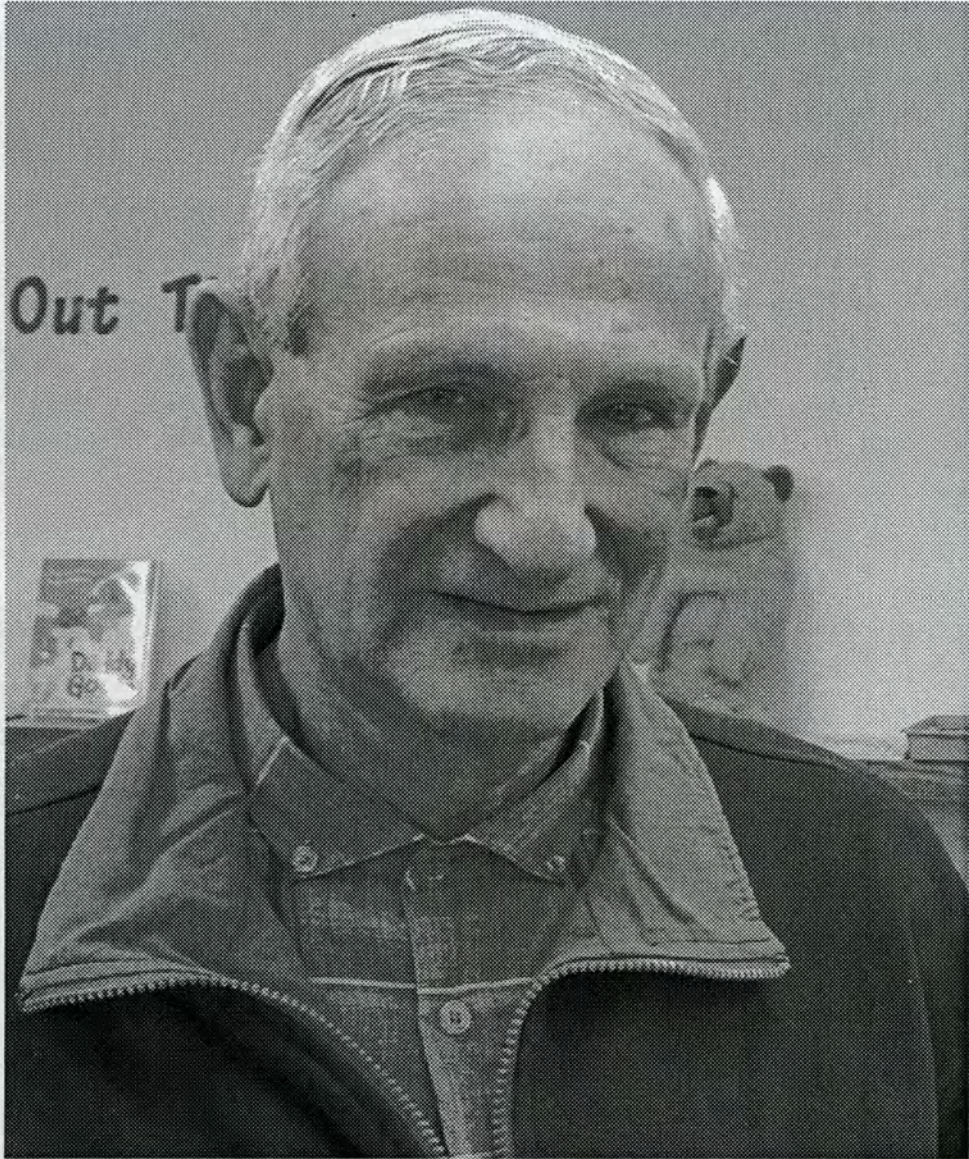
“And then there was a whole mob scene outside of the tent. . . . My concern was I knew, from previously being to the circus, that there was a pond in the opposite direction of going out to the street and I wasn’t sure whether we would have to go to where the pond was. Not being a swimmer, I was as much concerned with that as I was exiting to go out to wherever the street was, but that was not the case. We did go out where the street was.

“There were animals and the animals were nervous. They were evacuating. I remember they had in the sideshow a limbless woman who didn’t have arms or legs and she was thanking somebody for carrying her out from the sideshow to the street. We hung around for awhile and saw what was going on. Then we got concerned that our parents would be worried where we were or what was happening because they knew we went to the circus. We decided to go home and this was maybe 20 minutes after we were outside the tent. I had a heart condition at the time and, when I got home, my mother said that my pants were dirty so I said, ‘You’re glad to see me alive rather than your concern about the pants being dirty.’ My mom, at the time, was not aware of the circus fire, but was concerned about my health due to my anxiety.”

After that time Mr. Vinick made sure to sit near exits when he was in a crowd or at a theater. He advises people to be aware, to be alert, to be conscious of what’s taking place around them.



John White was born on January 11, 1911 in New York City. He attended the University of Pennsylvania and received his B.S. in 1934. He worked for the U.S. Army during World War II. He married in 1945. He has three children and is currently residing in New York City.



Out T

## **John Walsh**

John Walsh was born on February 7, 1931, in Hartford. For most of his childhood he lived in the north end of Hartford at 255 Martin Street. He referred to the neighborhood as "Hell's Kitchen"; a blue-collar neighborhood with not much money and fathers who sometimes worked and other times didn't.

"I was one of four boys and sister. We didn't have much money and we were always looking for a way to make a dollar. Whenever the circus came to town, my brothers and I would go to the "circus lot on Barbour Street" early in the morning and help feed the elephants and do any other menial chores to get a free pass to the show. The passes were good for any performance.

It was really hot that day, and when we had received our passes we decided not to go to the circus that afternoon, but to go swimming at the pool at Pope Park. We walked across town and swam until mid-afternoon, when we boarded a bus to go home. When we came to the intersection of Capen Street and Main, we saw fire trucks, police cars, and people running in panic. It was chaos. The four of us got off the bus and followed the crowd to the east side of the circus tent. There we saw people pulling dead bodies out of the tent. "We tried to help out where we could; lift something, drag something, grab a hand on a stretcher. "

We lost many young friends that day, and some of their parents, though I can't recall their names now. We were a very close neighborhood and many of us went to St. Michael Church. "The breaking point for us was after we feed the elephants, we made a decision, collectively, the four brothers, to go to Pope Park for a swim.



## Leonard Wasserman

Leonard Wasserman, born 5/5/31, lived with his family on Garden Street in Hartford. His uncle was a butcher and, for displaying a circus poster in his shop window, he received free circus tickets which he gave to his nephew. Leonard's mother usually wouldn't have allowed him to go to an event without an adult but, since he had just recovered from the measles and recently celebrated his Bar Mitzvah, she gave in. He went off to the circus matinee with his schoolmate, Hyman, on the afternoon of July 6, 1944.

"We were seated at the opposite end of the tent where the fire broke out . . . I remember very distinctly the wild animals, the lions and the tigers, were the first act . . . three rings in the center of the tent with the enclosed passageway tunnels which created a problem. I remember the animals either being in the tent, in the rings, or going to and I saw flames, a small area of flames, at the opposite end of the tent. People were standing, yelling, 'Fire!' Everybody seemed to stand and the movement was down the stands. For some reason, we jumped down from the bleachers to the ground. We didn't follow the crowd and we went under the tent. My impression was, 'Uh oh, those lions and tigers are going to get free - you better get out of here!' . . . We ran to the east . . . there was a big field and some woods there . . . We took a street and turned west at Westland Street. All I could think was my mother was going to find out and she was going to be going crazy . . . My mom was in the kitchen ironing and she saw the smoke so her immediate reaction was to go downstairs and to head towards the circus. . . The next most fortunate thing on my part was I met my mother at the corner of Westland and Barbour Streets. All I can remember the rest of the day were the trucks going to the Armory . . . they were carrying the bodies.

"That evening we got a call from my brother who was in the Air Force in England and when he heard the news he figured, 'Lenny's got to be at the circus', so he called home to see what was what.

"I had nightmares long after that particular time - I can't tell you exactly how long. . . . Again, I think my experience would have been far different if I joined the crowd. The thing that is vivid in my mind is dropping down, and we weren't at a lower bleacher area - we were up near the top, so we jumped down quite a distance. I remember a frustration in that the first place we reached that we tried to lift up was a place where the tent had been anchored tightly down and we couldn't get it up. We moved until we found a more flexible area and crawled under. Our main thought was to avoid any encounter with lions and tigers, resulting in super running speed."

Mr. Wasserman offers a piece of advice to people who might find themselves in a crisis situation, ". . . not to follow the leader. Evaluate for yourself what appears to be the safest method of egression and follow that. Very often it's much to your advantage not to follow the crowd but to follow your own instincts and intelligence."

The first photograph shows a young man in a military uniform, standing in front of a building. The second photograph shows a young man in a military uniform, standing in front of a building. The third photograph shows a young man in a military uniform, standing in front of a building. The fourth photograph shows a young man in a military uniform, standing in front of a building. The fifth photograph shows a young man in a military uniform, standing in front of a building. The sixth photograph shows a young man in a military uniform, standing in front of a building. The seventh photograph shows a young man in a military uniform, standing in front of a building. The eighth photograph shows a young man in a military uniform, standing in front of a building. The ninth photograph shows a young man in a military uniform, standing in front of a building. The tenth photograph shows a young man in a military uniform, standing in front of a building.



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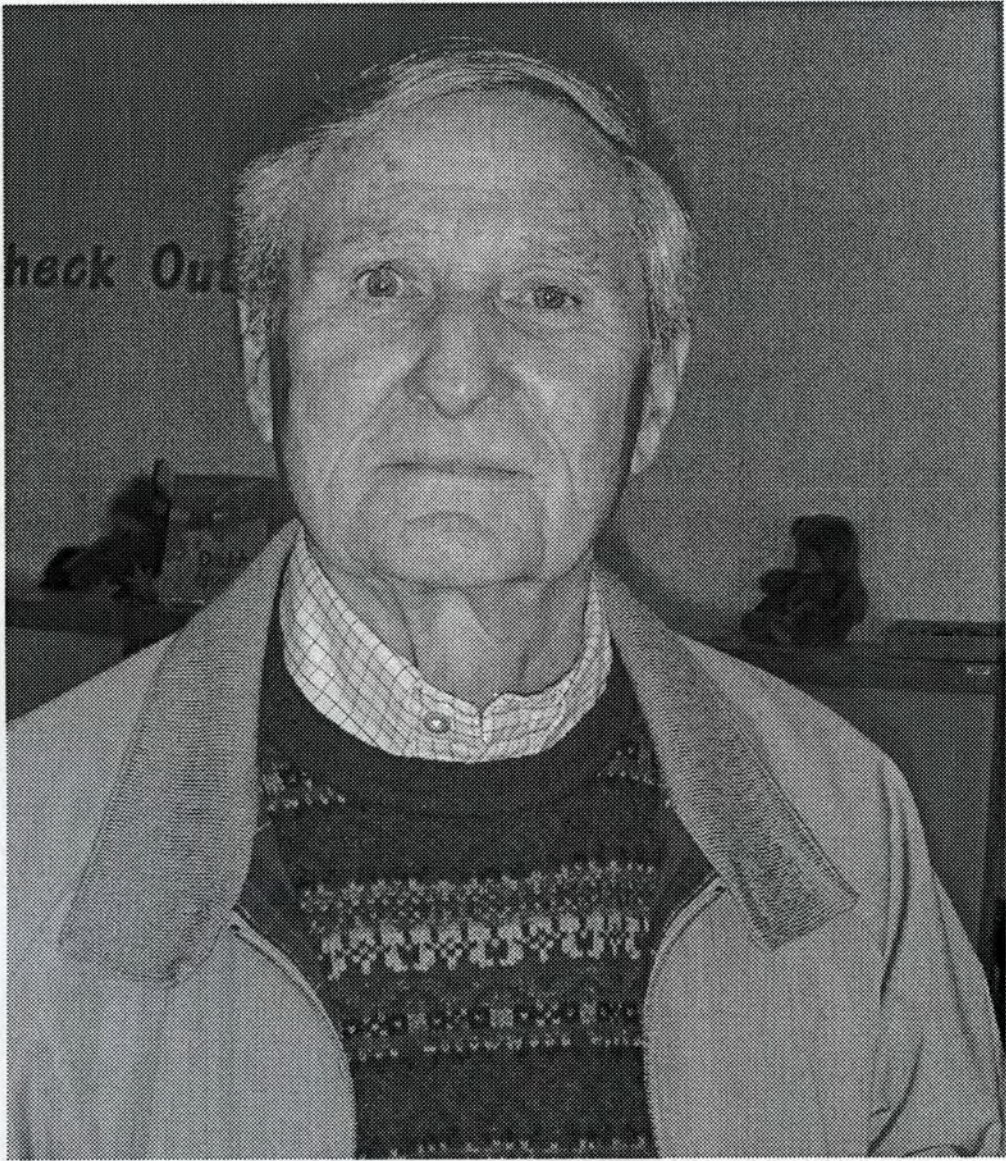
## Richmond Woods

At the suggestion of his father, Richmond Woods, born 10/4/27, took his 8 year old brother to the circus on July 6, 1944. On that hot summer day, their father dropped them off and advised they get seats in the reserved section which would afford the best view of the performance. Richmond noticed that there were wooden chairs set up on platforms and that those platforms were so close together that one could not crawl through. They took seats about halfway up the section on the north side of the big top.

“The lions were at that point performing and someone yelled, ‘Fire!’ We all looked to the right and we saw the flames. We all stood up and an attendant suggested that we all calm down, sit back, ‘We’ll have it extinguished right away.’ So everybody sat down again. We had no sooner sat when flames started to lick the side of the tent. I took my brother - I was unconscious about anybody around me - went forward and obviously we had to walk toward the east. You couldn’t go west because the fire was coming from that direction. We didn’t realize at the time that we were impeded by this caged passageway for the lions getting to the center . . . we understand that several people were, you know . . . In fact, when we were sitting before the performance started, friends of my parents, a woman – a mother and her 8 year old son walked by us, so they were closer to the fire. We ran to this caged area, and it was quite high, so I threw my brother up onto the top - I hustled over. I started to pull him down and two things happened at that time - his leg got caught inside, just his foot – so I wrenched his foot, got that out and, as I looked back, I could see these flames licking the top of the tent. You could feel the heat . . . it was just as if someone had lit a single sheet of newspaper - it went that fast. I pulled him down and then, oh, I just took him, pulled him, tried to carry him and ran as fast as I could. We went out the east side and then I guess through people’s backyards . . . didn’t quite know where we were. We got out to a road and a bus came along. We took the bus to Central Row in Hartford and then transferred because we lived in West Hartford . . . I told my folks how I had seen Mrs. Koob and her son, Herbie. They followed up with Mr. Koob and learned that they did not survive . . . I had seen them because she had walked by and I had yelled down and she waved and smiled. It was a very sad and tragic thing.”

Mr. Woods recalls that in West Hartford many husbands, who had lost wives, put signs with their names out on front lawns and plantings as memorials. “It did subdue the community, there’s no question about it.”

Mr. Woods says he is always concerned about crowds. Though he used to attend the Goodspeed Opera House, he no longer goes because he realizes that elderly people or those with canes would have a difficult time getting out if there were a problem, what with the turmoil and blockages. He advises that people be alert when announcements of exit locations are made in theaters.



Peter Arico, born 5/30/32, lived with his parents and three sisters at 215 Cleveland Avenue in Hartford in 1944. Their backyard abutted a clay bank from which the Spang's Buick Company took material to make their product. Just beyond the clay bank was a wooded area that opened onto the circus grounds.

Each year everyone looked forward to the arrival of the circus. The circus train would be parked on tracks running parallel to North Main Street. The entire circus troupe would proceed up Cleveland Avenue, turn left to Parkers Street, and onto the circus grounds. Whole neighborhoods sat on their porches and on the curbs watching as the performers and clowns gambled along, the caged animals were drawn on wheels, the elephants tramped. The clowns would ask for money to make the tents the animals work which paid their bills for the maintenance of the circus.

# TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

On the night of the fire, Peter's mother and her daughter were in the kitchen. While they stored in the refrigerator, the main performance was under way. A woman took Mrs. Arico upstairs over the top of the tent. Seeing the danger they all quickly left for home, but the panic had already set in. They saw people running for their lives, many injured, others being tripped. There were screams of people and of sirens - the breathless, hot day only worsened the stench of the fire.

The victims were ever direction including through the woods to the north and onto Cleveland Avenue where Peter's family offered water and whatever assistance they could. They allowed people to use their phone, though it was soon impossible to get a free line. The injured were crying there with burns on their skin and shredded clothing. One mother and her child, both of whom were severely injured, were being helped by the Arico's neighbors. The husband was summoned and he managed to drive through the chaos of ambulances, fire hoses, and general confusion. He put down his convertible top to make it more comfortable for them to ride to the hospital -- sadly, they both succumbed to their burns.

Peter is convinced that someone flicked a lit cigarette up onto the tent and that small flame, coupled with the paraffin and gasoline coating, caused the fire to race out of control in minutes. The authorities in charge of the investigation put a 30-day hold on the circus leaving the area. During that period the animals were kept in a fenced-in area on the clay banks behind the Arico home. Peter can still hear the haunting sounds of the animals each night, especially from the elephants -- sounds as if they were weeping.



## Peter Arico

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Each year everyone looked forward to the arrival of the circus. The circus train would be parked on tracks running parallel to North Main Street. The entire circus troupe would proceed up Cleveland Avenue, turn left to Barbour Street, and onto the circus grounds. Whole neighborhoods sat on their porches and on the curbs watching as the performers and clowns gamboled along, the caged animals were drawn on wheels, the elephants marched, and all the circus paraphernalia was drawn to the site. The circus would ask for volunteers to help set up. The stronger boys would pound stakes to secure the tents; the smaller boys would carry water buckets or spread hay for the animals – work which paid fifty cents for the afternoon or free admission to the circus.

On the sixth of July Peter's mother, his three sisters, his mother's friend and her daughter decided to walk up to the circus grounds and take in the sideshows. While they stood in line waiting to buy tickets, they watched as people entered the big top for the matinee performance. Sometime later Mrs. Arico glanced over and saw the flames near the top of the tent. Seeing the danger, they all quickly left for home, but the panic had already set in. They saw people running for their lives, many injured, others being trampled. There were screams of people and of sirens - the breezeless, hot day only worsened the stench of the fire.

Fire victims ran in every direction including through the woods to the north and onto Cleveland Avenue where Peter's family offered water and whatever assistance they could. They allowed people to use their phone, though it was soon impossible to get a free line. The injured were everywhere with burns on their skin and shredded clothing. One mother and her child, both of whom were severely injured, were being helped by the Arico's neighbors. Her husband was summoned and he managed to drive through the chaos of ambulances, fire hoses, and general confusion. He put down his convertible top to make it more comfortable for them to ride to the hospital – sadly, they both succumbed to their injuries.

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## Lois Dunham

Lois Dunham, in her early twenties, was spending time at a cottage on Coventry Lake when she read of the circus fire the morning after it occurred. She got to a telephone and called her mother in Hartford only to hear that the wife and daughter of her mother's brother had perished in the fire.

Gladys Barry and her husband, a Hartford fireman, lived with their only child, Gail Anne, in the Trinity College section of Hartford. Gladys and her daughter, who was about five years old at the time, had gone to the circus on that hot July afternoon in 1944. Mrs. Dunham relates that her mother was called upon to go to the Armory to try to identify her sister-in-law and niece. Her mother first found the body of Gail Anne and, knowing that Gladys would never allow her daughter out of her sight, she knew that Gladys also must have been lost. Indeed, she found her among the victims..

Mrs. Dunham had immediately returned to Hartford to assist the family. She went to the Hartford Police Department to search through the personal effects which were found at the site of the fire. Victims' families were allowed to identify and claim those possessions that they could. Lois knew that her aunt always carried a purse with "everything in it". She identified Gladys' pocketbook which contained all of her personal items, including her identification, but without any money.

The family wanted someone to stay with their lost relatives, so Mrs. Dunham spent one night at the Farley and Molloy Funeral Home in Hartford where the bodies of her aunt and little cousin had been taken. She recalls the sight of many little caskets lined up in one room, including that of her cousin, Gail Anne, who had been the flower girl at her wedding in August of 1942.

As the years passed, Mrs. Dunham's mother, though she had held up well at the time, rarely spoke of the tragedy.

## Kathleen Glynn

Kathleen Glynn, born nearly three years after the Hartford circus fire, remembers as a child hearing her parents speak of the tragedy. Though they tempered their comments in front of their young daughters, she recalls that her father would not allow them to go to an indoor circus or to any event with an enclosed tent. She knew her father had been a photographer but it was not until nearly forty years after his death at age forty-four that she was able to put her story together. That came with the publication of Stewart O'Nan's book, The Circus Fire: A True Story of an American Tragedy and the appearance of the photograph of Little Miss 1565 on page 245, taken by her father.

Robert D. Glynn, born 7/17/18, suffered as a child with a rheumatic heart condition. His illness delayed his education but he was able to graduate from high school at the age of twenty. Sometime later he began his career as the official photographer for the Connecticut State Police Department. In that role, he was called upon to document various accidents and tragedies, including the circus fire. He was especially touched by the little girl whose body went unclaimed in the aftermath. Mr. Glynn went to the Taylor and Modeen funeral home, intent on having the child appear most presentable. It was there that he took the now-famous photograph.

Kathleen remembers her father as a very sensitive and caring man, especially kind to his wife and young daughters. Her father revisited memories of Little Miss 1565 twelve years later with the cancer death of his own daughter, age seven. Kathleen believes these tragedies broke his heart and he carried that sorrow with him for the rest of his life.

In recent years Kathleen has visited the Ringling Museum of the American Circus in Sarasota, Florida. There she saw on display the picture that her father took so long ago and that had so deeply affected his life.

## **Linda Holyfield for Mary Hindle**

Mary Malerba Hindle, born 11/29/16, lived with her husband, Edmund Jr., and their five year old son, Edmund III, on Lenox Street in Manchester in the summer of 1944. Mary was very close to her mother-in-law, Ada Hindle, who lived in Norwich. Mary had always wanted to go to a circus so Ada obtained three tickets to the Hartford circus matinee on July 6, 1944. She came to Manchester and she, Mary and her grandson, known as Sonny, took the bus to Hartford to attend the show.

Mary remembers a very hot, sticky day and having to keep all of the bus windows open. The circus grounds provided a gay atmosphere with people everywhere, clowns, and elephants. They found their seats near the top of the reserved bleachers on the north side of the big top, about two-thirds of the way from the main entrance toward the orchestra.

The Wallendas were getting ready to begin their act and the elephants were coming in. Mary glanced kitty-cornered across the way to the right and noticed a small flame up high on the tent. She nudged her mother-in-law and asked if that was a problem. Ada recognized the danger and started them down the bleachers just as others began screaming and pushing. The planks of the bleachers began collapsing and Mary caught her foot in them as Ada and Sonny continued down. When Mary finally managed to free herself, having lost her pocketbook and her shoe, she reached the bottom and saw Sonny standing alone and crying – Ada was trapped under part of the falling bleachers. Mary grabbed Sonny under her left arm and tried to pull Ada free with her right hand but couldn't. The tent was collapsing in flame at this point and the surge of the crowd pushed Mary out of the tent, with Sonny still protected under her left arm.

Burned on her left arm, shoulder and her back, her hair combs melted into her scalp, Mary was in shock. She felt she must get home and tried to get to a bus stop though she had no money. A police officer found her and Sonny and took them to McCook Hospital. Sonny had only minor burns since his mother had managed to protect him with her own body but she had severe burns. The hospital was chaotic with victims lined up on litters in the hallways. Edmund Hindle was called and brought Sonny home.

Miraculously, Mary recognized her mother-in-law on a gurney across the hall. She was badly injured but lucid. She suggested that Mary, who was a devote Catholic, be transferred to Saint Francis Hospital for treatment. She remained there for three months, undergoing seven skin grafts. When she returned home her doctor came three times a week for the next ten months to minister to her, changing dressings and monitoring her healing. Sadly, Ada was too critical to move from McCook – she died of her injuries on July 28, her birthday.

Mary has endured a burden of guilt over the loss of her mother-in-law. She has felt that had she not had that desire to see the circus, Ada would not have perished. To this day she must always have a window cracked open in any room she's in and she can't stand to be enclosed, always insisting on the door to her room being left ajar.

Her lasting impression of this experience is how quickly things can go from pure gaiety to tragedy. She recalls singing to herself along with the music and, suddenly, a spear of blackness. As the orchestra continued with "Stars and Stripes Forever", she felt anger that they would play such happy music at a time like that.

Mary, true to her abiding faith, advises that one should never get too far away from one's God because we never know when we'll meet Him.

## Dorothy Kelly

Dorothy Kelly was celebrating her twenty-fifth birthday on July 6, 1944. She and her husband lived in the Parkville section of Hartford off Bartholomew Avenue. They were planning to go to the matinee performance of the circus that day, but since it was so hot, they decided to go to the evening show instead. That afternoon they were shopping in a local hardware store when the owner received a telephone call with the news that the circus was on fire. He knew his wife and child had gone to the performance that afternoon so he promptly closed the store and left for the circus grounds.

Dorothy had been trained by the Red Cross in the Nurse's Aide Corps in 1942. The training involved six to nine months of working daily in the hospital with registered nurses. The Corps was formed to help fill the need for nurses who had been called into wartime service.

When she and her husband returned home that day, the radio was calling for volunteers to come in to aid the fire victims. Dorothy changed into her uniform and headed to a bus stop. A man came along and, recognizing her uniform, offered to drive her to McCook Hospital.

The scene at McCook was very busy but quietly efficient with doctors and nurses ministering to patients and many people in and out looking for their loved ones. Dorothy assisted the nurses for the next several hours. She says she will never forget the experience of going into one room and finding a patient named Dorothy Kelley, who later died of her injuries. After that first day, Dorothy did not return to the hospital because the situation then called for more advanced aides to work with patients.

Dorothy credits the training she received with the Nurse's Corps as preparing her well for helping others with medical care as the years went by. Though the circus fire experience is something that's always in her mind, she doesn't feel bothered with long-lasting effects from it. However, she chose never to go to a circus after that.

## Eleanor Leone

Eleanor Leone was 22 years old and working in the Metropolitan department of Hartford Fire and Accident Insurance Company at the time of the circus fire. In addition to her regular employment, she volunteered as a nurse's aide at Hartford Hospital. During her stint as a nurse's aide, she became acquainted with Dr. Walter Weissenborn, a staff doctor at Hartford Hospital and the county medical examiner. She thought it was the Red Cross that organized recovery activities at the Hartford Armory, set up as a morgue for fire victims.

Eleanor was called to help with victim identification at the Hartford Armory. As she recalls, she worked there from early afternoon until about 10 pm assisting family members who had come to the Armory to identify their missing relatives. She describes a gruesome, devastating scene. One of her co-workers at the Hartford, a man named Glen, claimed the bodies of his two children, around 10 and 12 years of age – his daughter was found with her hands in a position of prayer and his son died open-mouthed and with his arms above his head. Glen was overcome and “was never the same again”.

Many of the victims perished as a result of the crush and the trampling as circus-goers attempted to escape. She saw the young girl, who came to be known as Little Miss 1565, and could never understand how she was not identified since her lovely face was intact except for redness on one side. Mrs. Hoffman, Eleanor's dedicated fourth grade teacher, also died with her children in the fire.

Eleanor still gets emotional to this day when she thinks of the aftermath of the fire. Though her whole life has been devoted to helping others through such volunteer activities as tutoring children or caring for the sisters at MercyKnoll, she was never able again to work with the physically handicapped or with sick children. She never returned to the Armory or attended a circus. “Part of me was lost after that.” She recalls that her sister-in-law was to have taken Eleanor's five year old brother, Tommy, to the circus that day but, because she had such a severe headache, they didn't go. For that, Eleanor has been grateful these past 63 years.

Eleanor feels angry when she recalls the event. She finds it inexcusable that this could have happened – a careless cigarette, the tent that was coated with paraffin – “It could have been prevented. It took so many wonderful lives, especially children of all ages.”

## Omer and Dorothy Lessard

At the time of the circus fire, Omer Lessard, born 9/20/31, lived with his family on Howard Street, across from the Hartford Armory. He and his 12 year old brother, Donald, went to the circus on that hot afternoon. They entered the big top and took seats high on the bleachers about 25 feet from the entrance on the right side.

As the performance went on, something made them aware of a problem and, when they turned around, the flames were right behind them and about halfway up the tent. Everyone began climbing down the bleachers and, in the chaotic rush, a middle-aged woman in a blue dress fell directly in front of Omer and he accidentally stepped on her. To this day he doesn't know if she managed to get out of the tent and he is haunted by that memory.

Omer and Donald exited through the main entrance and went out onto Barbour Street. At the time, their father drove a truck for Harry Lappen's Furniture on Main Street in Hartford. By some fortuitous stroke of luck, he came along in that truck, found his sons, and got them safely out of the area. In the neighborhood around the Armory, the stench of the burn victims hung heavy for many days. Omer and his brother went over to the Armory because they felt "we had to see it".

Coincidentally, Dorothy Quint, born 11/5/34, was at the circus with a group of children from Children's Village in West Hartford. Dorothy's father had died leaving her widowed mother with six children. Mrs. Quint had then taken a position as housemother in one of the cottages at the Village and she and her family lived there. Dorothy and her cottage group were at the circus with their housemother, Dorothy Bowman. They were seated across the way from Omer and his brother, near the animal chute. When the fire broke out Mrs. Bowman, a large, burly, take-charge woman, directed her girls down from the bleachers and out through an opening where a man had slit the canvas with a knife. They somehow got to the Village station wagon and were whisked quickly and safely away. Mrs. Lessard notes that nowadays, when tragedy occurs, grief counselors are quickly summoned. In this case they were told, "Now, girls, you won't talk about this," and there was no further discussion.

Three years later, as teenagers, Omer Lessard and Dorothy Quint met in Hartford and, in the course of events, were married. They will celebrate their 55<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in March of 2008.

Mr. Lessard experienced nightmares for years after the fire whenever the subject came up. To this day he feels guilt when he thinks of that woman who fell in front of him – he believes that many victims died, not from the fire, but from being trampled in the panic that ensued. Mrs. Lessard considers herself very fortunate in that she had someone with the presence of mind to take charge and get her out without the severe trauma that others experienced.

Both of the Lessards remain vigilant about exits in crowded places and they both feel very strongly that enclosed tents for public performances, even today, should not be allowed under any circumstances.

## Irene Moore

Mrs. Moore (nee Johnson), b.7/25/20, lived with her parents and her three year old son at 70 South Main Street in Manchester at the time of the fire. Her first husband was serving overseas during the war. Her father, Fred Z. Johnson, was employed as personal chauffeur to Frank Cheney, Jr., for whom he worked a total of 45 years. In July of 1944, her dad was in his early 70's.

On July 6, 1944 Mr. Johnson planned to drive Paul Cheney to the circus in Hartford. Paul was a bachelor who had come to live with his brother, Frank, Jr., after the death of Mary Cheney. Paul was in his 60's at this time and was a quiet man who had a great many interests, particularly music.

Mr. Johnson wanted to take his grandson, Irene's son, along to the circus with Paul. He was very angry with Irene when she refused to let her son go, even though she couldn't explain why she didn't want him to go along – "You know all children love circuses".

When the fire broke out in the big top, Mr. Johnson got Paul out of the tent and to a safe place. He then returned to the tent and got hold of several children, had them hold onto his belt, and led them out of the fire's path. Irene believes he went back in more than once and each time was able to bring children out safely. Mr. Johnson also had been a fireman in Manchester and Irene thinks it was from this experience that his instincts took over. When he finally returned home to Manchester, his clothes were blackened and he was very shook up. He chose not to talk too much about the experience then or as time went on.

Talk of the fire went on for days and weeks and the family listened to developments on the radio. Sometime in the 60's she went to visit the grave of the unknown child who was lost in the fire, but she has no desire to see the circus fire memorial in Hartford as this was such a terrible event.



## Russell Vibberts

Russell Vibberts, born August 21, 1927, lived with his family on Silver Lane in East Hartford. On the afternoon of July 6, 1944 he was working in a tobacco field on Hills Street not far from his home. His Aunt Mazie from West Hartford had called him the previous day to ask if he'd like to go to the circus matinee on the sixth. His teenage cousin, Jackie Vibberts, was visiting her from Atlanta and a day at the circus seemed like a good idea. Russell decided he didn't really want to go to the show and chose to work instead.

That afternoon the wife of the owner of the farm came out into the field and told them that the circus was on fire. As they turned toward the west they could see a black cloud of smoke over Hartford. Two of the young women who lived down the street from Russell and who were working tobacco with him, were also in training as student nurses in Hartford. They were called to report to the hospital to aid in the recovery efforts.

Russell's cousin, Jackie, and Aunt Mazie had gone to the matinee performance. They sat close to the main entrance and were able to escape unharmed, though they felt the extreme heat of the fire. Russell considers himself very lucky that he had chosen not to go with them. He feels that with three people they might have had to sit in a different section and may not have been able to get out as easily.

The next day Russell went into Hartford to the site of the fire. The area was roped off but he could see the charred seats and the overall destruction caused by the fire. He said the newspapers were loaded for days with items relating to the fire and its victims.



## Guy Cummings

Guy Cummings submitted a written account of his experience during the circus fire on July 6, 1944.

“This day was to be an exciting one for our family, Mom and Dad (Horace and Audrey Cummings), me (12), and my little brother, Jeffrey, (4), as we were going to ... the Circus. It was a hot day and the traffic up to Barbour Street was quite heavy. We got a good parking space in a lot about two and a half blocks from the circus grounds and walked up to the entrance and through the area of animals in cages and specialty performers like sword swallowers, bearded lady and other oddities. The most memorable thing we saw was the gorilla, Gargantua, who had been featured in their advertising.

“Our seats were in Section C which was to the right a short way from the entrance. The seats were on bleachers and we were in about Row 5 or 6 from the front. I don't recall how many rows there were to the back. We sat for a while as the bleachers filled up and we watched preparations for the first acts, wild animals and high wire acts. They really hadn't got much chance to start when there was an enormous intake of breath from all the people in the tent as a small circle of fire over about Section A began and very quickly spread over the entire tent. At that point my Dad picked up my brother and went back and up the bleachers and must have jumped down to the ground. He never really told me what he did and my brother was too young to remember in later years. At that time Mom was heavy and so she and I went down to the front of the section which had a waist high barrier in front of the first row. She couldn't get over it so I had to give her a big push and she fell on her knees in front of the fence. I climbed over, helped her up, and then we began to run to the far end of the tent where the band was playing and there were two exits. By the time we got part of the way to the exit, the tent was gone and by the time we got to the exit itself, the tent poles were falling and the band was running out, too. Scary doesn't begin to describe this situation.

“Mom and I got outside and didn't know how to proceed since Dad and my brother had gone in a different direction. In the meantime, one of my distant cousins a bit older than me came up and said he couldn't find his family. We told him that if we ran into them we would tell them he was okay. I don't remember how long it was, but Dad and my brother showed up and we walked back to the car. The whole area was crowded with people who were devastated ... and I guess we were lucky to be together. ... You could hear sirens from ambulances and fire trucks which contributed to the scary atmosphere. We found we were lucky that no one was injured. Mother had a slight burn on her shoulder and arm and the top of my hair was singed.

“We got home and told the neighbors what had happened as it appeared no one had been listening to the radio. We then found out that several of the people down the street from us had also gone to the circus ... We lived in the community of Hillstown ... It was an old section of town and had lots of family groups ... The people that seemed to be missing were two of my father's first cousins and three of their small children. The boy we had met outside the circus tent was the son of one of the cousins.

“My Dad went over to Hartford with his brother and his uncle ... they found one of the children in the hospital who died that night, and the bodies of one of the cousins and the other two children. One of his cousins wasn't found and, when the majority of the bodies had been identified and claimed, those remaining did not include her. It was thought that someone had claimed her body by mistake as the woman's body remaining wasn't hers. The cousins who died were Viola Locke and Edith Budrick and the children were Elaine Locke, Edith Budrick and Joseph Budrick.

“This was a devastating experience for anyone who was there that day. I have never been comfortable in crowds since that day and would not attend anything held in a large arena of that nature for many years. I also always knew where the exit was in any theater or enclosed space and, in fact, still look for them to this day.”

## Lorna E. Hastings

In December of 1998 Lorna Hastings wrote a letter to Stewart O’Nan describing her experience in the Hartford circus fire. At the time he was doing research for his book, The Circus Fire: A True Story of an American Tragedy. Mrs. Hastings has shared that letter with the Mary Cheney Library for the purpose of “preserving the local history as well as the history of Connecticut for all generations to come”.

“I was nine and one half years old when my father took my eight year old brother and I to the circus. We also took the neighbor girl who was a few years older than I. We had seats in the 13<sup>th</sup> row, mid way down. When the fire broke out my father, of course looked for the fastest way out. He noticed that the vast majority of people seemed to be heading for the exit which was to our right, probably 3-4 sections away. He also took note of where the fire was at that time and decided that was not the way to go, especially when he saw a woman’s hair catch on fire. He decided to go to the back of the bleachers, away from the fire, even though it would be quite a drop to the ground. He got the neighbor girl on a support pole and had her shimmy down. Then he lowered me by holding my hands and then letting me drop. He put my brother on his back and also shimmied down the pole.

“So many images go through my mind during the time the fire was noticed and when we arrived at our car. I landed on the ground, unhurt, next to a woman who had either fallen or been pushed and was apparently unable to get up before someone else had landed on top of her; how my brother’s shoe got caught in the folding chair and my father trying to free him and also keep others from pushing us over where we stood; a man holding up the side of the tent for people to get out and telling me it’ll be ok, my mother won’t be mad (I was crying because I had lost a handkerchief that my mother gave me with instructions not to lose it); seeing a woman, shoeless, crying for her baby; my father having to pick me up because I was terrified of the elephants that were tied on the sidewalk and we had to go past them to get to the car (I was a pretty small kid for my age and their feet looked extremely large to me). We couldn’t find the neighbor girl after exiting the tent, so my father said he would go back to look for her after putting us in the car. You can’t imagine the relief we all felt when we approached the car and there was the girl, I think her name was Barbara, sitting in the back seat looking scared but just as relieved to see us coming. My mother was near hysteria when she heard the news. She had stayed home with my 3 month old brother and wondered if she would ever see us again. We were all very lucky that day. Thank God!

“I’m 64 years old now, but that experience will never leave me. What started out to be a wonderful day for all, turned into a tragedy in a few short hours. I still go around checking for fire whenever I think I smell something burning. For many, many years, I was nervous about riding in a car when the first cold weather arrived and the car heater was needed. I would always think the car was going to catch on fire, my hand was always on the handle of the door. When I was married and had children, one of the reasons we bought our first house was the fact that there were 4 entryways and every bedroom had a window above a roof of a porch below. I ran my children through a fire drill twice a year.”

## Elaine Mrosek

Elaine Mrosek submitted a written account of her memories of the Hartford circus fire.

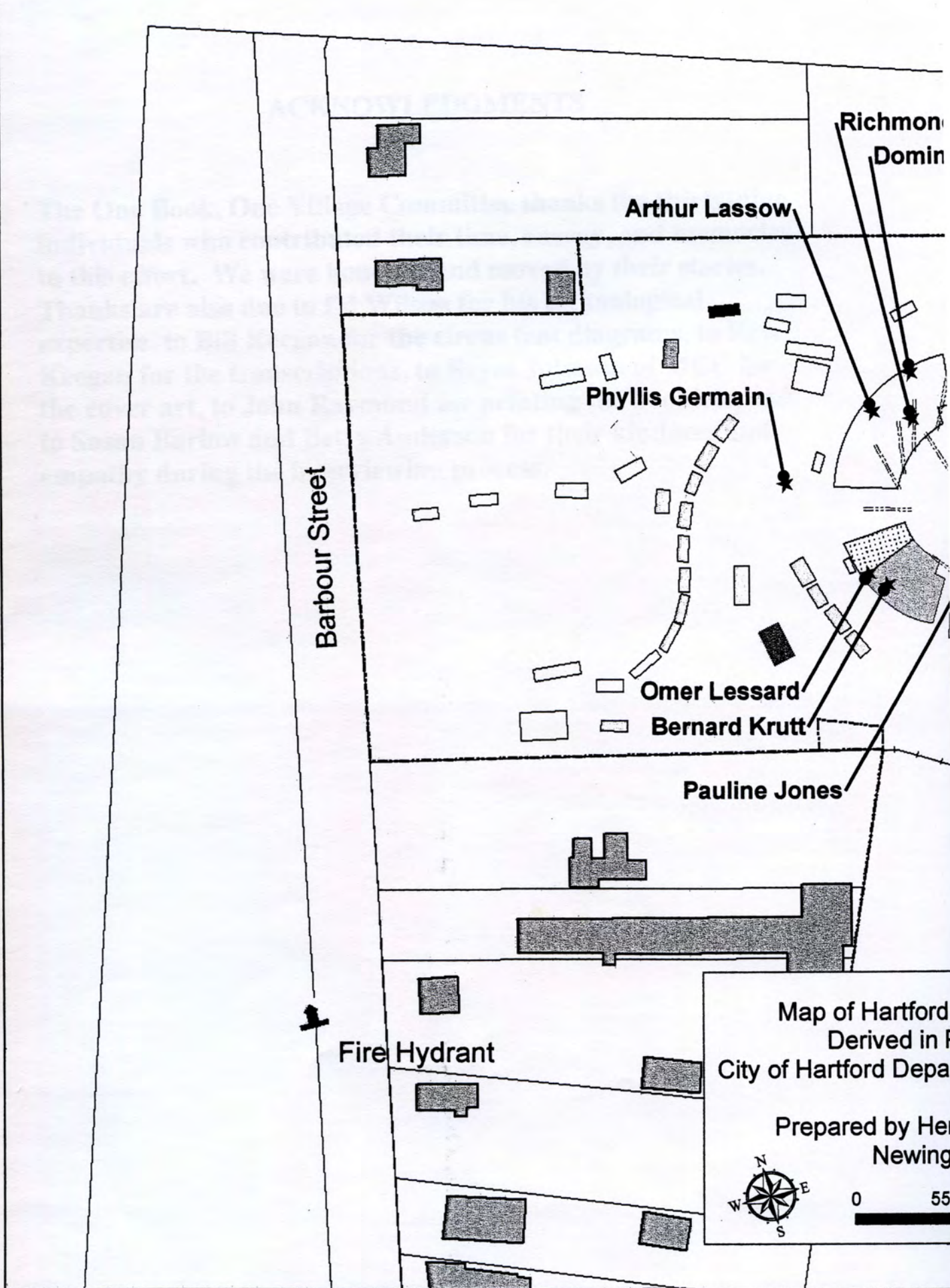
“In July of 1944, my name was Elaine Webster and I lived at 29 White Street in Rockville, CT. I was a sophomore at the University of Connecticut and was spending some vacation time with my parents before returning to summer school.

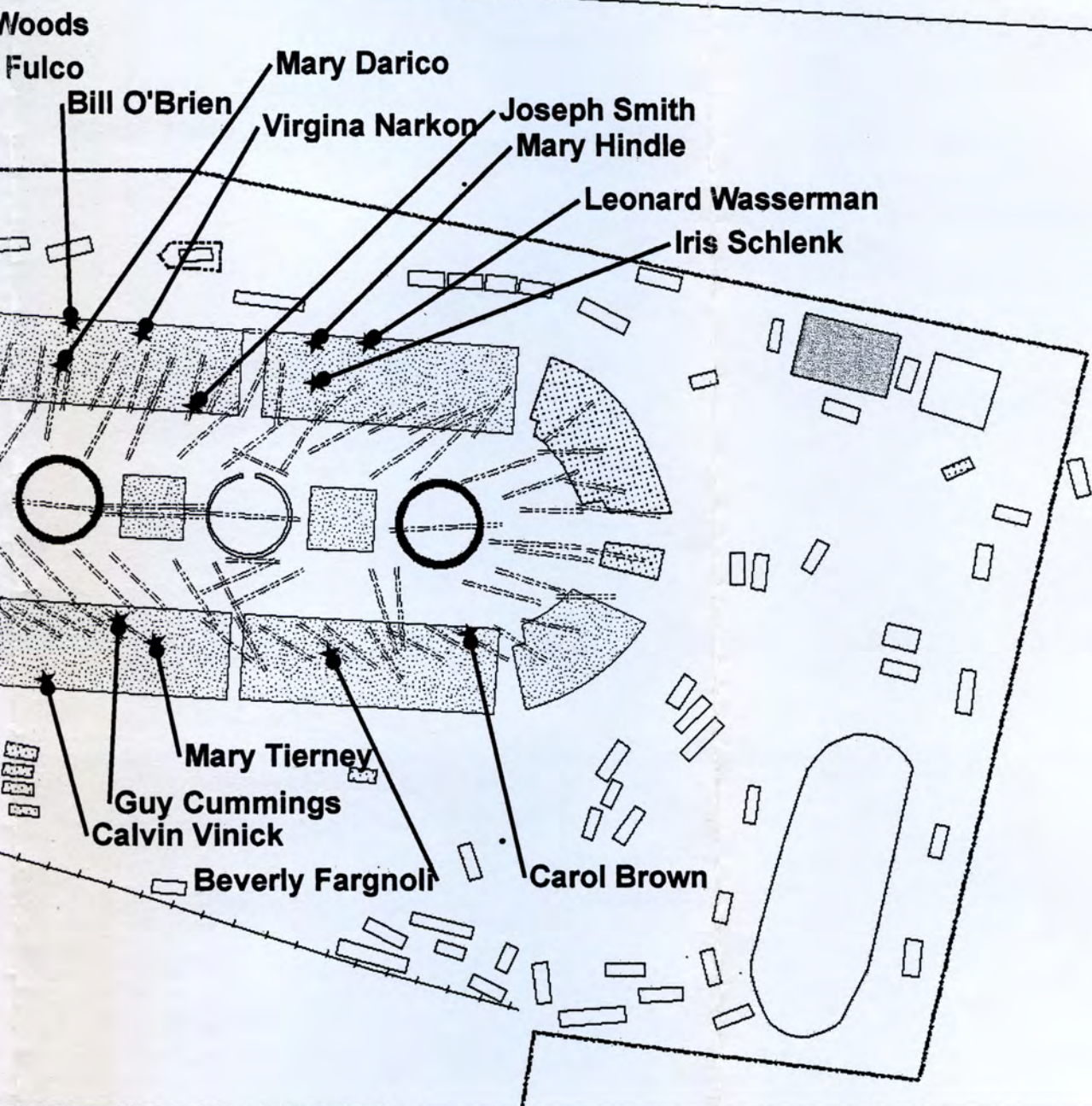
“A neighbor took her three children to the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus during one of those days they were performing in Hartford. Her name was Mrs. Kuhnly and her three children were Georgiana, Roberta and Barry – I cannot remember their ages.

“Sometime during the afternoon word of the fire spread all along our street and we knew the Kuhnlys had gone to the afternoon performance. There was great concern and finally word reached Mr. Kuhnly. Later that day he received word that his wife and eldest daughter, Georgiana, had been killed but Roberta and Barry had been saved. My mother saw Mr. Kuhnly collapse on his front lawn.

“My older sister was a secretary at the Aetna Life Insurance Company in Hartford and she recalls that, when word of the fire was received, men began gathering their belongings and ran outside as fast as they could to try to find out what was happening as many of them had families at the circus.

“Our family physician, Dr. Metcalf, also lost a sister in the fire, I believe.”





Woods  
Fulco

Mary Darico

Bill O'Brien

Virginia Narkon

Joseph Smith  
Mary Hindle

Leonard Wasserman

Iris Schlenk

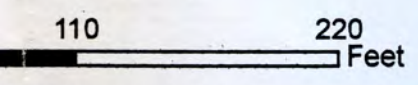
Mary Tierney

Guy Cummings  
Calvin Vinick

Beverly Fagnoli

Carol Brown

Circus Fire, July 1944  
 Part from Maps by  
 Department of Engineering, 1944  
 Heritage Consultants LLC  
 Danbury, CT 2008



**Legend**

- ★ Interviewees
- ⦿ Fire Hydrant
- Fallen Poles
- Fence
- ▨ Destroyed
- ▨ Ring
- ▨ Ring
- ▨ Ring
- ▨ Animal Wagons
- ▨ Band Tent
- ▨ Buildings
- ▨ Charred
- ▨ Dressing Tent
- ▨ Giraffe Cages
- ▨ Intact
- ▨ Office
- ▨ Ticket Office
- ▨ Property Boundary



*One Book, One Village 2008*