

The Circus Comes to Montclair


CONTRIBUTED BY MIKE FARRELLY, MONTCLAIR TOWN HISTORIAN

ON JULY 21, 1888 the Montclair Times announced that the circus was coming to town for "the first time in almost forty years." This reporter was unable to find out why a circus hadn't been here for such a long time. If forced to guess, I would say that the period after the Civil War was financially hard on American circuses. Many of them consolidated. As they became larger they found that they could only appear in larger cities. The Walter L. Main Circus performed here on July 25, 1888 in the vacant lot next to Mullen's Livery. The spot is now an Exxon station on Bloomfield Ave and the parking lot next to the Greek Taverna. The Main Circus featured Hazel, the performing Shetland pony, Bigelow, the "strong man" who out-pulled a team of horses, Monsieur Leonard who lifted a horse with his teeth and Dan Rice, "the horse with a brain" who pretended to die, then got up and picked out the most beautiful young lady in the audience and the homeliest man. Dan Rice, the horse, was named after the person, Dan Rice, the most famous clown in the early 19th century. A ticket cost 25 cents.

One circus, or another, came to town just about every year after that. The Main Circus was back in 1890. They had just merged with the Van Amberg Circus and were billing themselves "a Mastodon Show" complete with a museum, caravan, aquarium, horse fair and all the other "circus et ceteras except the objectionable ones." In June of 1893 Hunting's Great Railroad Circus showed up promising "prominent acts," "trained horses, elephants and dogs." The managers of the circus "wished it to be especially known that all efforts will be made to have the

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performance given in a manor to suit the most fastidious". Scribner and Smith Circus arrived in October, 1893 with: 200 men and women, 50 acts, 15 "lady" performers and 5 "funny" clowns. Peck and Sague's "Enormous Show" arrived in June of the following year, 1894 promising a circus, a museum and a hippodrome with trained horses. They set their tents up on Grove St. near Glenridge Ave. Tickets were still only 25 cents each. In August 1903 the Gentry Brothers "Famous Shows" Circus erected their tents at the Maple Ave. School, now Glenfield. The main feature of the Gentry Brothers show was a herd of baby elephants and "Liliputian" camels.

We won't mention every circus that came to town. Fast forward to 1916 when the Clark and Wilson "Greatest Wild Animal" show appeared on Elm St. in May of 1916. Their biggest attraction was a lion riding a horse. In 1926 a new kind of circus appeared: Gates Flying Circus, which featured daredevil pilots performing amazing feats in, or on, airplanes. Clyde Pangborn, sometimes known as "Upside down Pangborn" and Aaron "Duke" Krantz, a wing-walker and probably the best known stunt pilot of the 20th century, were the main attractions. Spark's Circus which prided itself as being a "high grade, clean circus, intelligently arranged" show came in May of 1929. The featured Sparks performers were: the Nelson Family, acrobats, known for "foot juggling", where one performer lays on his/her back and "juggles" another person with their feet, Harriet Guilfoyle and her trained leopards, Laverne Hauser and her trained lions, Franz Woska and his trained Bengal tigers, the "Flying Walters", an aerial act and the Guice Family, bareback riders and acrobats.

Circuses continued to visit Montclair in the following decades. The Downie Brothers Circus and Wild West Show appeared here several times during the 1930s. The Downie Brothers Circus was the first circus to be transported by truck instead of train. They usually set up tents at Essex Field, which became Woodman's

Field and is now part of the Aubrey Lewis Sports Complex. The Hagenbeck and Wallace Circus visited in 1934; featuring Clyde Beaty the world famous animal "lion tamer," who later developed a circus of his own. Circuses came to Montclair throughout the 40s, 50s, 60s, and even the 70s, but the nature of circuses started to change. People began to feel that the treatment of circus animals was cruel. Circuses stopped traveling; they became more permanent fixtures in large theaters. Acts became more choreographed, like the Cirque du Soleil.

Did Montclair ever have a circus of its own? Well, sort of. In 1912 The Commonwealth Club decided to put a full blown circus together to raise money for the police department and the fire department. Some of the performers were local, most were imported. For 5 days in June of 1912 the club set up a "city of canvas" in Harrison Park (now Edgemont Park); complete with street fairs and side shows. Fortune tellers, knife throwers and all the usual side show performers displayed their skills. The big tent was big enough for an audience of 3,600. They were treated to a cavalcade of horsemen led by Buffalo Bill himself, a variety of acrobats and clowns, trapeze artists and all sorts of aerial acts. There were merry-go-rounds and ferris wheels, including one giant ferris wheel. One of the comic highlights was the "Suffragette Parade" poking fun at women who agitated for the right to vote. It would not be considered politically correct today. It would not have been much of a circus without animals. There were elephants and camels and many others on display. Tickets were a princely 50 cents, but children under 12 could still get in for a quarter. The club raised \$13,000 for the police and firemen. A wonderful time was had by all. ■

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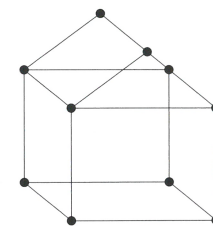
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