

After 70 Years:

Vivid memories of the circus fire on July 6, 1944

by Jeanette (Burke) Hughes, age 81 as of June 2014

During World War II, my family, the Burkes, moved from Rutland VT to Hartford CT to join our father (Thomas E. Burke) while he was employed for war work at Colt's (firearms) Manufacturing Company. Before the war, he had sold new cars at the dealership that he owned with his brothers, but during the war there were no new cars to sell to civilians. My father applied for family housing, and many months later we moved into new housing: Charter Oak Terrace. Our neighbors were war workers from all over the United States. For instance, our next door neighbors at Charter Oak Terrace were from Vermont's capital, Montpelier – Max and Trudy Greene and their son Max George.

Across the courtyard from us at Charter Oak Terrace, with back yards facing each other, was another nice family, the Akins, with three daughters and a toddler son. In early July, my mother read in the *Hartford Times* that the Ringling Brothers Circus was coming to Hartford. My mother (Eda Burke) decided to hire Ethel Akin (age 14 or 15, but with the maturity of a 30-year-old) to take our family's oldest three (of five) children to a circus matinee. (My kindergarten-age youngest sister Irene had gone to Shriner's Circus with Max George and his mother one week prior.) Our mother would stay home on July 6 with Irene and one-year-old John, our youngest sibling. It was a Thursday, so my father at work at Colt's.

The day (one month after D-Day) dawned very hot and humid but we were eager to see the clown Emmett Kelly and the Flying Wallendas, etc. Four of us (my 10-year-old sister Joanne, our 7-year-old brother Lenny, and my 11-year-old self, all led by neighbor/friend Ethel Akin) left home around Noon to transfer from one bus to the next to get across town; Ethel was a Hartford native who knew her way.

Once we arrived at the circus, all wearing shorts, Lenny right away bought a turtle that he would carry for hours in a small covered container until we returned home. Then we purchased the four tickets and entered the tent, impressed by the size, it being, after all, the largest tent in the world at the time. We chose bleacher seats, about five feet up, hoping to catch a breeze through the nearby tent flap.

Far off but directly across the tent from us were many servicemen in uniform seated in rows of wooden folding chairs with more bleachers behind them. Thousands of people were still arriving at about 2:00 p.m. We all sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” and watched the first wild animals enter, from far to our left. The first acrobat was dressed as a lion. There was a dancing bear. I saw the Flying Wallendas climb ladders to take their places before their first performance of the day. But before we had been there long, the band switched to the fast-paced “Stars and Stripes Forever,” which the circus workers knew was their signal of an emergency – and the need for the wild animals to be led away from the crowds.

Soon I saw flames, about ten or twelve inches high, on the wood shavings below the feet of the servicemen seated straight across from us. Ethel was seated to my left, so I whispered to her: “fire” and pointed. She said: “Come on, kids; we will have to jump.” We leapt down from the bleachers; and by that time others had noticed some flames and were crushing toward the tent flaps and exits. We got out of the tent by crawling under the tent wall behind where we had been seated. A man was using a penknife to slice life-saving openings into the tent’s heavy canvas.

We continued to do as Ethel instructed, hanging tight to each other, moving quickly up a grassy incline until we were away from the tent. Within five to seven minutes, the huge tent was collapsing with untold hundreds of people trying to escape. We heard, but tended not to look back, knowing that it couldn’t be good.

Ethel caught her breath and told us, “This is huge and it will be reported on the local radio; we’ve got to find a phone and call my mother, so that both she and your mother will know that we are okay.” [NOTE: Ethel Akin’s family had been Hartford residents for years, therefore they had a phone. Due to the wartime shortages and priorities, by the time our family’s request for a home phone installation was approved, we had moved back to Vermont!]

After trying a few Barbour Street homes without success, one lady let Ethel enter to make a call from the kind stranger’s phone, letting her mother know that we four would be coming home safe. It took hours – standing in line and then crowding onto one over-packed bus after another - but thanks to Ethel’s foresight, we weren’t in a rush, as our parents knew that we were unharmed, headed home.

AFTER THE FIRE

Much of the news coverage of the fire and its aftermath was shielded from my siblings and me, but we knew that it was an enormously sad tragedy with many casualties, many hospitalizations, and many funerals – including for the many children who did not survive. I did, however read in the newspaper a list of the 167 names of people killed in the fire. I was so sad to read the first and last name of my schoolmate Sylvia. What a great relief it was to see her when school re-opened in September! It seems that there had been two people with the same name; my school friend had not died; it must have been someone else with the same first and last names. Serious nightmares, experienced by all of us, kept my mother up during the nights for a couple of weeks, but we were safe. Our brother Lenny's turtle was not his pet for long; normally kept in a goldfish-type bowl that sat outside a large kitchen window, this circus turtle managed to "run away."

BEFORE THE FIRE

I don't know what it was like to be one of the young hospital patients in Hartford in mid-July 1944, but I do have memories of being one there just seven months earlier. In early December of 1943, my sister Irene (turning five years old later that month) and I (age 10-1/2) were both admitted to Hartford Hospital for tonsillectomies. I agreed to sleep in a long crib so that Irene could be across from me in the same ward, near the entrance. Mind you, during wartime, shortages were everywhere. But bloodied bed sheets from my crib were turned top-to-bottom, to be re-used instead of laundered! I remember thinking that my mother would be willing to wash the sheets that Irene and I slept on, if they would let her.

In the middle of the third night of our hospitalization, I woke to the sound of hospital staff who were rushing to the bedside of my neighbor, six-year-old Russell. His parents were wailing for their only child, who had just died from a heart ailment following a tonsillectomy. My little sister slept through that shocking drama, and I kept it a secret so that Irene wouldn't be scared during our recoveries.

Of course, our family and many others have always felt fortunate to be among the thousands of survivors of "the Day the Clowns Cried." Knowing of the hospital staffing shortages that I had previously witnessed, I could only hope that the local hospitals could somehow take good care of all of those burned and injured victims – many as young as my siblings and me.