

A Man's Tender Search for a Name for

Little Miss

1565

by HENRY SUYDAM

Late next week a plumpish grey-haired man will drive from his home in Hartford, Connecticut to Northwood cemetery on the outskirts of the city. He will park and walk to a spot he has visited every July 6th for the last 17 years. He will kneel and place a handful of flowers on the grave of a child he never knew in life but has grown close to in death.

The man's name is Thomas Barber. The child's name is not known. Her gravestone bears only the strange inscription "Little Miss" 1565. She is an unidentified victim of the terrible Hartford circus fire which took 169 lives. Through all those years Tom Barber has been searching for the identity of the little girl. Today he is no closer to her name than when he first saw her lying in a morgue.

Hartford was steaming hot on Thursday, July 6, 1944, but 7,000 people had packed into the circus bigtop to watch the greatest show on earth. Detective Tom Barber, assigned to the pickpocket detail, craned anxiously near the main entrance trying to spot his own two children and their uncle in the matinee crowd. Apparently they had not yet arrived.

Barber may have been the first man to see it—a tiny glow near the top of the great canvas, the size and color of an orange. A breeze stirred the hot summer air and in seconds Barber was standing in the middle of the most horrible holocaust in the circus' history. Barber dashed outside and around to the east end of the tent. Panic—wild and ugly—had already struck. Piled up against the leopard chute blocking the aisle were scores of writhing people. He watched in disbelief as ropes burned through and poles came crashing down, raining searing death on the agonized jam at the animal chute. He thanked God his own two children had not turned up and quickly joined in the grisly job of carrying the bodies out. One of them was that of a small blond girl about 7 years old. Her burns were neither widespread nor deep. Except for the left cheek, her face was virtually unmarked. (It was later determined that she had died of asphyxiation.)

That evening Barber was ordered to go to the armory and join fellow detective Edward Lowe in helping organize the grim business of identifying the bodies. "I went home first to change clothes and take a bath," he recalls. "Harry and Gloria, my kids, were home. Their uncle had never called to take them to the circus." Barber always thought of himself as a tough cop but the scene at the armory shook him. "It was bad enough

with the heat and the smell," he says. "But you can't imagine the mothers and fathers and the uncles and grandparents who had come to look for their loved ones."

Barber and Lowe tied numbered tags to each of the army cots provided for the bodies. Only a few relatives were let in at one time, some steadied by nurses who pressed ammonia soaked gauze to their faces. Sobs and sometimes screams filled the great hall.

On one of the cots lay a body, unclothed but covered by a blanket, of a blond child with an unmarked face. Her tag bore the number 1565. It was while threading his way through the section designated "Children—Female" that Tom Barber first really noticed her. "It was that face that caught my attention," he says. "She was a pretty little thing. She looked almost like she was asleep." Eddie Lowe had also noticed her. As the night wore on the two men would pause in their work and look her way. They watched dozens of people stop and study her. But they all moved on.

This puzzled Barber. With many of the badly burned cases, all they had

to work with were bits of clothing or jewelry. Why hadn't someone claimed this little tyke? Through the night and next day bodies around her became names instead of numbers. But not hers. What had been curiosity in Tom Barber grew into something deeper. He found himself asking Lowe if anyone had claimed "our little friend."

On Saturday the few remaining unidentified bodies were removed to the Hartford Hospital morgue. And now Barber's feelings toward the child grew more intense. "I seemed to be getting closer and closer to her," he says. "She was about my Harry's age. It seemed so sad that she might go to her grave without a name. I kept thinking that it could have been Harry."

Time was running out. Already Hartford was burying its dead. Before their "little friend" was taken to a funeral home Barber and Lowe made certain that she was photographed and ordered a dental chart, finger and footprints. Her clothes and the clues they might have provided had been lost. By Monday the number of unidentified had dropped to seven. There was only one other female child in among them and an uncle tentatively

had accounted for her. Finally no more visitors came. Of the seven who were now sent to funeral parlors, Miss 1565 was the only one recognizable but the only one whose identity was an absolute mystery.

During the next several months Barber spent full time tracking down leads with the help of Eddie Lowe. They sent the dental charts to hundreds of dentists, questioned mailmen, doctors, tradesmen, Sunday-school teachers. They tried, futilely, to match her to adult victims of the fire. They showed her picture to every person who had claimed a body in the armory that night. They visited orphanages and welfare agencies. They wrote to every primary school in Connecticut enclosing their little friend's picture. During the fruitless search Barber would often stop by the grave to brood about the child at his feet. Who was she? Why couldn't he find a name for her?

It was frustrating, like trying to assemble a defective jig-saw puzzle. Why hadn't someone recognized her photograph? Why hadn't there been any phony claims, made on the chance that the circus might have to pay thousands of dollars to bereaved relatives?

When he and Lowe visited the grave on the first anniversary of the fire, a newspaper wire service sent out the story nationally. When Barber saw the story he hoped this would stir up new leads. Mail poured in, most of it explaining the writers' own theories in the case. One woman wrote to Barber proposing marriage. Many sent coins and small bills to pay for flowers. There was a stir in 1946 when a Michigan woman thought the child might be her missing granddaughter—but then the real granddaughter was found out West.

Eddie Lowe moved away from Hartford and Barber carried on alone. He could only hope that the mail or the telephone would bring some new, conclusive clue. Recently he received a package of seeds from a woman in Australia with the request that he plant them by the grave. They were forget-me-nots.

One of the things that keeps the case open for Barber is a poem a woman sent him—and which he rereads from time to time. Its closing lines touch him deeply:

So they took her form so light,
 Wrapped it in a cloth of white,
 Laid it in a little grave
 And the empty name they gave
 Was Little Miss Nobody.
 There she lies a no-one still,
 Nameless on a lonely hill.
 And the snowflakes and the rain
 Come and go and fall again
 On Little Miss Nobody.



At the grave Detective Tom Barber places flowers near marker. Retired from the force this spring, he still sifts old clues, hopes for new ones.