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## The Mysterious Case of Little Miss 1565

BY LEONARD A. STEVENS

**She was a little girl, with real blue eyes and real curly hair.  
Somewhere, someone must know her name and miss her terribly**

■ IT WAS THURSDAY, JULY 6, 1944—circus day in Hartford, Connecticut. Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey's show was in town. Although the day was a "scorcher," some 6,000 men, women and children pushed past the high-pitched barkers on the midway and into the main entrance of the "Greatest Show on Earth."

In that perspiring throng walked a glad-hearted little girl who was doomed to become the subject of one of the strangest cases in the annals of missing persons. She was about six years old and 46 inches tall. She was an attractive child; her hair was curly and her eyes were blue.

The show began. A man dressed as a lion chased a number of scan-

tily-clad girls around the rings. Next came the real lions, charging into the arena through two steel chutes that flanked each end of the reserved seats section.

The little girl's eyes grew big. As the lions performed, a trained bear ambled into the arena under the big top, and his antics made the little girl laugh. When the lions finished, they were sent back through the chutes, and the excited crowd turned to see what was next. Already the Flying Wallendas were climbing toward the roof of the big top for their aerial act.

It was 2:30 P.M.

At that moment, Robert Dale Segee, a circus roustabout, slouched somewhere near the big top's main

entrance. He saw—or thought he saw—a red horse with a rider who demanded that Segee set fire to the main tent. The hallucination wasn't new to Segee who, when he confessed six years later, admitted that he had previously committed arson under the horseman's orders. So Segee obeyed again, as the jangle of circus music called the crowd's attention to the aerialists at the top of the tent.

It was 2:40 P.M.

In less than a minute, a woman in the audience screamed "Fire!" Thousands of heads turned to look, but the blaze could hardly be seen. A ring of flame no larger than a horseshoe began to creep up the tent's side wall near the main entrance. Someone could have slapped it out with his hand—but no one did.

The flames swiftly climbed higher. When they reached the roof, the big top seemed to explode. The tent fabric was impregnated with inflammable paraffin for waterproofing (it might have been flame-proofed, but wartime restrictions made the necessary material unavailable). In half a minute, the circus fans were under a ceiling of fire. The air was filled with the roar of animals and the screams of people panicked by the overhead inferno.

Within minutes, the big top had burned away, with blazing sheets of canvas falling on people below. The heavy poles that had supported the tent toppled like uprooted timbers. An immense oval of burning grandstands held back the rescuers who tried to reach the unfortunate people caught in the center.

Soon the shriek of fire trucks and ambulances cut through the night-

mare of screaming people and crazed animals. When rescuers finally reached the burned area, dozens were dead. Many bodies were found beside one of the steel lion-chutes, which had blocked escape.

In a nearby armory, the charred bodies were placed on cots at the north end of the building. The bodies of 75 women lay on the right of the hall; the bodies of 42 children lay on the left. The bodies of ten men lay in the center. Six Roman Catholic priests passed among the cots anointing the dead. Doctors, nurses and police were there to help those who came to identify the bodies.

As more victims were found at the circus lot, or died in hospitals, the bodies were brought to the improvised morgue. At one point, 16 bodies arrived from the Municipal Hospital. The body of the little curly-haired girl was among them.

"I remember how the child's body caught my attention," said a police official who was there. "She wasn't like most of them. She was only burned a little. She looked as if she was asleep—not dead."

Outside the armory that evening as many as 200 people lined up waiting to go in. Behind the building, a line of black hearses waited.

One family at a time was allowed into the hall to look at the bodies. By 9:30 P.M., only 25 of the dead had been identified. It was not an easy process. Many badly mutilated bodies were difficult to recognize. In some cases, the only possible identification was made through a piece of clothing, a shoe or an article found on the body.

"People walking by those cots," said a policeman, "really didn't want

to find the people they were looking for. The armory could be the end of the line. If a missing person *wasn't* there, there was some hope."

By the following day, 15 bodies, including the body of the little girl, were still unidentified. The 15 bodies were moved from the armory to the Hartford Hospital morgue. Within the following three days, nine more bodies were recognized and claimed. Then no more people came to the morgue. Six bodies were still unidentified.

Five of the six were so badly mutilated that recognition was impossible. But five families had each reported a missing person. They could assume with some degree of certainty that their lost ones lay among the five unidentifiable bodies.

The sixth body, completely recognizable, was that of the little girl with the curly hair. A tag, numbered 1565, had been placed on her by state police. Some thought she might be six-year-old Judy Norris of Middletown, Connecticut, or six-year-old Eleanor Cook of Northampton, Massachusetts. These two children had disappeared at the fire, and their nearest of kin were unable to find either girl's body in the morgue. But both families studied the features of the little girl tagged number 1565. She was not their child.

Who was she? She had to have a name. The best the police could do was to call her "Little Miss 1565."

On Monday, July 10, six hearses moved through the center of Hartford and stopped at the city hall. The mayor, members of the board of aldermen and clergymen of three faiths joined the cortege which then proceeded to Northwood Cemetery.

The six unidentified bodies were given a joint funeral and buried in graves provided by the city.

Statistics on the tragic Hartford circus fire were reaching completion: scores dead and 500 injured, with 225 scarred for life. Damages eventually paid by the circus: \$3,946,355.70.

Though she was buried, the case of Little Miss 1565 remained active. Two Hartford detectives, Thomas C. Barber and Edward T. Lowe, were assigned the task of establishing her identity. Both had been on duty at the armory and in the Hartford Hospital morgue.

BARBER AND LOWE had little to work with. There were the child's fingerprints and footprints. But young children are seldom fingerprinted, and this effort at identification proved to be fruitless. The footprints seemed to hold possibilities, until Detective Lowe discovered that hospital records of newborn babies' footprints are classified only according to name. He had hoped these records would help him, but without the dead child's name, or the slightest idea of where she had been born, the chance of matching her footprints with a single set filed among thousands of others in numerous hospitals was nil.

The detectives had a photograph of the dead child's face, and it seemed to offer the best opportunity for establishing her identity. The picture was published by a number of cooperative newspapers. An artist made a lifelike sketch from the photograph, and it also was published. The publicity produced many leads from people who said that a neighborhood child was missing.

The detectives attempted to investigate each lead.

"Within a couple of weeks," said Lowe, "we were discouraged. The missing children all turned out to be on vacation, at camp, or visiting relatives during summer vacation. In fact, so many children were reported missing under such circumstances that it made our search practically impossible. We decided to wait until school reopened to check reports of missing children."

As the summer passed, the detectives tried other methods of tracing the child. They showed the little girl's photograph to mailmen and milkmen in the Hartford area—without result. They talked to people who had claimed bodies at the morgue after the circus fire. Someone, they thought, might have identified the wrong child and would recognize his error if he saw Little Miss 1565's photograph.

"These interviews," said Lowe, "were extremely painful. People who had lost relatives in the fire wanted to forget the whole affair. Most didn't want to talk about it and we couldn't blame them. We got nowhere with our investigation."

When school opened in September, Barber and Lowe immediately checked with school officials about missing children. Many little girls had not shown up for their classes. The detectives took the names and started tracing the children. Each case was eventually explained. It was usually discovered that parents had moved away without notifying the schools.

In the meantime, the picture of Little Miss 1565 was shown to every primary and kindergarten teacher in Connecticut and to a large number

in nearby states. None of them recognized the girl. As winter came, the search seemed increasingly hopeless.

At Christmastime, 1944, the two detectives felt that something should be done in remembrance of the little girl no one knew, and they decorated her grave with flowers. Reporters learned of the thoughtful act, and an account of it was published in scores of newspapers around the country. Public interest suddenly revived. Papers everywhere began publishing the child's picture and asking if anyone could identify her. More leads poured into the police department, and the detectives followed them up. But again results were negative. No one could be found who really knew the dead child.

THERE WERE DOZENS of suggestions as to the girl's identity. Had her parents perished in the fire? Possibly, but the person identifying the parents, or reporting them missing, certainly would have known that they had a little girl. Could it be that someone didn't want to face the horror of identifying their child? Or was it possible that she was an illegitimate child, whose parents were ashamed to admit identity? Not very plausible, and furthermore, how could you suddenly lose a little girl without someone asking questions? She probably had playmates. Wouldn't they ask for her, and wouldn't their parents wonder what had happened to the child?

Speculation continued, but it all led to the same unanswered questions. A neighborhood, a street, a school, a doctor, a storekeeper—somewhere, someone would certain-

ly become aware that a little girl was missing. But no one did.

Two years after the circus fire, the case suddenly came back into the news. In early August, 1946, Mrs. Gertrude Landers of Wyandotte, Michigan, learned about Little Miss 1565 and felt sure that the child was her granddaughter, Sherron Lang. Mrs. Landers said that her daughter, Mrs. Estella Lang and the child had disappeared in 1942.

Hartford police doubted if Mrs. Landers could be right, but to make sure, they sent her a clear copy of Little Miss 1565's photograph. The Michigan woman looked at the picture and was surer than ever that she had found her granddaughter. The story of this incident appeared in newspapers all over the country. Near the end of August, Mrs. Landers' missing daughter read the account in Portland, Oregon, and notified her mother that she and her daughter, Sherron, were alive. Case 1565 was no nearer solution than ever.

Detectives Barber and Lowe lost hope of ever establishing Little Miss 1565's real identity, but they didn't forsake the child. For 14 years the two detectives have continued to place flowers on the grave which now has a marker donated by a Hartford monument firm. They pay their sad visits at least three times a year; the circus fire's anniversary, Christmas and Memorial Day. When their visits were publicized

again in 1952, money for flowers arrived by mail from all over the world. The detectives returned the donations, but accepted the Hartford Florists Association's offer to supply flowers indefinitely for the grave of Little Miss 1565. Lowe, who is no longer with the Hartford police, still helps Barber deliver the flowers on the three dates.

As for the girl's identity, the detectives have only a theory: The child's parents might have died in the fire. When the nearest of kin came to the morgue, they might have identified the wrong child's body by mistake—perhaps the body of little Judy Norris, Eleanor Cook or some other missing child. Possibly the error was never discovered by those who identified the child because they died soon after the fire, or for some reason did not see the pictures in the newspapers. Or perhaps they did see their mistake later but for some reason did not admit it.

But this theory is too tortuous and imaginative to quite satisfy detectives Lowe and Barber. "Little Miss 1565" was a real girl, with real blue eyes, and real curly hair: somewhere, someone must know her name and miss her.

Three times a year, visitors to Northwood Cemetery near Hartford can see the two detectives standing in thoughtful requiem over the small grave. "Little Miss 1565" would be about 21-years-old this year. Her case is still open. ■■

### A WORD FROM THE WISE

GOODNESS AND BENEVOLENCE never tire. They maintain themselves and others, and never stop from exhaustion.

—Mary Baker Eddy



## The Nerve of Some People

EDITED BY SEAMAN JACOBS

■ AFTER SELLING the woman a mink stole she really couldn't afford, the super-saleslady smiled gently. "How would you prefer us to bill your husband, madam?" she asked. "In a long series of piddling amounts, or one unbelievable sum?"

■ THE BEAUTIFUL BLONDE coolly brushed off all the men at the party until she was introduced to a Texas oil man. Then she suddenly perked up and became all sugar and honey. Looking at him coyly and batting her eyes, she asked, "How much did you say your name was?"

■ AS THE GUEST entered the hotel lobby after spending his first night, he was approached by the manager. "I trust you slept well, sir?"

"No!" the guest replied. "Terrible! I didn't close my eyes all night."

"Then you've only yourself to blame," the manager retorted. "If you want to sleep, you must close your eyes!"

■ A GLEAMING CADILLAC, complete with liveried chauffeur, rolled up before the entrance to a swank resort hotel. Lounging in the back seat was a lady glittering with diamonds and swathed in sable. Beside her sat a little girl equally resplendent. As the car stopped, the doorman bowed to the lady and lifted the child grandly from the automobile. "What a beautiful child!" he exclaimed. "Can she walk yet?"

The befurred woman cast her eyes heavenward and said fervently, "May she never have to!"

■ THE JUDGE looked sternly down at the defendant. "Young man," he said, "it's alcohol, and alcohol alone, that's responsible for your present sorry state!"

"I'm sure glad to hear you say that, Your Honor," the young man replied, with a sigh of relief. "Everybody else says it's all my fault."

■ THE GUEST was admiring her hostess's newly wallpapered living room when the visitor's young son walked over to one wall and promptly drew a bright red giraffe on it. "Did you see what your son just did?" demanded the hostess.

"Yes," the boy's smiling mother replied, "and isn't it wonderful? You know, he's only seen a giraffe once."

■ THE HUSBAND, citing infidelity as the cause, was suing his wife for divorce. "I've never been so insulted, and it's all a lie, judge," the woman sobbed. "Why, I've been faithful to him dozens of times!"

■ THE NEW TYPIST, fresh out of secretarial school, was so pretty and innocent that nobody had the heart to reprimand her for her numerous mistakes. Even the boss, who came upon her one day, frantically digging through a file cabinet, only watched appreciatively, then smiled. "Now, now, Sally," he said soothingly, "don't worry if you've lost something again. I'm certain it's not serious enough to warrant those tears."

"It is *this* time," the sobbing girl replied. "It's my lunch!"