

The Hartford Circus Fire

The Hartford Circus Fire occurred on July 6, 1944, in Hartford, Connecticut and was one of the nation's worst fire disasters. The fire occurred during an afternoon performance of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus attended by approximately 8,000 people.



More than 100 people were killed and 600 were injured. The great irony was that the performance took place under canvas. According to eyewitness survivors, the fiery tent collapsed in about eight minutes trapping hundreds of spectators beneath it. Had the crowd realized it, safety was no farther away than ducking out under the sidewalls of the tent.

While some people were burned to death, many others died as a result of the ensuing chaos. Most spectators were able to escape the fire but many people were caught up in the hysteria and panicked. Witnesses said some people simply ran around in circles trying to find their loved ones, rather than trying to escape the burning tent. Some escaped but ran back inside to find family members. Others stayed in their seats until it was too late, assuming that the fire would be put out promptly and the show would continue.

One fact that came out in the investigation was that the tent had not been fireproofed. Ringling Bros.' had applied to the Army, which had an absolute priority on the material due to the war, for enough fireproofing liquid to treat their Big Top. Allegedly, the Army had refused to release it to them. The circus' management was found negligent and several Ringling executives received jail sentences.

To date, the cause of the fire remains undetermined. Many claims were brought against Ringling Bros.', which set aside all profits for the next ten years to pay off these claims. A picture appeared in newspapers worldwide showing the legendary sad tramp clown, Emmett Kelly, holding a water bucket. The tragic event became known as "the day the clowns cried."