

BACK YARD

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BIG BERTHAS OF THE BIG TOP

****BY CHEERFUL GARDNER****

(From Illinois State Univ. Circus Archives)

Did You Know That:—

Although an elephant's hide is one inch thick, a pin prick will draw blood?

An elephant's trunk is said to contain 40,000 muscles & that it may be used to breathe, carry water, pull nails, hammer, as a balance, a flail and a rope?

Many elephants sleep standing, sometimes falling down while sleeping?

Part of their respiration takes place between the toes, which must be sponged carefully and often?

Too many peanuts will give even a big bull a stomach ache but many enjoy tobacco?

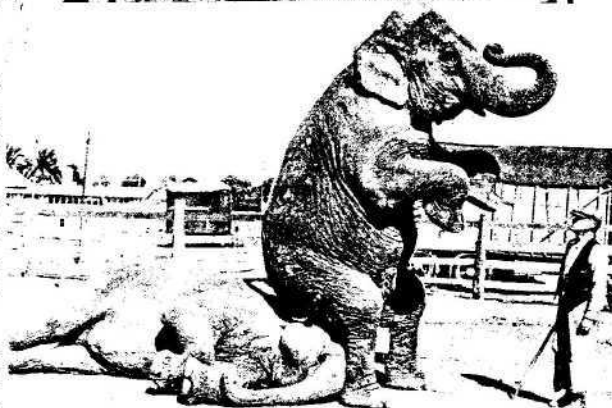
Their memory, contrary to popular opinion, is short?

HEADLINES scream: "Mad Elephants Stampede!" "Crazy Elephant Kills Keeper!" "Trainer Tracks Elephants Escaping In Canadian Wilds!" "Elephant Turned Criminal Frightens Town!"

Those great beasts are not criminals at heart. They may be frightened or sick, but they seldom hold while sane any malice against a human being. I know, for I have broken & trained more than 150 elephants for vaudeville & circus acts during the last 40 years.

From Tusko, The Great, who stood 10 feet, 4 inches in his unstockinged feet, to Mabel, the 20-year-old youngster in my herd today, all have been lovable monsters. True, Tusko became a killer. But, Tusko was a victim of confinement & resulting disease. Years ago, circus men thought it was good business to include a killer among their herds, keeping them in chains to prevent mass murders. But, those elephants were not naturally killers. I'll show you why as we get along.

You'd be surprised at the tricks we can do with elephants. You wouldn't think, as you see 5 huge pachyderms turn & twist during an 8-minute circus sketch that they crowd 32 individual tricks into their act.

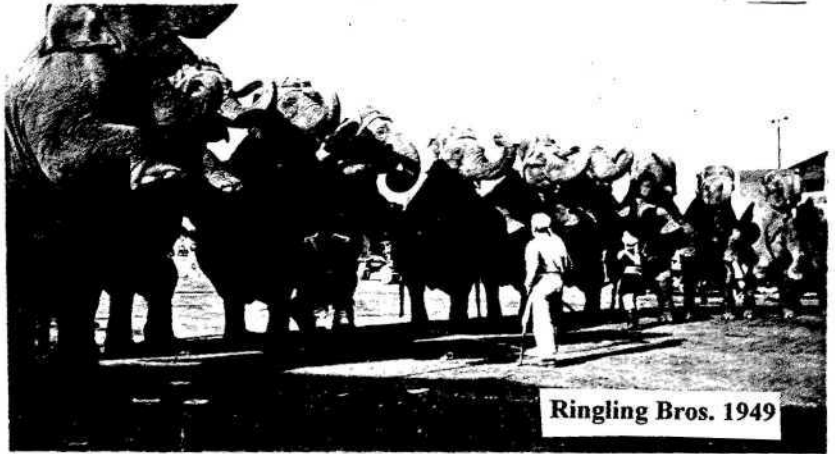


Well, they do; and we have worked years perfecting the act, bullying & coaxing them, keeping their spirits high as we bring them along in an unaccustomed routine. If you've never tried balancing from 3 to 5 tons of quivering-animal flesh on its head & 2 fore feet or standing one erect on its 2 hind feet, you will not understand much about our troubles. Yet with main force & hard work, a good trainer can cajole an elephant into doing almost anything his huge bulk & weight permit.

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The Smahas



Ringling Bros. 1949



Clyde Beatty 1965



Hagenbeck-Wallace 1938

RHINO RECORD by Mike Cecere

A few weeks ago, I entered a quiz contest in "The Rumblyngs From The Crummy" column and thought I'd give the answer here while I wait for my prize to be sent. Anyway, the man who trained that Rhino for the old "Tarzan" movies was Mr. George Emerson. Emerson was a great trainer in the old school style & headed up the famous MGM studios zoo for many, many years.

The MGM studio owned every kind of wild animal including a famous trio of Asian elephants, "Happy Queenie" and "Sally" who eventually became The James E. Strates elephants.

My favorite MGM "Tarzan" movie is 'Tarzan's New York Adventure', which goes from the jungle to a circus lot in New York.

Rhinos, now quite common in European circuses, performing in the ring rarely have been shown here due to the changing nature of the circus layouts, whereas in Europe the basic lot layout with nearby menagerie stable is the same daily.

In my experience, I've witnessed 2 exceptional rhinos working open in a circus ring. A beautiful black rhino shown for years by Roman Schmidt & a huge white rhino trained & presented by Rex Williams, the Dean of America's Elephant Trainers. Both of these were shown in the 1970s.

The most recent attempt was by Italian master trainer, Flavio Togni on the Ringing Bros. Circus, Blue Unit, several years ago. Show in the cat arena, it was a valiant effort, handicapped by the constraints of the buildings the show plays which are built for basketball, not circuses.

This is no fault of the Feld Corp. as they have always done their best to provide the top conditions & care for their animals.

So, if you want to view great animal training of days gone by, rent "Tarzan's New York Adventure," pop some popcorn & have a few laughs. Meanwhile, I'll check the mailbox for my prize!

PORKY'S RETURN by Mike Cecere

As I related in a previous article weeks ago, having African elephants has pegged me as the "Marlin Perkins" of Farm Country. Well, it happened again.

Increasingly in America these days, slowly but meaningly, we've been getting more & more yuppies, ("townies" to my show-biz friends,) moving out amongst us. And I had one of them roar up our driveway the other day in a huge Ford "Explorer", sport utility vehicle that

was just above her level of safe operation to drive, (and they complain about us semi-truck drivers!), ranting at the top of her lungs that our pigs were eating her herb garden!

Which would not have been so bad except she lives 2 miles down the road, & we have no pigs here.

It must have been too much tofu that got her that upset & my suggestion (once I stopped laughing) was to say she should make a cross out of bacon strips & perhaps that would ward off the pigs. (Hey, it works in vampire movies!)

I did tho make several calls around to see if anyone was missing any porkers to no avail.

Then, one of my neighbor volunteered that a mutual neighbor with poor fencing repair must be the guilty party. Later in the day, while doing cow count, I astoundingly came upon the errant pigs who were walking down the road!

They were a pair, a huge sow & her companion, a small pet-size pot-bellied pig. With some effort, we managed to herd them up into one of our holding pens & proceeded to give them some much needed water & a good feeding, which I'm sure they appreciated.

One of my more senior farmer neighbors happened to be passing by & volunteered to inform the errant owner to come get his pigs.

And in short order, he arrived with a trailer to pick them up, grateful that their reign of garden raiding had been stopped as it was getting expensive for him.

So, out of the trailer trooped his crew that worked in his construction business & trust me, they were a real cast of characters. I hadn't seen a crew like that since my days touring on tent circuses with the wino tribes.

Then the fun began. If it only had been a little muddier, it would have been hilarious. As it was, the pigs outsmarted them for the better part of an hour, until I lent some gates & advice, which turned the tide. So, you can see, it's never a dull moment out here in the country!

NEW WORLD by Mike Cecere

In the ever changing world these days, it's very hard to decide the best course for our industry to take. There are lots of ideas, some work, some don't. And there are many for sighted show business families, that chart a successful course year after year, generation after generation.

One of the most notable is the Tetzlaff family. In their second generation, led by world famous wild animal trainer

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