

## ELEPHANTS & THE LONE RANGER IN YORK

In the winter of 1929-30 Barnett Brothers Circus arrived in the town of York, announcing that they were adopting York as their winter quarters. From April to January they would be roaming the area of the United States east of the Mississippi River. The circus quarters took up most of the city block between E. Jefferson and Trinity streets.

The circus used the three months in York to train animals and design new shows to take on the road. The first presentation was in York, whose citizens were always eager to participate.

There were five elephants when the circus first came. The oldest elephant was "Gyp" an 18-year veteran of the Barnett Brothers Circus. Gyp was huge, weighing slightly less than a ton and a half. Her trunk was badly scarred by a fire in Coney Island, New York 35 years before joining Barnett Brothers.

Gyp was unusually gentle with children. She never had a tantrum and hundreds, maybe thousands, of children rode on her broad back.

In February of 1934 it was obvious that Gyp was ill. The elephant keepers were not surprised. Gyp was 92 years old while the typical circus elephant died at 55-60 years (nowadays the average age at death is 70 years).

Gyp's death came from the usual elephant malady. Her teeth had worn out and she could no longer chew hay or anything else.

The circus wanted to give Gyp's body to an institution which might be able to display it. There were no veterinary schools in South Carolina. Clemson turned down the offer and Winthrop (which then had a small museum) did not want the body. With no takers to their offer, the circus arranged to bury Gyp on the John Benfield farm described as "four miles southeast of Yorkville."

It was reported that the grave was 10 ft. deep and 7 by 10 ft in dimensions. The statement was made that Gyp was the only elephant ever buried in South Carolina soil. This caused A. M. Grist to observe that "In a century or so, when scientists of the future era find the skeleton of old Gyp here in York county, they will write learned treatises about the elephants who roamed this part of the country early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and prove it by the bones disinterred here."

Shortly after Gyp's death the circus added five elephants. A crowd of boys, some with parents, surrounded the barn to see the new elephants arrive. The newcomers were put in the lot with the 4 old-timers and they "played together" to the amusement of the crowd. Then the newcomers were marched over to the stone barn. Two were taken inside but only briefly. Apparently the two did not want to be separated from the others and turned and rushed back to the door. Meantime, the eager boys had crowded in the door. A stampede resulted as the crowd tried to get out of the way. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt.

The keepers then lined up all five and in the traditional way using their trunks they would hold the tail of the elephant in front of them and all went safely in.

The circus then had 8 females (Babe, Lucile, Carrie, Jennis were the old-timers joined by Alice, Freda, Junie and Della). The lone male was Joe.

In the late 1930s the circus managed to hire the original Lone Ranger, Lee Powell, whose movie career went on the rocks. Powell was billed as "The Original Lone Ranger of Talking Picture Fame." Wearing a costume similar to his movie outfit and riding a white horse, Powell would greet audiences with "Hi-yo Silver" as the orchestra played the William Tell Overture.

In 1941 Powell married Norma Rogers, the daughter of the owner of Barnett Brothers Circus. He took his bride to Hollywood where he had gotten contract to play in a 6-part series called Frontier Marshalls." Reviewers panned his work and, bitterly disappointed, Powell joined the U. S. Marines. He was killed in action on Tinian (Marianas Islands) on July 30, 1944.

In 1945 Barnett Brothers sold out to Wallace Brothers Circus who moved the circus out of York but not out of the memories of many an old-timer.

By Louise Pettus