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Wineka column: Sparks circus enjoyed the winters here

Sunday, October 04, 2009 3:00 AM



Some Sparks Circus artifacts Paul Bernhardt collected over the years include a mallet used to drive in tent stakes, a long herald trumpet, a horse harness and one of many posters. The items are being displayed in a Bernhardt Hardware window. Photo by **Mark Wineka**, Salisbury Post.

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When the Sparks Circus arrived in Salisbury in early December, it usually showed the wear and tear of a season's worth of travel.

But the circus performers and executives also bore the smiles of people who knew they were home.

Among friends.

Autumns in Salisbury today have become associated with OctoberTour, football games and elections.

Long ago they were seasons in which anticipation began building for the Sparks Circus' return.

From 1910 to 1919, the Sparks World-Famous Shows wintered here. Those four to five months of having a circus in Salisbury's back yard left deep impressions, most of them good.

Hundreds of people would greet the circus as it arrived at the depot in at least 15 train cars. Horses pulled the gilded wagons and calliopes out of the red-and-yellow rail cars, followed by elephants, zebras, camels, horses, seals, lions and tigers.

Familiar performers emerging from the cars might include Louis Reed, the elephant man; Bert Mayo, the ring leader; Pete Mardo, a clown; Lizzie Guise, who had a trapeze act; and Fritz Bruner, the German lion tamer.

Salisburians also looked for their beloved Charles Sparks, the owner and manager, who lived a showman's philosophy that said, "If you can't be for it (the circus), don't be with it."

Sparks, called "Guv'ner" by his employees, endeared himself to Salisburians and, in those days, considered the town his second home — the road was his first.

From the depot, residents followed the circus' trek along West Innes Street to "Fair Park," where today's Hefner VA Medical Center now stands. The fairgrounds' structures turned into exotic animal stalls, sewing rooms and paint, carpentry and blacksmith shops. Workers also set up a cookhouse.

Sparks immediately invited everyone to visit the grounds at any time to wander free among the animals and employees getting ready for the next season.

Professor Wills practiced on a giant steam calliope, which had 32 whistles and could be heard from three miles away. Salisbury kids sometimes were allowed to ride down to Grants Creek on top of the elephants, who enjoyed the water.

Sparks invited some of his Salisbury friends to the cookhouse for hot cakes.

The circus operation of some 200-plus employees made positive ripples through the local economy.

M.L. Johnson, a butcher, sent fresh meat out to Fair Park by the wagon load.

Salisbury Hardware Co. saw a steady business in supplying

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A couple of the notices for the Sparks Circus that Paul Bernhardt has in his collection. Photo by **Mark Wineka**, Salisbury Post

items such as paint, whips and harnesses.

Farmers sent tons of hay, straw, oats and corn to feed the animals, which were groomed and trained at the fairgrounds.

Addie Sparks, Charles' wife, created new costumes with the help of local seamstresses.

Sparks made contributions to local churches and civic groups. At Christmas, he sent the circus calliope through the downtown.

Charles Sparks had the reputation for running a clean circus, never tolerating, as one report said, "swindling schemes or catch-penny games evident with many other shows."

A Salisbury Post article from 1914 said the Sparks Circus was a big asset to the town: "These were high-class, civic-minded people and a highly moral enterprise that enriched our town," the newspaper said.

Sparks billed his circus as "The Show That Has Never Broken a Promise."

Salisbury benefited in another way from being the winter headquarters. The Sparks Circus performed its first show here every April before it loaded all the rail cars and headed off for another season.

Morning parades in the downtown whet the appetite for afternoon and evening performances at the various circus stops, and Salisbury was no exception. But big crowds also showed up to see the circus off at the train station.

Thousands of people lined Salisbury streets for glimpses of the military band, calliopes, golden chariots, clowns, magicians, jugglers, teams of horses and animals from all parts of the world. The whole town practically took half a day off, including school children.

The opening shows were well-received. The April 11, 1912, edition of the Post reported that, "in fact, there was not a mediocre act in the entire program, and some of them were of the highly sensational order, notably the daring acrobatic work of the Walton family, six in number."

Other performers included the Loretta Sisters, who did stunts while being suspended in the air by their teeth; the Nelsons, who dazzled with an aerial act; and Berre and Hicks, who did some death-defying dives from the high ladder.

Another report from April 15, 1914, commented on how "the clowns were splendid and the performing seals, remarkable."

The Elks Club always sponsored a big supper for the circus employees the night before they left.

Clifton Sparks, another Sparks Circus executive, ended up marrying a Salisbury girl named Vera Menius. The New York Times once featured their son, Clifton Jr., as "the circus baby who wants to be a clown" and described him as "the most-pictured and most-traveled baby in the country."

Clifton Jr. eventually became an MIT-educated engineer.

The most repeated Sparks Circus story through the years related to the hanging of Big Mary, billed as the world's largest elephant and one of the favorite winter attractions in Salisbury.

In September 1916, while the circus conducted its parade through downtown Kingsport, Tenn., Big Mary spotted a pile of watermelons on the side of Main Street.

A handler jabbed Big Mary a couple of times with a bull hook to keep her in line. The pokes incensed the elephant, who wheeled on the handler and killed him.

The next day, Sparks secured a railroad derrick, placed a chain around Big Mary's neck and hanged the five-ton elephant. An elephant hanging is not soon forgotten.

Charles Sparks' own story was an amazing one, too. Born in Park City, Utah, he was singing and dancing on street corners at age 6 to support his widowed mother and two sisters.

Dying from tuberculosis, his mother gave him to showman John Wiseman, who eventually adopted the boy and made him a partner. Wiseman even adopted Sparks' name for his own.

John and Charles Sparks first toured the country as minstrels

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before building a small circus. John Sparks died from blood poisoning three days after being clawed by a lion. Charles bought out his half of the circus and expertly managed the business to become a multi-millionaire years later.

Having outgrown Fair Park, the Sparks Circus left Salisbury in 1919 to winter in Macon, Ga., where Sparks again would become a cherished citizen. Sparks eventually sold his circus to Ringling Brothers and in the 1930s became owner of the Downie Bros. Circus.

When Sparks returned to Salisbury with his new circus and sat on the outside steps of his office wagon, hundreds of people reportedly lined up to visit with him.

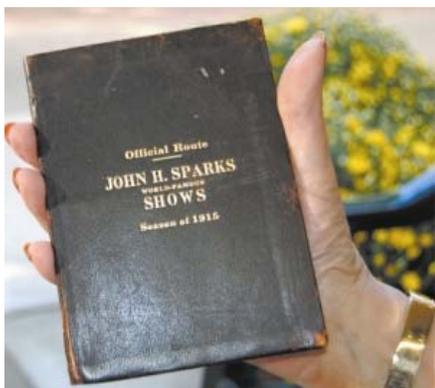
The circus made its last visit to Salisbury in 1947, and Sparks sent his regrets for not being able to attend. He died two years later.

At his death, the Macon Telegraph said he had been a leader "in the circus business and raised that part of the amusement industry to a high level."

One measure of a man is how long he's remembered. It's autumn, and we're still talking about the Sparks Circus.

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This official Route Book from 1915 included all the dates, shows and mileage the Sparks Circus had scheduled through the United States and Canada that year. Photo by **Mark Wineka**, Salisbury Post

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