

Richard Shipley (1903-1973)

Running away to the circus! This was the daydream of many young people in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. Richard Shipley actually did just that. At the age of 16, he ran off to join the **Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus**.

Richard F. Shipley was born in Bloomington on November 22, 1903. He was one of 13 children. The family was Roman Catholic, and he was **confirmed** at Holy Trinity Church. He attended St. Mary's School, but quit school after eighth grade to help out his family. This was not unusual at the time, as an eighth grade education was considered a good education. One of the jobs he held in those early years was as a wagon driver for a meat market located on West Market Street. But at 16, he joined the circus.

During that first season, Shipley worked as a regular circus laborer; that is, not as a performer, but as one of the many workers needed to keep the circus running as it moved from town to town throughout the nation. Circuses at that time were housed in huge tents, or "**Big Tops**," in which performers did their acts, ate their meals, and cared for their animals.

But after only a season, Shipley returned to Bloomington for unknown reasons and moved back home with his parents. Perhaps his large family needed his help. In 1923, Shipley went to work for the Boylan family at their grocery store. This family's grocery grew into a candy and ice cream business later known as Boylan Brothers. Richard's first job was as a **chauffeur**, but later he became a clerk in one of their ice cream shops. Then, he returned to driving, delivering ice cream as the business expanded into selling their products for **wholesale**. Later he became an ice cream maker, and held this position for the rest of his 20-year career with the company.

Sometime between 1940 and 1941, Shipley returned to the circus he had left many years before. This time, Shipley became part of the elephant department. He probably started his new career as one of the 55 **bull hands** Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey hired that season. His duties would have included: loading and unloading elephants off trains; mucking out (removing manure); feeding and watering the elephants (an elephant could drink about 40 gallons of water per day and eat 200 pounds or more of hay every day); and assisting in training exercises. He also prepared the elephants for their performances, swept them off, dressed them in costumes, and helped set up barrels, tubs, and other items used in the elephants' tricks.

By 1944, Shipley was an assistant in the elephant department. In his new position he was responsible for helping to supervise 37 workers in the caring and training of 30 or more elephants. It was during this season that the worst circus fire in American history occurred. The circus was performing in Hartford, Connecticut when the fire broke out. Twenty minutes into the afternoon performance, the first alarm sounded. The fire quickly spread across the big top. The elephant men quickly realized they had to get the elephants away from the fire, not only to keep them safe, but to protect people in case the startled and upset elephants **stampeded** and caused even more damage. Shipley and the other elephant men quickly rounded up all the animals and relocated them to a nearby meadow. Unfortunately, 168 people died in the fire, which destroyed the big top tent and shut the circus down for eight weeks.

Shipley continued working for Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey for five more years after the fire. Even though he traveled far and wide crisscrossing the country, he always stayed close to his Bloomington family by visiting home or bringing family to performances that were nearby. By 1945, he was promoted to superintendent of the elephant department.

In the years following his time with Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey, Shipley worked for the **Clyde Beatty Circus** from 1949 until about 1957. He was an elephant trainer and later superintendent of the elephant department for Beatty's circus. He also appeared in the elephant acts where he trained the elephants to perform standing on their back legs and doing other difficult maneuvers. In 1954, he even appeared in a movie along with the Clyde Beatty Circus as the elephant trainer. The movie, *Ring of Fear*, starred Clyde Beatty (as himself) and Mickey Spillane, an American crime novelist. In the movie, Beatty's circus seemed to be **jinxed**, falling victim time and again to a series of accidents that no one could explain. In reality these accidents were being caused by a **saboteur** and **deranged** killer that was on the loose in his circus. In order to solve the crime, Beatty called in crime novelist, Mickey Spillane (who played himself) to catch the killer. Shipley was listed in the credits, mentioned by name in the film, and was shown on screen several times.

Unfortunately, the 1950s also saw the decline of American circuses. The popularity of new forms of entertainment, like television, kept more Americans at home. Because of this, circuses faced financial crisis. In 1959 Shipley joined the **Carson and Barnes Circus**, where he worked for the final 10 years of his career. On his very first day there, however, he was nearly killed when an elephant did a headstand on him. Shipley survived with a broken collarbone and several broken ribs. This was the worst of several injuries he suffered during his career. He was soon back on the job, training and performing with his elephants. He also added three dog acts.

With his eyesight failing, Richard Shipley retired in 1970. He returned to his family home on West Locust Street. He died just three years later while living in a nursing home in Lincoln, Illinois and is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

Discussion Question: Why was the circus appealing to young people? What might have the same attraction for young people today?