

The Rampage of Gypsy the Elephant

Most circus spectators are constantly in awe of the performing animals, particularly the elephants with their huge bulk and exceptional intelligence. All too often however, these poor beasts have been trained through the use of brutally abusive treatment, and occasionally, the trauma becomes too great, causing one of the great animals to snap. The 1902 incident with Gypsy in Valdosta, Georgia quite possibly is a good example.
By Martin Register

On the chilly evening of November 22, 1902, Gypsy, “the largest elephant in the world,” looked down at her trainer, James “Whiskey Red” O’Rourke, as he lay comatose on a Valdosta, Georgia street. The man did not know it at the time, but this was the last road he would ever travel.

As was his habit, O’Rourke had once again had too much to drink and, from most accounts, had simply passed out and fallen awkwardly from his seat astride Gypsy’s neck.

He flopped in an ignoble heap at the intersection of Central Avenue and Toombs Street.



According to an account of the incident published the next day in the Valdosta Times, Gypsy, to the great pachyderm’s credit, tenderly attempted to lift O’Rourke back to his place atop her neck, but her trainer was unresponsive. She reportedly prodded him a few more times and, still getting no response, proceeded to lower her five-ton bulk onto the trainer, crushing him into a bloody mish-mash of teeth, hair and bones.

With that simple act, a night of terror had begun for the city of Valdosta. Before it ended – miles away on the following day – a circus clown had been maimed for life and at least three other circus employees had been injured in a rampage that sent terrified Valdostans scrambling for their lives.

Obviously distressed by all the turmoil she had suddenly created, Gypsy shrieked and screamed up and down city streets, chasing those in her path, climbing the steps of buildings and wreaking general havoc before finally trumpeting loudly and lumbering on a generally northward path beyond the limits of the shocked town. As these huge wild beasts have been semi-domesticated and trained in the West over the past several centuries, deadly outbursts such as this have been well-documented. Sadly, more often than not, these incidents have occurred because a trainer or owner has consistently abused

the elephant, or because an injury (such as severe tooth decay) or some other physical trauma was left untreated.

When the tragedy with Gypsy ended, a much-beloved elephant lay dead, and a local legend – which would be told and retold for over a century – was born.

A Home for the Circus

Valdosta's growing population and moderate climate made it a prime choice as the home of the Georgia State Fair in the early part of the 20th century. The fairgrounds were located at the edge of town, east of the property which today comprises Valdosta State University.



The site made a good winter home for what was known as The Harris Nickel Plate Shows. This circus was never the size of a Ringling Bros & Barnum Bailey outfit, but was nevertheless a well-known attraction.

E.D. Ferrell, who wrote about the infamous incident involving Gypsy in the Lowndes County Historical Society's newsletter in 1973, said Valdostans had a long relationship with the

elephant, billed by the circus as “the biggest-born of brutes.” Albert S. Pendleton, Jr., secretary of the Lowndes County Historical Society, quotes a female by the name of Corinthia Morgan who had moved from Troupville to Valdosta in the 1860s and witnessed the huge wild animal:

“Did you ever hear of Gypsy, the elephant, and how she ran away?” Morgan reportedly said. “John Robinson's circus used to come to Troupville back in the old days, traveling over the dirt road with one elephant, the only animal with ivory tusks which the circus possessed at that time. The pachyderm (sic) was called Gypsy, a name she lived up to only too well. She will never be forgotten by the old inhabitants around here.”

In his article, Mr. Pendleton explained that Ms. Morgan's memory of Gypsy appearing with the circus at Troupville means the elephant probably had been known to Valdostans for over 40 years. Indeed, at the time of her death, circus employees estimated Gypsy's age to be between 65 and 67 years, claiming she had been bought by circus management in India around 1847.



Other records document Gypsy's odyssey from circus to circus beginning in 1867. Pendleton says he believes the Gypsy referred to by Ms. Morgan in Troupville is definitely the same Gypsy who carried out her last outrageous performance on the streets of Valdosta in 1902.

As things turned out, Ms. Morgan's assessment of Gypsy's days in Troupville was quite an understatement. As long as there are modern-day residents in Valdosta, that town and Gypsy no doubt will be forever linked in folklore.

A Final Performance

Valdosta's railroads ran more than a mile south of the fairgrounds and the circus's winter home. Every year, as The Harris Nickel Plate Shows returned to their cold-weather retreat, the circus would hold a pair of evening performances in front of the hometown crowd.

As the railroad cars loaded with tents and cages and carriages and animals rolled to a stop in Valdosta's downtown in late 1902, nothing seemed amiss. The circus unloaded in front of its fans and set up shop for a night of fun before heading northward afterwards, back to the fairgrounds.

"Gypsy was the last elephant that night to leave the grounds," wrote E.D. Ferrell, "as she was used in the dismantling of the tents with her trainer, O'Rourke. The long caravan of animals, wagons and various types of circus conveyances proceeded from the East Hill (circus) grounds to Patterson Street and turned north to the Fair Grounds.

"This continued most of the night after the closing about 11 p.m.," Ferrell added. "O'Rourke was mounted on Gypsy's head. . . . The two were seen by many people quite late as far north on Patterson Street to present Gordon Street. However, no one could remember seeing Gypsy and O'Rourke north of there, so it was decided that he must have fallen asleep because Gypsy was seen walking south on the road which is now Toombs Street. . . ."

Although it wasn't widely known at the time, Whiskey Red O'Rourke's crushed and broken body was already lying in the street as Gypsy meandered southward. What some say pushed Gypsy's bad mood into an all-out bloodbath was the fact that she apparently had broken a tusk at the same time, for the broken ivory appendage was later found near

O'Rourke. A broken tusk would be no different than a broken tooth in a human, though the pain and suffering of the animal would obviously be magnified many times that of the human.

Ferrell wrote that Gypsy had rolled O'Rourke's body to the granite curbside in front of the First Baptist Church, where a collision of ivory against granite apparently broke off the huge tusk.

"The pain of the [shattered] tusk must have enraged her terribly and she started running like wildfire back to Patterson Street," Ferrell continued. "By that time some of the circus people became aware of her being loose, and they rushed to the scene with large pitchforks. When they could get close enough, two of the men with pistols fired into her body, one shot after another."

The rounds from the handguns, however, had little effect on the huge elephant. "Gypsy was roaring in a high screaming voice and shook the town," Ferrell said. "While the circus people were trying to subdue her, the local citizens, who were still up, were running from her, frightened to death."

Battling the Beast

The center of the ensuing battle moved to the Valdes Hotel, a grand, three-story structure which occupied an entire city block in downtown Valdosta, and was owned by Ferrell's father. Twenty-year-old James Madison Pearson – Ferrell's cousin – was on night desk duty that night.

It was at the Valdes that circus personnel managed to corner the raging Gypsy, holding her at bay with pitchforks while firing a continuous rain of bullets into her. Despite the bloodbath and horror of the situation, it soon became obvious that it was going to take more than small bullets to bring down a brute the size of Gypsy.

With a growing crowd of pistol-packing pursuers dogging her every step, Gypsy's rage increased steadily. Suddenly, without warning, she reportedly looked toward the hotel and, to the horror of those present, ascended the steps of the structure in an apparent attempt to enter the structure. Suddenly, there seemed to be a very real possibility that the panicked elephant might literally burst through the side of the hotel.

Doing the only thing he could think of on such short notice, the night clerk Pearson raced to the electrical switchboard of the hotel and turned off the lights, leaving the area in darkness. This tactic somehow changed Gypsy's course and she reversed herself and quickly moved back out into the street.

For more than two hours, "Gypsy took control of the whole street," wrote a reporter for the Valdosta Times. "She would charge at the crowd, then hurl loose bricks and timbers into the air and all the while she was emitting a blood-chilling elephant cry."

Panic swept through the streets. Women and children were herded to relative safety behind strong walls, but Gypsy's rage did not seem to be aimed at women and children. According to all reports, she very deliberately attacked only the men who worked for the circus.

Though they enraged her, the continuous shower of bullets piercing Gypsy's flesh did not slow her down, and certainly did not kill her. At one point, she wrapped her long leathery trunk around a light pole, shook it, and shattered the lights.

At the First Christian Church – then under construction – she suddenly grabbed a backpedaling circus clown and tossed him more than 30 feet according to newspaper accounts. Three other circus employees, cornered and attacked by the on-rushing giant in full wrath mode, were saved only by massive pitchfork and pistol attacks on Gypsy from both sides and behind.

In the electrical blackout brought on by Gypsy's onslaught, Valdostans and circus personnel alike held their breath and listened for elephant shrieks and crashing debris in an effort to locate the danger.

“It was an eerie sight,” the newspaper reported, “the huge elephant thundering up and down the streets past the street lights, then into the shadows, no one knowing where she would strike next.”



Then Came The Police

Valdosta Police Chief Calvin Dampier was on the scene, but in the pitch darkness described by the newspaper, it was almost altogether impossible to guess from whence the thundering bulk of Gypsy would next appear. Facing the seemingly impossible turn of events caused by a berserk five-ton elephant in a city's downtown, local citizens and lawmen began organizing themselves and gathering firearms of a heavier caliber.

“There was a group going from house to house in an

area of [shotgun houses],” Pendleton said. Someone in the group finally asked a group of people if they had seen an elephant thundering past. Had not the situation been so dangerous, some of the responses might almost have been comical.

“I don’t know who it was,” one man reported, “but whoever it was stole a bunch of cabbages from the garden, put them under his arm and went running that way.”

In a dilemma perhaps unique in American history, Chief Dampier spent a troubled night under bizarre circumstances. Just how does one stop an attack by something as large and uncontrollable as Gypsy in 1902?

Finally, a resident whose name is lost to history reported that he had a Krag-Jorgensen rifle, a large caliber weapon from the Spanish-American War. It was most likely the one gun in the county capable of bringing down an elephant. However, there was a problem even with this solution. The gun was 10 miles away in Clyattville.

A unit was immediately dispatched to Clyattville to retrieve the weapon. It was about this time that Gypsy suddenly raced away to the north, reportedly crashing through the board fences surrounding the circus’s winter home, and disappearing into the darkness and dense woodlands.



A Mortal Wound

At some point during the night, the Krag-Jorgensen rifle was finally brought to Chief Dampier, who, along with an enormous unofficial posse, set off after Gypsy once again. With an animal that large, the trail couldn't have been very difficult to follow.

Various reports differ in the details involving Gypsy's ultimate fate, but the end result of all the stories is the same: Dampier and hundreds of followers finally found the runaway elephant the following morning, lying in tall grass near Cherry Creek, miles to the north on the Nashville Road.

One report maintains Gypsy's execution consisted of a single, well-placed Dampier shot. The Valdosta Times however, reported the elephant stood up, was brought to her knees by one shot, and finished off by another. Ferrell's version of the story maintained Dampier "pumped several shots into her body."

An estimated 3,000 people made the trip to see the dead elephant amid an atmosphere that has been described as a mixture of relief and sadness. Certainly, the execution of a huge, regal beast such as Gypsy was a traumatic experience for all involved.

Today, the exact site of Gypsy's remains is unknown, other than the fact they were buried in the vicinity of Cherry Creek, an area being overtaken today by subdivisions as Valdosta sprawls northward. The carcass was so massive that, even utilizing teams of horses, Gypsy's remains had to be hacked to pieces with axes and dragged by the horses to several graves.

On the same afternoon, James O'Rourke, the 44-year-old trainer whose untimely slide off Gypsy's head had started the whole nightmare, was buried in Sunset Hill Cemetery, transported there by a carriage pulled by six "beautiful white horses," Albert Pendleton wrote. The body was placed in what Pendleton described as "a very fine casket, bought by Mrs. Harris, owner of The Nickel Plate Circus." Today, O'Rourke's tall, narrow grave marker sits about 50 yards behind the sexton's office at the cemetery.

As might be imagined, various newspapers widely reported the incident for days – some accounts carrying a critical evaluation of the way the incident had been handled. The Valdosta Times scoffed at criticisms pouring in from distant locales accusing Valdostans of mob violence leading to the tragic end to the animal. The newspaper stood behind the Valdosta residents stating it was circus personnel who began shooting first.

Shortly after the incident, Valdosta Times Editor C.C. Brantley wrote "Generations unborn will be told about things that happened the day the mad elephant was killed near Valdosta." His words turned out to be prophetic. More than a century later, Gypsy may be as much a local legend as is Valdosta High School football and the many state championships and renowned athletes produced by the school over the years.

Notches On Her Tusk

Interestingly, the tragic story of Gypsy might have ended right there, had not Renate Milner, director of the Lowndes County Historical Society museum, begun corresponding in 2001 with Kenton Cornish who was collecting information on infamous circus elephants.

Through their correspondence, Milner uncovered a new and shocking truth which turned the familiar story of Gypsy on its head. Milner discovered, much to her surprise, that Gypsy had always been considered a highly-trained animal (it was claimed the huge pachyderm could even play the harmonica), but that she was also considered a very dangerous and formidable performer as well. In fact, she had killed humans – on several different occasions – prior to the day she ended the life of Whiskey Red O'Rourke.

Seeking information on Gypsy, Cornish cited sources in *Bandwagon*, a circus periodical which labeled Valdosta's famous Gypsy a temperamental murderess. "Before coming to Valdosta, she was evidently already a notorious elephant and had killed a number of people over the years," Cornish wrote to Milner. "They carved notches on her tusks each time she killed someone."

An article in *Bandwagon*, written in 1993 by the late Bill Johnston and entitled "Tough Circus Elephants," chronicles the stories of several circus elephants which eventually turned violent. Johnston's article describes "one of the toughest elephants ever imported to this country. . . an Asian female named Gypsy."

Johnston wrote that by the time The Harris Nickel Plate Shows bought Gypsy in 1888, she had killed at least four men associated with circuses in which she had performed. "Gypsy never bothered women and children, but apparently only went after people connected with the show," Johnston wrote. This bit of information lends more credence to the possibility that Gypsy was regularly abused by her trainers and other circus personnel over the years. She knew who was abusing her, and when the moment arrived, she apparently exacted her revenge upon her tormentors.

Among the murderous deeds committed by Gypsy after joining the Valdosta-based Nickel Plate Shows were the following:

- An unluckily cold circus employee emerged from his tent in the middle of the night one evening in Roncesford, Virginia, to take some of Gypsy's hay in an effort to keep warm. That simple act proved to be his undoing, for Gypsy broke loose from her chains, grabbed the employee from his tent and slammed him to the ground, killing him instantly.
- In 1896, ignoring warnings from Bernard Shea, Gypsy's trainer at that time, circus worker Frank Scott decided to exercise the temperamental elephant. For his efforts, Scott was rewarded by being thrown to the ground in a Chicago alley and stomped to death by the elephant's front feet.

Bernard Shea ultimately turned Gypsy's reins over to O'Rourke in 1896 after an incident in which Gypsy almost killed Shea. According to a description of the incident in Johnston's article, Shea and Gypsy were soaking up the cool water of a stream in Smith's Grove, Kentucky, when Gypsy suddenly grabbed Shea with her trunk and forced him under the water. He fought to the top several times, only to be shoved back under by the determined Gypsy. He eventually managed to escape, but immediately quit the show, because he knew then that it was only a matter of time before the elephant added him as another notch on her tusk.

Legends Never Die

It's just like the old saying. . . Legends never die. They just keep getting bigger, which in Gypsy's case is saying quite a lot. Her place in history is secured in the Historical Museum in Valdosta, and with each new generation, the story is passed along anew.



Milner, who frequently gives tours of the museum to school groups, says many of the children already know parts of the Gypsy story. And those who don't already know the details of Gypsy's wild final night on earth ask so many questions that they leave knowing at least most of the legend.

“Children love the story,” Milner says. “I try to be a little careful about [explaining the part about] Gypsy being hacked to pieces, but they want to know all about that too.”

Of even more interest to the children is the fact that one or more of them may even be living right over the scattered remains of Gypsy today, since quite soon, the entire area in the vicinity of her grave will be completely occupied by the new subdivisions being built in the area.

Resources: http://www.georgiahistory.ws/articles/gypsy_elephant.asp