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1916 Elephant Hanging Still Haunts Erwin, TN

By Angela K. Brown

ERWIN, Tenn. (AP) — The railroad crane squeaked and strained as it slowly hoisted the 5-ton elephant. The chain around the animal's neck tightened as the crane ascended, lifting first the front feet and then the back feet off the ground.

Moments later, with about 3,000 people watching, Mary the circus elephant was dead, her lifeless body hanging 6 feet in the air.

Mary was executed for trampling her handler, and tales about the bizarre hanging on a rainy afternoon in 1916 have endured for generations.

Many in this rural northeastern Tennessee town want the whole thing forgotten. They don't like how townspeople have been portrayed in published accounts.

"It made people from Erwin look like a bunch of bloodthirsty rednecks," said Hilda Padgett of the Unicoi Historical Society.

Mary was owned by Sparks World Famous Shows, a small traveling circus. She was featured prominently on advertisement posters: "Mary — the largest living land animal on Earth; 3 inches taller than Jumbo and weighing over 5 tons. A positive feature at each exhibition."

Before the performance in Kingsport on Sept. 12, 1916, Mary and the other elephants walked through town in the circus parade. Walter "Red" Eldridge, a drifter who had joined the circus the day before in Virginia, was handling Mary.

When the elephant stopped to nibble on a watermelon rind, Eldridge hit her head with a stick. Suddenly Mary lifted him with her trunk and threw him into the side of a wooden stand. Then she walked over and stepped on his head, several witnesses told newspapers.

People ran screaming, but the elephant never charged the crowd. In fact, Mary quickly calmed down and the show — with her in it — went on that night.

The next day, the circus traveled about 40 miles to Erwin, and rumors about Mary's attack began spreading. Some residents heard the governor had ordered Mary killed. Others claimed Kingsport residents were headed to Erwin with a cannon to blow her up.

The mayors in nearby Johnson City and Rogersville threatened to cancel circus shows in their towns if Mary kept performing.

Circus officials were reluctant to take action because Mary was such a valuable part of their show. But they knew they had to do something and apparently decided to kill her in spectacular fashion.

Circus workers wrapped a chain around Mary's neck and attached it to a 100-ton derrick



Murderous Mary the Elephant is hung from a railroad train.

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car, used for lifting and moving railroad cars. The chain broke during the first attempt. Witnesses said Mary broke her hip and did not squirm as much when she was hoisted the second and final time. She was buried near the track.

Historians believe only one person took a picture, and it appears fuzzy because of the fog, rain and camera equipment.

Charles Edwin Price, who chronicled the events in his 1992 book "The Day They Hung the Elephant," said he had a hard time separating fact from folklore. < Click here to order the book from Amazon! >

Price spent two years digging up circus records, poring over old newspapers and talking to the few witnesses still alive. He also listened to tapes of witnesses interviewed in the 1960s as part of an East Tennessee State University project.

Newspaper accounts differed widely and were influenced by emotion and rumors, Price said. In one colorful — but unsubstantiated — story, the sheriff arrested Mary and chained her to the jail in Kingsport before letting her travel with the circus to Erwin.

Another account that remains popular but is untrue had the townspeople of Erwin actually putting Mary on trial, convicting her of murder and sentencing her to death.

"When you have an event that happened so long ago, especially something this bizarre, folklore takes over in a lot of ways," said Price, who lives in Gate City, Va.

Erwin resident Ruth Pieper, who has researched the hanging, has tried for years to get approval for a memorial for Mary and to display an exhibit about the hanging. Both ideas have been rejected by city leaders.

"They want to keep it quiet, but it's part of our history," Pieper said. "And if it's told correctly, people will understand and won't blame Erwin anymore."

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