

*The Story of Janet Elephants and the Circus*

# Elephants and the Circus

by JASON HRIBAL

Janet was a female elephant born in 1965. She had been taken from the jungles of Southeastern Asia. Stripped from her mother and extended family, she was ultimately shipped to the United States. After arrival, she was put to work in the circus, and it was in the circus where she remained for the rest of her life. Her main job was to give rides to children and adults. And it was one day, while providing just such an amusement, that this elephant reached her breaking point.

In 1992, Janet was employed by the Great American Circus—a medium-sized operation based out of Sarasota, Florida. She had been owned by this same outfit since reaching the states nearly twenty-five years previous, and she had grown quite disenchanted with both the company and her job. It was in February, while performing in the town of Palm City, Florida, when everything went down.

Inside of the big tent and on the main stage, Janet was giving a ride to a group of school children. A crowd of some 1000 people watched and marveled at the spectacular showing. But that delight soon turned to dread after Janet began resisting her trainers. She started to thrust her full weight against the steel barrier separating the ring from the audience. She toppled the high-wire platforms with a loud crash. A handler tried to calm the elephant but was pushed aside. A police officer suddenly appeared and entered into the fray. He confronted Janet but was promptly picked up and tossed hard onto the concrete flooring. As he lied their dazed and bruised, he was grabbed again and placed directly under a foot. He was going to be stomped. Several circus handlers, though, pulled him to safety at the last second. Janet seized this opportunity to bust through the

barrier, maneuver through the screaming crowd, and escape the arena.

Once she got outside, Janet began targeting certain people. Elephants, bear in mind, never forget: whether it be a face or a trespass. She chased down one circus employee and flatten him. She then, amongst the chaos and sea of hysterical patrons, spotted another trying to get away. This employee also was caught, tumbled over, and plowed under. There is, in fact, a lengthy history of this kind of resistance among circus elephants.

It was in May of 1993 when Axel Gautier, the world famous trainer for Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, was stomped to death. Descended from six generations of Swedish performers, this 35-year veteran developed such elaborate tricks as getting elephants to walk sideways on their hind legs. He was on sabbatical from the Greatest Show on Earth and decided to tour the company's private breeding operations in Williston, Florida. Significantly, this facility—just like its zoological counterparts—was opened in response to stricter laws and regulations that were being passed to regulate the exportation of elephants from foreign countries. Circuses and zoos no longer had easy access to their labor pool. They needed a new, more reliable source. Thus, breeding programs and "conservation centers" sprung up around the country. As for Gautier and his visit to the Ringling operation, he went alone into a corral that contained a group of elephants. He must have known or trained at least a few of them. In any case, the elephants knocked him down and stepped on him repeatedly. Gautier died of internal injuries. The circus implied that this was an unfortunate accident, but they kept mum on the specific details. Twelve years later, another longtime Barnum trainer paid a visit to the facility, and the elephants stomped him too. He, however, would survive.

In 1994, two handlers at the Jordon Circus were beaten up by an elephant named Sue. She had two kids on her back when she decided to grab one trainer with her trunk and throw him up into the air. As soon as he landed with a thump, Sue strolled over top of him—breaking his arm, shattering several ribs, and causing internal

organ damage. The elephant next turned her attention to the other employee. Sue ran down the woman and kicked the crap out of her. It was only two years afterward when Sue violently confronted a different trainer—this time in central Wyoming. When questioned by a local newspaper, a circus spokesman denied that this was an attack. The elephant, while giving a ride to six children, became "spooked" at the sight of a horse and, consequently, backed into her handler. Spectators, nonetheless, provided a different story. They described how the elephant charged directly towards the trainer and bashed into the woman. Sue then began kicking the handler over and over again. When the woman tried to escape, the elephant just pulled her back for more.

In February of 1995, after a Tarzan Zerbini show, a trainer was trampled while attempting to load a female elephant into a trailer. Circus officials assured the media that this was a freak mishap, as the handler simply slipped under the elephant. Yet, according to a later lawsuit, this was no mishap. The now former employee detailed how the animal purposely knocked him to the ground and stomped on him not once but twice. The elephant, he testified, was trying to kill him. Ten years later, there would be a second incidence involving a Tarzan Zerbini handler and the insides of a trailer. Again, the circus pleaded innocence: the man fell, and the elephant was only "stepping on him out of curiosity, not out of aggressiveness." In the end, though, no lawsuit was filed; for the man died from the wounds.

In April of 1999, yet another handler for Tarzan Zerbini went down. This time, an elephant broke free from her leg shackles and ran after a particular person. Spinning the man onto his back, she proceeded to deliver swift blows to the trainer's face, chest, and pelvis. Why did this happen? The circus would say nothing. However, an ambulance crew member noted that the injured man reeked of booze. Another employee later admitted that the circus pachyderm performers were "originally trained by drunks and were badly beaten in the past." "Now," he warned, "the elephants don't like the smell of alcohol on people." A lesson to remember.

In January of 2000, an associate of the Ramos Circus was crushed to death at the outfit's home-base in Florida. Kenya, an 11 year-old African elephant, had managed to snap her leg chain and wander free. Indeed, while some people may know rivers, elephants know chains: as they are often tethered in irons for 15, 16, or even more hours per day. At any rate, this elephant was now free, and she targeted a member of the Ramos family. First, Kenya sent the woman crashing into the dirt and then trampled over top of her. The elephant watched as this former acrobat struggled to her feet, only to push her over again and continue with the lethal strikes. Kenya, shortly thereafter, joined this same woman in the afterlife—as the elephant also died. County authorities suspected foul-play. Someone had poisoned her.

Finally, in 2006, a pair of trainers at a fair in Marlborough, Massachusetts was smashed up against a wall by a 37 year-old Asian elephant named Minnie. Both individuals were critically injured. A spokesman explained that the elephant, while being loaded with a group of children, shifted her position and accidentally bumped into the handlers. Visitors, on the other hand, gave a different report. They said that a trainer hit Minnie near the eye with a bull-hook. As one onlooker added, "people think the animal got crazy, but it was provoked." The elephant was just trying "to defend itself." Several years previous, at the New York State Fair, there was a similar incidence with Minnie. It was at end of a long day of hauling passengers when she knocked her handler into the grass, kicked him, and then stepped on him. This last action not only left a large imprint of her foot on the man's body but also a lasting impression upon his mind.

Interestingly, scientists have long claimed that the root cause of this type of behavior in male elephants is "musth." Taken from the Hindi word for madness, it is defined as a period of glandular secretion, higher testosterone-levels, and heightened sexual arousal. In other words, this is a case of over-active and uncontrollable hormones; otherwise known as "heat." One would have hoped that the fields of natural science would have, by this point in history, moved beyond the 17th century and biological determinism. But to no avail. Non-

physiological factors—such as captivity, poor labor-conditions, brutal training, or the grind of circus life—matter little, if at all. Agency is basically a non-concept. Even more ironic is the fact that females are not even considered in the broader equation. For female elephants are not supposed to be aggressive or non-compliant. They are gentle, placid, obedient creatures. This is their nature; this is their instinct. Perhaps, though, biologists will address this issue sometime in the future. Of course, they will return and tell us that such kinds of behavior in females are nothing more than a case of PMS.

But to return to Janet and the 1992 circus in Palm City, Florida. One visitor snapped a photograph capturing this elephant sprinting along the midway with a group of children still clinging onto her back. Eventually, though, circus officials were able to surround her and retrieve the frighten youngsters. Two handlers were now put in charge of loading the elephant into the back of a trailer. But Janet declined the offer.

She took a hold of one of them and threw the man twenty feet into the air. She grasped the other and gave him a similar high and mighty toss. Finished with those two, Janet began to ram her broad body against the trailer that she had been put in so many times. Next, according to an eyewitness, "the elephant grabbed the training stick [from a fallen handler] and was slinging it against the van. Then she threw it down and just took off running." That stick, otherwise known as an ankus or bull-hook, is the primary tool used to teach, command, and control elephants. It looks like an inverted fish-hook, and it is employed to inflict harm and cause pain. Terror is how elephants are ruled. And Janet hated both: the terror and the ankus.

It was just two years earlier when a Great American Circus elephant, very possibly Janet herself, pummeled a trainer during a Pennsylvania show. The audience later detailed how the animal, just before the attack occurred, was refusing to obey a series of instructions. The handler, at that point, commenced hitting the performer in the left ear and eye with an ankus and then hooked the

creature's mouth with the barbed point. This type of violence towards elephants is usually kept well hidden by circuses but, on occasion, it does make a public appearance for all to see.

This was especially the situation with Mickey in September of 1994. This 15-year old elephant was working for the King Royal Circus. During a performance in Lebanon, Oregon, he refused to do a trick. The trainer shouted and promptly gouged the elephant in the neck with the bull-hook, drawing blood to the horror of the audience. A few people called the cops. After the show, the handler was arrested and hauled off to the city jail. Responding to the incidence, the King Royal manager fumed that "these animals can become killers." "What I'd like to do with these protesters," she continued, "is take our nicest elephant and put it in their back yards for about an hour. Then they'd see just how much destruction one of these guys can really inflict."

As to the escalating situation on the Florida midway, the police—at the request of the owner of the Great American Circus—stepped in and drew their weapons. A crowd of spectators had already encircled the scene. "All the people were yelling," one bystander recalled. "They were saying you shouldn't shoot that animal." The audience had chosen a side in this struggle, and it was not with the circus. Alas, the police paid no mind and began their barrage: firing a total of 47 bullets into the elephant. Janet lay prostrate on the ground but still alive. Fifteen minutes later, an officer arrived with larger bullet casings and finished her off. Janet's body was taken to the local garbage dump and unceremoniously discarded. Not all stories end well.

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