

# *ISCHUA VALLEY*

## *HISTORICAL SOCIETY*

### **ROBINSONS' CIRCUS VISITS MACHIAS AS TOLD BY AN OLD MACHIAS RESIDENT**

I wonder if our old residents remember the visit of Robinson's circus and menagerie to Machias way back in the late 1860s. This circus was the largest one which operated in those days, at least in this territory. Beside the strict circus features, it had some 15 or 20 cages of wild animals as well as an elephant, a couple of camels and I think a giraffe. The tent was a mammoth affair with a seating capacity of probably 1,500 or 2,000 or possibly more.

As I remember, it was but one ring and in the center of it was a pole. The animals were in cages on wagons. There were lions, tigers, bears, monkeys, besides smaller animals and I think some birds. The one performance that I saw was of the usual type of modern circuses and included acrobatic tumbling, trapeze acting, bareback riding and performing, as well as jumping or turning somersaults through hoops covered with paper. Of course there had to be a ringmaster with his long whip, to keep things moving and the funny clown, with red spots all over him.

Two of the performances impressed me forcibly enough as a kid to make me remember them quite distinctly. The first of these was the entrance of 5 or 6 grotesquely dressed goblins who chased the clown from the dressing room into the ring and kept the poor frightened fellow dodging about to get away from them and hollering in fear at times. They had big heads and hideous features. They were dressed in loose, flowing robes reaching nearly to the ground. They began to stretch up until they were 13 or 15 feet in height and of course this scared the clown still more. He dodged every attempt they made to get him, but luckily there was only one at a time after him. At last he succeeded in getting away and ran for the dressing room with them chasing him. On their way out 2 of the goblins doubled over backward and put their heads through their legs, and even then they were as tall as a man.

The other act I recall was a lady gymnast in fancy tights with silver spangles about the hips and a thin flesh colored covering on the rest of the body. Her trapeze act was at the top of the tent over the ring. She climbed a rope ladder some 40 or 50 feet from the trapeze and grasped 2 rings fastened midway and swung from there to catch her leg over the trapeze. The first time she missed it and as she came down near the ground her assistants caught her and stopped her. Then she tried it over again and succeeded. Her acts were very good and after them she slid down a rope to the ground.

But late that night 3 or 4 circus employees got into trouble with town hoodlums and a fight ensued. The local boys were making good account of themselves when someone blew a whistle. It was no time before circus fellows came running from every direction where they

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were lodging and a general fight was on. But the town fighters were outnumbered and driven to cover, some of them with broken noses and black eyes. Everybody caught by the circus crowd was pounded and licked. One old gentleman, on his way home from a neighbor, was attacked and so severely beaten that he never got over it. He had to walk with a cane ever afterwards. The next morning the whole show outfit was gone, bag and baggage. They were to be at Ellicottville that day.

But the Machias boys were not to be whipped that way. They hankered for revenge. They collected a crowd of fighters and went to Ellicottville and enlisted help from other toughs. A real fight ensued. I do not know how it turned out, but in those days when license and drunkenness were the rule, fighting was the common diversion and Machias had its full quota of fighters.

This was not the only aftermath of the Machias disturbance. The old gentleman who was severely injured made claim for damages. The sheriff seized the circus property to stop it from being taken out of jurisdiction, pending a settlement. The circus was ready to settle rather than to be tied up for days. It was reported the receipts at Machias were about \$2,500 and it took most of that sum to settle the old man's injuries.

Submitted by: William Watkins, Deputy Historian of Machias from ELLICOTTVILLE POST May 3, 1933.