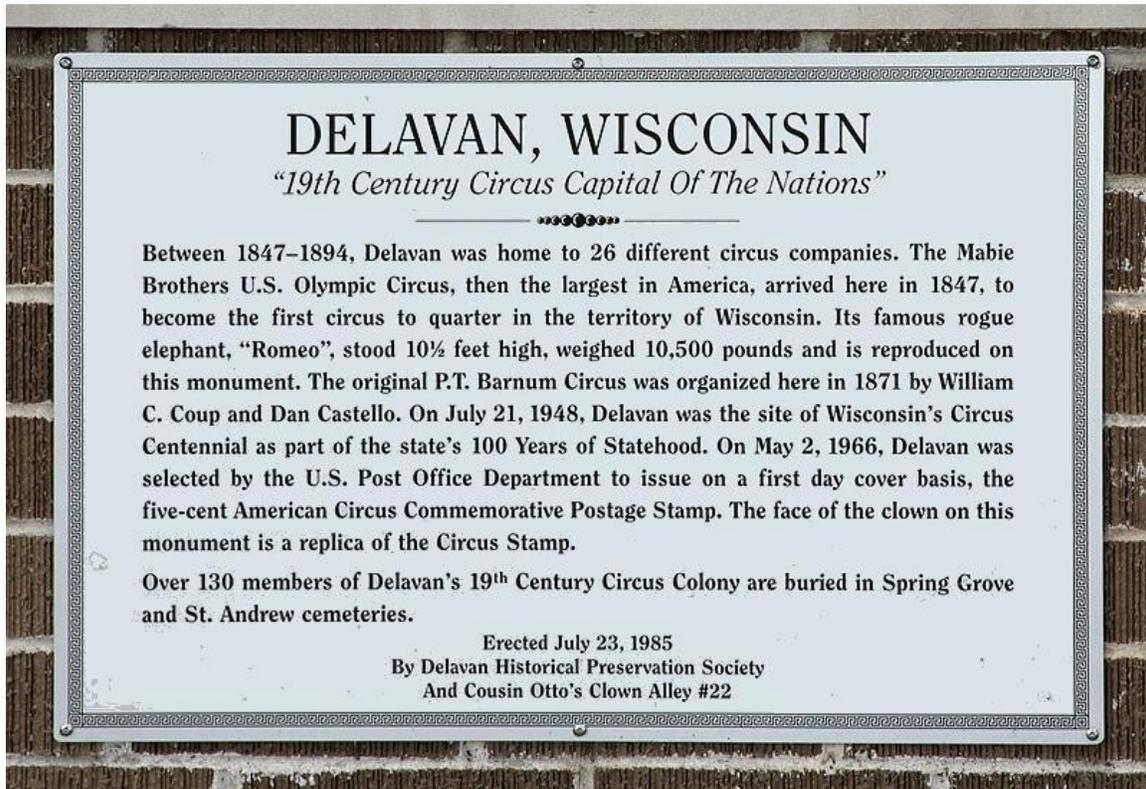


“Story of Romeo, the Elephant”

by:Carolynn Reyenga



Statue of “Romeo”, the killer Elephant.

Romeo and Juliet, Delavan’s Famous Pachyderms... The elephant which stands on the monument in “Watertower Park” is a facsimile of “Romeo”, the noted Mabie circus elephant who resided in Delavan between 1854 and 1865.

A pugnacious elephant, termed a “rogue,” Romeo killed five handlers during his stormy life-span. One of the largest Indian elephants ever exhibited in America, at maturity he stood nearly 11-feet tall and weighed 10,500 pounds. Born in Ceylon about 1828,

Romeo was in a herd of 10 elephants imported in 1851 for the P.T. Barnum Asiatic Caravan, and was exhibited the first season without incident.

In 1852, while the Barnum show was playing New Orleans, Romeo attacked and killed his keeper named Long John. Following the 1853 season, Romeo and a smaller female, Juliet, were sold to the Mabie Brothers and delivered to the show's winter quarters at the present site of Lake Lawn Lodge.

No problems were encountered the first year, but in 1855, while the Mabie circus was exhibiting in Houston, Texas, Romeo turned on his keeper, French Williams, crushing him to death.

The Mabie circus press agents heavily publicized Romeo, "The Killer Elephant", who became a strong drawing attraction wherever the show exhibited. An over zealous press agent fabricated a wild story about Romeo trying to save its mate who was slipping off a bridge in Iowa by holding trunks. Although a complete hoax, the story was carried by unsuspecting newspapers throughout the country, garnering considerable publicity for the Mabie circus.

In 1859 the Mabie brothers hired an experienced elephant handler named Steward Craven, who was highly proficient in handling Romeo. However the next season, at Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Romeo claimed his third victim when he killed an assistant handler.

Romeo once escaped from his barn at Lake Lawn winter quarters and terrorized the entire area for three days until captured. While playing a Chicago (winter) indoor date, in 1863, Romeo nearly tore the building apart, before escaping onto the street where he was loose for nearly an hour.

Romeo's Delavan residency came to an end in April of 1865, when the Mabie circus was sold to Adam Forepaugh of Philadelphia, who later rivaled Barnum for America's circus supremacy.

In 1866 Romeo lost the sight in one eye when struck with a chain. On December 18, 1867, while Romeo was in winter quarters on a farm near Hatboro, PA., he attacked his handler who was washing him, driving a tusk through the handler's body and forcing him to the ground where he trampled him to death.

In 1869, Romeo claimed his fifth life when he killed another handler. The Van Amburgh show was considering destroying the elephant, when Forepaugh heard about it and bought him back.

Forepaugh exhibited Romeo infrequently in 1870-71 due to the elephant's poor physical condition, but decided to feature him for the 1872 season since he appeared greatly improved.

While exhibiting in Chicago, it was discovered that Romeo was suffering from surgery on an infected foot and Romeo responded favorably for two days, but died on June 7, 1872.

His remains were exhibited on June 8, in a tent on the Chicago circus lot. Forepaugh donated the body to the Chicago Medical College to be mounted for a museum display,

but the day's delay in the hot weather caused too much decomposition and Romeo's remains were disposed of in the municipal dumping grounds.

-ooOoo-

Juliet, unlike Romeo, now rests in Lake Delavan. Juliet was a medium size female Indian elephant brought to America from Ceylon in 1851 in the same herd as Romeo, and purchased by the Mabie Brothers circus of Delavan in 1854.

Somewhat docile and highly trainable, Juliet pulled a bandwagon in the Mabie street parade and performed in the ring. Unlike Romeo, who created numerous problems, Juliet was a trainer's delight to work with.

Juliet enjoyed excellent health until following the 1863 season when a bowel obstruction was detected. She steadily declined at the Lake Lawn winter quarters of the Mabie show and died in February of 1864, during the height of the Civil War.

Due to the frozen ground it was not feasible to give Juliet an earth burial as was the usual custom, so her body was weighted down and deposited through a large rectangular hole sawed in the ice.

The late Amos Reader, who viewed the burial of Juliet as a child, said in a 1956 interview, that it took place a short distance off the present main pier at Lake Lawn.

In May of 1897, Alex Miller, while trolling for northern pike off Lake Lawn, reeled in part of a ribcage of a large mammal, tentatively identified as an elephant's, and thought to have been the remains of Juliet.

In 1931, a drag line operation off Lake Lawn brought up an elephant tibia bone, thought to have been another part of Juliet's remains.

The remaining bones of her anatomy are still deposited amidst the hydro soil on the lake's bottom.

Rest in Peace, Juliet.

