



Circus Yard Setup

Grade Levels 4-6

This classroom activity is based on The “Big Top” Show Goes On: An Oral History of Occupations Inside and Outside the Canvas Circus Tent. It is provided courtesy of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program (OOHRP) at the Oklahoma State University Library.

Formally established in 2007, the OOHRP has collected and preserved firsthand accounts from individuals who have witnessed historic moments. The program explores the lives and contributions of Oklahomans from all walks of life.

The “Big Top” Show Goes On is one of many projects undertaken by the OOHRP. This oral history project aims to preserve the voices and experiences of those involved with the work culture associated with Hugo, Oklahoma’s tent circus tradition. Many circuses have called Hugo home through the years, but only three currently remain. As the number of traditional tent circuses dwindles, their continued existence in Oklahoma is a testament to the dedication this circus community has for providing a magical experience to be shared by people of all ages. Made possible by a 2011 Archie Green Fellowship from the American Folklife Center, oral history transcripts, recordings, and images from this project are available not only at the OSU Library in Stillwater but also the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

The OOHRP invites you to explore the website (www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/circus) and learn more about Hugo, Oklahoma’s connection to the circus.

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Background

Bringing a circus to town requires a lot of planning. In addition to transporting all the equipment, people, and animals, the process and logistics of getting set up in a new location each day requires a lot of special planning. A 24-hour man (or woman) is the person who travels to the next town the day before the circus arrives—24 hours in advance—and figures out how everything should be set up.

Read the following excerpt from the oral history interview with David Rawls, who owned and managed the Kelly Miller Circus for twenty-five years. He tells what a typical day in the circus was like for him. While the 24-hour man had things planned out the day before, the manager needs to make sure everything goes smoothly. You will hear that it's not all about training elephants and swinging on ropes in the top of the tent.

David Rawls: My day started, I usually got up at five o'clock A.M. I'd put some coffee on, I got ready, and then went out and I'd start waking people up making sure everybody was ready to go. Now, my routine was to leave early. However, I didn't leave early before anybody else was up and around. I wanted to make sure my staff, my key employees, were up and going and doing the things they wanted. Then I would get in my rig and go to the next town. I would arrive on the grounds and immediately visit with the twenty-four hour man, who was there ahead of me. He would tell me where he had the big top spotted, why he had it that way. There were a lot of things that went into it.

I would, first of all, look at the logistics for the next town the day before. I would go through my file, who was my sponsor, what was the lot, how was the ticket sales—a variety of things—what was the water source, what was the trash and manure source, things like that. I'd also look at the weather. I wanted to know what the weather was going to be. What it was going to do or what it could do that day. It might change the way I laid the lot out, where I put the tent, where I put my trucks. So, all that went into consideration when you got there. If everything was normal and you had the lot in a decent place and it was a good access and aimed the right way so the public didn't get confused on how to approach the circus and how to get in and buy their tickets and all that, then I would park my rig and again, have another cup of coffee, probably my second of thirty that day, and begin to park the trucks as they came in because they would start arriving probably fifteen-twenty-thirty minutes after I arrived. That transition took place.

We were all usually all on the grounds by oh, seven-thirty. Everybody had a place they would park and I would park the trucks in the place that they went. He [twenty-four hour man] would handle the performers and the house trailers and I would handle the trucks. We'd get everything located where it went and then the people would come out of the trucks and go to work. When the animals arrived, you immediately put up the awning, you put up the fencing, you unloaded the animals, and you started cleaning the animals' area up and feeding, watering, and things like that. It all had to be done.

The public usually would come out around nine o'clock. Almost every day, people came out to watch the show go up and we had a tour that we gave, we told them about the animals, we took them into the tent and they watched as the tent went through the air. If they had questions we would answer

them. We told them about what the show times were and how much the tickets were and whatever their questions were. That usually went on, and by eleven o'clock we were usually done, ready to go. It was during that time that if we had a mechanical problem or we needed filters or needed a new tire or needed a drum of oil, or whatever the case may be, we would take care of those logistics during that time frame. Some of them would go off and do the commissary buying. We had a buyer, an assigned buyer. They would get a list from the cook and the cook would tell them what they needed for the next day's meals and off to the grocery store they went to buy the food.

If I had a fuel truck coming that day, I would make sure we had enough cash in the office to pay for the fuel, usually around three thousand dollars that we had to have in cash to pay the fuel man. Someone was assigned to go around with the fuel man, in the mechanics department, and make sure every truck had fuel with the proper fuel and that the generators were fueled and ready to go. At nine o'clock in the morning the generators started, and that's when the personnel who ran the office and worked in the office and dealt with the sponsors and sold the tickets, they'd go to the office. Their computers would now work and their lighting would now work and their calculators would now work and so, they would begin their day. Concession stand was getting cleaned, would get cleaned from the day before and ready for that day's operation. The concession manager would see to it that he had the stock that he needed for the day. We bought ice, sugar, apples, and hot dogs on a daily basis so, all that was taken care of during that time frame.

At eleven o'clock the cookhouse would serve lunch. I skipped a little part. At five o'clock in the morning, when I get up, the commissary has already got coffee and rolls and things on. So, as everybody gets up, they go to the commissary and get a cup of coffee and something to eat in preparation for the day. Then at noon, they served another meal in the commissary. Then starting at the intermission of the first show, they started serving supper. They served that until after the show was over, well after the show was over so that everybody had an opportunity to eat dinner. Then they would close up, clean up, and tear down the commissary in preparation for the move to the next town.

At two-thirty we started preparing for the performance. We had a three-thirty midway call. Typically, our shows were at four-thirty during the week. Three-thirty is midway call, everybody has to be in place and ready at three-thirty. If you worked on the midway, if you did elephant rides or worked in the concession department or took tickets, you had to be ready to go at three-thirty and in uniform. The ushers had to be in uniforms and animal grooms had to be in uniform. So, everything had to be ready to go at three-thirty. You started preparing for that at two-thirty. The elephants get a bath, horses are brushed, and everything is cleaned up, spiffed up and made ready to go. I typically would do a walk-through at three-thirty. I walked down the midway to make sure everybody was where they were supposed to be, which was an automatic. They knew me very well. They knew I'd be there. So, I really didn't have to do anything, it was just a walk.

I would also go into the big top to check and make sure that there were no obstructions, everything was where it was supposed to be, and the public could enter the big top and walk to their seating area in a good, safe manner, no side wall was left hanging up or down, all the lighting was like it was supposed to be, all the backdoor curtains were drawn so, it looked like we were ready for a show when the public walked in. You didn't want it to look like half-done. It had to be ready to go. Then the people would come. They'd buy their tickets, they'd ride the elephants, and do whatever. Then they would gravitate into the big top.

At four-thirty, the performance would begin. The performance went on for an hour and forty-five minutes and then that show was over and those people would leave. Then they would ride the elephants or the pony ride or whatever, buy cotton candy or a souvenir and then they would leave and get in their cars. Then at six-thirty, the crowd started coming for the next show and you would do the second performance. On a normal day, when everything is going right, the second performance would be over and when that was over we would start the teardown and dismantling the entire operation. That took about an hour and ten minutes.

At the end, I would walk around and make sure the animals were like they were supposed to be and the tent was put away and all the stakes were picked up. I had good bosses, good staff, that took care of everything. Then I would go to my trailer and try to relax. I never was able to just lie down and go to sleep. I'd watch a movie or have a cocktail or whatever. Then I'd go to bed and then the next morning start again. (Pages 26-28)

Activity

The circus is coming to town! You are the 24-hour man or woman, so you are in charge of fitting the entire operation into the designated area. There is a vacant lot at the corner of Fifth and Washington Streets where they will set up. However, you must decide where everything goes beforehand so it is the most efficient use of the space and everything fits. There cannot be a tent out in the middle of the road or an animal trailer in the front yard.

You must fit all the pieces into the square lot (box) that is given. Remember to coordinate logistics. Everything that goes in the front yard must stay together, as should everything that goes in the back yard. Try to arrange it all in a practical manner.

As the instructions note, you should divide the lot in half and place the Big Top in the middle. The Big Top seats hundreds of people, so it has to be big enough. The Front Yard is the area the public sees and spends time in. This area must include a ticket booth, concession stand, sideshow, four donnikers (port-a-potties), and area for either the pony, elephant or camel ride, a novelty stand (to sell balloons and fun circus items), space for circus goers to walk, and the entrance to the Big Top.

The Back Yard is the area the public does not see, where everything is prepared, repaired, and where the performers and animals live while the circus is in town. This area should include ten travel trailers, five semi-trucks that haul animals and equipment, water troughs for the animals, and the cookhouse and eating area.

Circus Yard Setup



Divide the space in half. The Big Top, or circus tent, goes in the middle. One half is the front yard, one half is the back yard. You need to fit all of the following in the designated areas:

Front yard

Ticket booth
Concession stand
Sideshow
4 donnikers (port-a-potties)
Pony, elephant or camel ride area
Novelty stand
Space for circus goers to walk
Entrance to Big Top

Back yard

10 travel trailers
5 semi-trucks that carry animals and equipment
Water trough for animals
Cookhouse/eating area for crew