

NEWS

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The curious case of how an elephant ended up on the steps of a Delaware school

[Natalia Alamdari](#) Delaware News Journal

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For one or two nights a year, a menagerie of lions, tigers, horses, monkeys and more would inhabit the pasture off Route 9.

In the 1940s, the swath of New Castle land was tenanted by the Megginson family, who would rent the neighboring pasture to small circuses that toured up and down the East Coast.

For less than \$1, children and their parents would be dazzled by aerialists and acrobats, cowboys and clowns.

But the elephants were the real stars of the show.



Dolly the “patriotic elephant” enraptured New Castle residents in 1940, with her unflinching ability to pick an American flag from a pile.

A year later, Thelma, the “world’s best performing baby elephant” took the center ring.

And in 1943, Eva the elephant entertained the masses with “a most human display of American sports.”

Down the road was William Penn School, which at the time housed all grades in Colonial School District.

And somehow, in the years when the Megginsons would play host to the circus, an elephant ambled its way over to the school. It’s a moment forever immortalized in photos showing about three dozen students and their teachers staring in awe at the giant animal posed on the steps of what is now New Castle Elementary.

It’s hard to pin down the exact date of the Delaware Historical Society archival photos – at first glance, Leigh Rifenburg, chief curator at the society, dated the photos back to May 1936, when the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus performed in Wilmington that month. But schools were closed that afternoon for the performance, making the visit more unlikely.



Piecing together the curious case of the William Penn elephant sent this reporter down a rabbit hole of newspaper clippings, oral histories of New Castle, and even the Circus Historical Society (yes, it exists).

The elephant was more likely a troupe member of the smaller circuses that would occupy the fields neighboring the school, said James Meek, a local historian and member of the Trustees of the New Castle Common. Ringling Bros., on the other hand, would pitch its tents in the city of Wilmington.

Ted Megginson, who was a child when his family lived on the farm, recalled when his grandfather would rent the pasture to circuses in need of a performance space.

“They’d unload everything on trucks and bring them down to our field and set up there,” said Megginson, who turns 86 on Sunday. “They would bring horses, lions, tigers, monkeys and all that.”

New Castle County Gazette archives chronicle years of circus appearances at Megginson's Field, but only one puts the circus there on a school day – an October 1940 performance by Hunt's Circus.

***Hunt's Circus Is Coming To
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**Oldest Show On The Road. 48 Years Under Same Ownership To
Give Afternoon And Evening Performance, Featuring Many
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Hey, Skinny! The circus is coming to town.
That will be the cry of young New Castle when the posters go up around
announcing that Hunt's big three ring circus will show here on next Wed-
nesday afternoon and evening.

The two performances of the one

Hunt's Circus was a medium-sized family-owned show that performed through the 1960s, said Don Covington, president of the Circus Historical Society. Three elephants, including the patriotic Dolly, were the main attraction.

The elephant's appearance at William Penn was likely a promotional visit, he said. Having the show grounds within walking distance of a school would have created the perfect photo op to lure in paying spectators.

“There was never a better subject, both for the circus and for the photo editor, than an elephant,” Covington said. “A good circus press agent would alert the local press about the visit, clear the animal’s arrival with school authorities, and suggest that the student body be invited outside to meet the elephant.”

It wasn’t unusual for circuses to give complimentary tickets to school officials and lucky students, in hopes that they would then convince their families – and paying parents – to attend the show.

Megginosn himself graduated from William Penn in 1953, and would have been about 7 or 8 when the circuses took up residence on his grandfather’s farm.

And while he doesn’t remember an elephant making its way over to the school, he does remember when the pachyderms were brought to the farm to drink from the same watering trough the Megginson horses and pigs used.

Having a circus as your neighbor came with its perks, he said. The family would receive free passes to the show. A teenage cousin who lived at the farm would invite friends over to walk through the grounds to see the animals, he said.

“It was exciting,” he said. “You’d get to see the elephants, ride on the horses, see all the animals. It was a joy.”

Were you a student at William Penn the day the elephant came to visit? Or can you recall a parent or grandparent’s stories of the gentle giant on the steps of the school? You can share your memories with education reporter Natalia Alamdari at 302-324-2312 or at nalamdari@delawareonline.com.

Delaware City, Friday, June 20th

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