



Glen Elder, KS -- Heritage & History

~ Memoir Lane ~

Going to the Circus, 1933

-- Marjorie Kresin

Not long ago I was looking through my mother's trunks of keepsakes. Doing so caused me to recall times when, as a child, I watched her do the very same thing. "Going through the trunks," she called such moments.

Now, as I carefully lifted out each treasure, I rediscovered many things. There were clothes she had saved from family members including a striped silk shirt she had given my dad when they were dating. There was also a stack of sheet music, some from WW1 times, she had played in younger years, some baby things and a script—"The Man in the Green Shirt." It was a play she had a part in at Maple Grove country school (located approximately seven miles north of Glen Elder in Jewell County) a few years after she and dad were married in 1922. There was a lot more.

Handling these items, I remembered mother's voice, how she touched and held them herself, making comments about each one; her expression would change with each piece. Sometimes it was sadness accompanied with a far-away look—other times, a gleam in her eye along with a laugh or grin.

As I went deeper into the trunk it was then I found it—a worn, soft-cover book with a torn cover. The moment I picked it up I knew it was the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus book my mother had bought years ago on the day our family went to the circus. I remember dad thought it was too expensive to buy, but relented when he saw how much mother really wanted it. It was all about the life and operation of the circus. As I held it, I recalled how she enjoyed reading and talking about it for days after attending the show. Then, I began to reminisce of my childhood and how different it was 70 years ago.

Born in March, 1928, at my Grandma Davis' house near Glen Elder, Kansas, I grew up on a farm four miles north of Glenwood Cemetery with my parents Dewey and Margaret Anderson and my sister, Maribelle. My entire world was a small area made up of the nearby countryside and small community. My life consisted of playing house and dolls, making mud pies, cutting paper dolls and playing games with my sister. We enjoyed family gatherings at my Grandma Anderson's with aunts, uncles and cousins. We went to Glen Elder to do our shopping, "trading," is what mother called it, and to church.

That all was soon to change when we girls heard our parents discussing the fact that Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus was coming to Concordia, Kansas. When it was decided we were going excitement ran high as plans were made for the big day. We girls had no idea where Concordia was but we knew we were going on a long trip for the first time. We counted the days!

The day before, dad worked hard to get everything done so he would be able to go, and there would be cows to milk and chores to do before leaving in the morning. Mother busied herself too, making sure our clothes were ready to wear. She killed and dressed a chicken to fry and prepared other food for the picnic lunch we'd have while waiting for the circus to start.

Finally, everything was done except our baths. So, out the wash tub came. After the water was carried in and heated we each took our turn. Now we really were ready for the big day. Bedtime came early so we could get a good night's rest, but no one could sleep. Even our parents were still talking late at night. We girls asked, "What time are we getting up in the morning?"

"I guess whoever wakes up first can wake the rest of us," Dad replied.

I'm not sure when we went to sleep but, at 3:30 a.m., a little voice called out, "Is it time to get up yet?" That was the beginning of our big day. Dad went to chore; mother fried the chicken, packed our lunch and made sure we had everything. It was still dark at five o'clock in the morning when we all loaded into our Model-T Ford—with its dim headlights on, we headed for Concordia and my first long trip.

We arrived in Concordia even before the circus train itself got there; so, dad parked near the train tracks. We waited and then got to watch as the big steam locomotive and its colorful circus cars arrived. Soon the unloading began. Workers used the elephants to move all the heavy equipment. Next, they used them to put up the tents. As soon as the kitchen and dining tent was up, the cooks started cooking and serving breakfast to the circus help; then, they began to prepare lunch.

Other workers fed and groomed animals. We watched as performers unpacked costumes, making sure everything was ready for their act. We watched as the people put on their makeup and became funny clowns. Everyone was working to be ready for the big show in the afternoon.

Morning passed and it was time for our picnic. Mother spread a blanket and we ate under a shade tree. All I can remember of the meal was chicken and bread & butter sandwiches. Dad bought our tickets and then we entered this very large tent called the big-top. Rows and rows of folding chairs surrounded three large rings positioned in the very center of the huge tent. The chairs filled quickly—the circus was about to start.

No way could two little girls know what was about to happen, but happen it did! Lights and music filled the air. Clowns were doing funny things everywhere to make us laugh. Beautifully dressed performers on high wires swung in the air. There were horse, elephant and other animal acts in every ring. It was impossible to see it all; we loved every minute.

Then, it was over. As we filed out of the tent dad put me on his shoulders, the crowd leaving being so tight I could barely breathe. It seemed to take forever to reach the outside.

That was the last memory of the day for me. I know we returned home that evening and I am sure we girls slept all the way. For a child nearly five years old this trip to Concordia to see the circus broadened my world with a special day I still remember.