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American tradition: Old-time circus stops in Phelps

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PHELPS - Dozens of people young and old gathered along Clifton Street Monday morning to take in a traditional raising of the big top.

The sounds of orders barked in Spanish and the smell of burning diesel fuel and animal droppings hung in the air as Carson & Barnes Circus workers buzzed between and around their trailers, scrambling to set the giant stage for Monday night's two shows.

Spectators were treated to an inside look at the show, from Isla the Elephant pulling up 38-foot tent posts to a sneak peek at the petting zoo, which features baby goats and Katie the Pygmy Hippopotamus/

"The baby goats are sooo adorable," said Sydney Howard, 8, of Geneva, who watched the action with her mom, Liz, and sister Anna, 6.

"Mom, please can we come tonight, please, please, please," Anna said, falling to her knees and thrusting her skinny arms and clasped hands over her head.

The raising of the big top also brought out the "ancient," as Paul and Marge Siedert, of Geneva, jokingly described themselves.

"This is pretty exciting. I just look at them putting this whole thing together and marvel at the teamwork," Marge Siedert said.

Lifelong circus lovers, the Siederts said they were at one of the last outdoor shows performed by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus in Geneva in 1957.

"These folks should be commended for perpetuating an American tradition," Paul Siedert said.

In many ways, the scene was as old as the circus itself. The field crawled with activity from the moment the 60-trailer-long caravan arrived Monday morning, following a show in Owasco on Sunday.

Workers, most of whom started the day at 5 a.m., pounded heavy wooden stakes, unrolled the massive, 300-foot long tent and threw hay to the hungry animals in the menagerie.

Other preparations, though, had more of a 21st century flavor, including unloading digital sound and stage lighting and erecting broadband satellite receivers so the circus' 160 to 180 employees could surf the Internet at will.

"It's funny, the more we try to be a traditional circus, the more technology we end up using," said spokesman Ben Trumble.

As one of the longest-running big-top circuses in the country, Carson & Barnes has witnessed many changes to the business, survived, and in many cases is better for them, Trumble said.

"Every time a new entertainment medium came out, it was supposed to be the death of the circus," Trumble said. "You had silent film, then radio, then television, now video games and the Internet."

If that's the case, someone forgot to tell circus owners. In 1869, he said, there were around 26 circus companies touring the United States. Almost a century later, in 1956, circuses still numbered about 26. Today? You guessed it - around 26 circuses continue to thrill ladies, gentlemen and children of all ages.

Circuses survive, Trumble said, because they learn to adapt and carve out niche markets.

"We're marketed as a traditional, old-fashioned family circus," Trumble said. "To pull that off, we have to adapt very early."

While Cirque du Soleil shows continue to sell out on word of its elaborate acrobatics and somewhat erotic themes, Carson & Barnes unabashedly clings to its image of traditional, family-oriented entertainment, Trumble said.

Its three rings, outdoor tent and ringmaster - complete with tuxedo and tails, recall popular and comforting nostalgic images, he added.

Other circuses have found similarly narrow markets, such as the all-African American Circus De Soul and the Hispanic Circo Mundial.

Carson & Barnes is still a family affair - from the owners to the performers to Trumble himself, whose father and grandfather both worked in the business.

"We have trapeze artists who can trace their families involvement in circuses to Italy in the 1700s," he said.

Most expert performers are born into the circus, such as acrobat Eric Fernandez, 10. Since he was 5, the Brazil-born Fernandez has traveled the United States, attended school at circus headquarters in Hugo, Okla., and joined the Flying Fernandez Family on the trapeze. Starting this year, he has a new job: jumping over elephants.

"We just use trampolines," Fernandez said, eyes darting back and forth, as if on the look-out for something more exciting to do. "I was born in the circus, so it's not scary or anything. I'm used to it."

Taste, not technology, dictates what goes on during the performances, and the shows change

as often as the styles do. While traditional standbys - such as elephant acts, clowns and trapeze artists - still form the backbone of the show, circus history is littered with the bones of acts long passed.

"Some acts that were really popular we never see again," he said, like leaping acts.

Workers from all over the world are drawn to the circus, Trumble said, and the Carson & Barnes group boasts employees from 12 countries. The international face is evident from the set up, done mainly by Mexican citizens on work visas; to the Ukrainian menagerie master; to under the tent.

"After the Soviet Union collapsed, all of a sudden there were tons of acrobats, trained in schools sponsored by the government, looking for work," Trumble said. "A lot of what they were doing was never seen [here] before."

Circuses also changed their relationship with elephants, one of the enduring icons of the big top. Gone are circus owners like P.T. Barnum, who would load 50 pachyderms on a train and parade them through town. Carson & Barnes travels with four Asian elephants but owns dozens.

Those left behind live on their own preserve in Oklahoma and participate in rehabilitation breeding programs aimed at increasing their numbers worldwide, Trumble said.

The animals that make the trip live and work under the watchful eye of elephant manager Randy Peterson.

"Personally, I think this is the most wonderful job in the world," he said. "Every time I go on the road, I tell my family that I'm off to play circus."

The 30-year-old elephants are longtime circus veterans that Peterson knows just as well as the guy in the next cubicle.

"They're very intelligent and gentle creatures," he said. "They're easy to work with, too."

"When you're hot, they're hot and when you're cold, they're cold, so it's easy to relate to them."

When the lights went out Monday night, the performers and workers retired to their trailers to catch a few hours of sleep - before hitting the road once again, this time to Evans, Erie County.

Like Phelps, just another stop on a 235-day tour.