

IT'S TRUE WHAT THEY SAY: AN ELEPHANT NEVER FORGETS

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By Randal D. Williams

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Elephants are said to have very good memories, maybe even better than humans.

Whether or not that's true may be open to debate, but one elephant many years ago remembered very well. As with all stories passed down orally, this one is based on memory of the late, great Hilham historian, folklorist and raconteur, Charlie Brown.

In the early 20th century, the Upper Cumberland was visited by numerous traveling circuses. They brought an exotic, unknown world to the isolated rural communities of the region. Folks got to see lions, tigers, apes and elephants; they saw clowns and performers from places they'd only read about in books or learned about in school; they ate cotton candy, hot dogs and ice cream. The traveling circus was a romanticized version of what the world beyond must be.

The circus procession into town was a community-wide event. The locals would watch the circus roustabouts erect the Big Top and other circus structures. And the shows themselves were mesmerizing. The rubes, as the circus folk called the locals, always went home happy and amazed.

One such circus that regularly visited the Upper Cumberland was the Mighty Haag Show, which billed itself as the "Pride of Dixie," and "A Southern Show for Southern People." Emmett Kelly, the most famous circus clown of all time, once worked for the Mighty Haag Show. The Haag Circus was a "high grass show," playing small crossroad towns where the grass was usually untrimmed. The Ringlings called Ernest Haag "the Barnum of the sticks."

The Haag Circus began as a wagon show, but from the early 1900s until the 1930s, the circus traveled almost exclusively by train. The Haag Show was not a large circus by Ringling Brothers' standards. An average Haag Show train would consist of an advertising car, four sleepers for performers and crew, six flat cars for equipment and three stock cars for the menagerie. In the Upper Cumberland, the train made stops along the old Tennessee Central Railroad; the stops included Cookeville, Algood and Monterey. The circus would perform in these towns, but it would also travel by wagon to outlying communities such as Hilham, in Overton county. And that's where our story takes place.

In 1915, or thereabouts, the Mighty Haag Show had traveled by wagon from Algood to Livingston, and then on to Hilham. Folks lined the roads to watch the wagons rumble by and to see the elephants march into town in time with the calliope mounted on its own brightly colored wagon. The only thing to ever cause a bigger stir in the area was General Zollicoffer leading the 25th Tennessee to the Battle of Mill Springs; but the 25th didn't have elephants.

The Mighty Haag Show roustabouts set up the circus tents in a field near the Holham Store. Folks came from far and wide to watch the proceedings, and to stare at the caged animals and the colossal pachyderms tethered in the field beyond the Big Top.

The elephant handlers would admonish the locals not to feed the animals, and under no circumstances were the rubes to give the elephants alcohol or crewing tobacco. When the admonitions were delivered, they fell on the deaf ears of one older gentlemen in the crowd, Mr. Clay Hawkins.

Clay had come to watch the circus hands work; he had ridden his mule to town, and he was dressed in his best “overhauls.” In the bib pocket of said overhauls was a copious amount of Clay’s homemade, hand-twisted chewing tobacco. As Clay watched the elephants chewing their hay, he felt a sudden pang of sympathy for the big creatures. He immediately decided to share a “chaw” with one especially hospitable looking old girl named Tip, who was tethered nearby, placidly studying the rubes. Clay dismounted, pulled a large twist from his overhaul pocket, whistled at the big elephant, and tossed the tobacco high in the air. Tip caught the twist as deftly as any gig leaguer could have.

Tip chewed the tobacco for quite some time before swallowing the quid; Clay was proud of his generosity toward the old girl. Within a matter of moments after swallowing the tobacco, however, Tip was vomiting violently and staggering like a drunken man. She then trumpeted loudly, started spinning in circles like a five-ton whirling dervish and passed out colder than a cucumber. There was an immediate uproar from the gathered rubes, roustabouts and Tip’s handler. Clay, feeling that discretion was indeed the better part of valor, quickly excused himself from the circus grounds.

The “passed out” elephant story spread like wildfire. Word of the elephant’s misadventure reached all the way to Cookeville and Carthage. More people than ever before came to the Mighty Haag Show to see the passed out, tobacco chewing, drunk elephant. Tip was the toast of the Upper Cumberland, even after completely regaining her faculties.

As the circus was preparing to leave Hilham, Clay made his way back into town to make sure Tip was none the worse for wear. When he arrived at the circus ground, Tip took one look at Clay, snatched a 14-pound sledgehammer from a roustabout and threw it at Clay with all her might. The sledgehammer missed him by an inch, but it was said that the big hammer traveled farther than Thor could have thrown it, and when it landed the din could be heard from one side of Hilham to the other.

The old elephant had not forgotten what Clay had done to her, and neither could Clay or anyone else who witnessed the elephant throwing the sledgehammer.

Clay Hawkins chewed tobacco on his front porch for the rest of the day and told friends, neighbors, rubes and passersby the story of the hammer-throwing elephant. And for as long as she lived, the roustabouts kept sledgehammers well out of Old Tip’s reach.

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Cumberland Tales is a service of the Cookeville History Museum. Editors are Dr. W. Calvin Dickinson and Dr. Michael Birdwell of the TTU History Department.

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