

Elephants
April 2017
Elizabeth Crawford

Come through my front door, and to your left you will see a curio cabinet full of glass, metal, wood, ceramic, and marble elephants. More than once I have been asked if I am a rabid Republican, but in fact my affection for elephants has a far different origin.

In 1974, we moved to Somers, a Westchester town about one hour north of New York City. The first clue that it was a special place was advice from the realtor that the details we needed to take care of as new homeowners required going to the Elephant Hotel. What?

Gradually we learned that around 1805 a farmer named Hachaliah Bailey bought Old Bet, the second elephant ever brought to the U.S., probably to be used as a draft animal. However, seeing the excitement of the crowds that gathered to gape at this huge creature as she walked from the Hudson River toward her new home in Somers, Bailey realized the profit to be made by keeping Old Bet hidden, later taking her from place to place only at night, and charging 25 cents to anyone who wanted to see her. He became rich, as did his neighbors, who joined in the purchase and display of exotic animals. Thus the beginning of the menagerie. A subsequent Bailey joined with showman P.T. Barnum, leading to Somers' designation as "The Cradle of the American Circus."

By 1825 Bailey had completed the building of the Elephant Hotel, which by mid-century became the site of great social events for circus proprietors and other wealthy people. In front of the hotel he placed a wooden replica of Old Bet on top of a tall granite pole, where she still stands today.

What better place for children to grow up than in a town still somewhat obsessed with the circus, and especially elephants! In Somers, the unit on town history was actually fun. In the schools, known as Tusker Territory, the students were (and still are) proud to be called Tuskers. Parades included various elephant floats and a wide array of clowns. For one special anniversary, officials imported a live elephant for the parade. I remember that day clearly since one of my sons was the drum major for the high school marching band, required to walk backwards while conducting the music. He was used to doing this, but I worried that this parade presented an unusual challenge. Fortunately, the visiting elephant cooperated and did not drop anything for him to step into.

Over the years, the Bailey family had sold the Elephant Hotel to Somers, after which it became the home of the various town offices. The one large room became the location for activities both social and official--refreshments after parades and Christmas tree lightings and meetings of the local court and town board. I remember taking my sons to board meetings to fulfill scout requirements. Usually some adult attendees disagreed with whatever decision the councilmen made, and we laughed to hear them mutter the traditional Somers complaint, "The circus may have gone, but the clowns are still here."

Recently, a couple of my grandchildren attended one of the last performances of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Changing attitudes toward keeping wild animals in captivity finally persuaded the owners to retire the elephants about a year ago. They are now living at a Ringling facility in FL although not everyone agrees that this relatively isolated life is best for them. It has been reported that ticket sales dropped precipitously with the disappearance of the elephants to the point where the Ringling circus became no longer viable. While it is sad to see the end of a long tradition, it is somehow fitting that what began with Old Bet ended with some of her distant relatives.

Some years ago it was decided that the intersection in front of the hotel was no longer safe, and improving the road would require moving Old Bet. Popular outrage forced the engineers to revise their plans and leave her where she had watched over the town for so many years. So, anyone who wishes to succumb to circus nostalgia and experience a bygone world in the small but intriguing circus museum is invited to visit Old Bet and the Elephant Hotel, a National Historic Landmark and the "oldest existing building of significance in the development of the American circus."