

# The circus comes to Rowesville

Louis Boone Jr., 9 years old, walked one block from home on his no-name street to Main. Mr. Harry Ash's General Merchandise Store had a cold box stacked with Eskimo Pies and ice creams on a stick for a nickel, the exact amount he had. Turning the corner into Main his eyes suddenly widened at the sight of a dozen big, colored signs, in the windows, on the wooden store facades and telephone poles.

"Ogledorf Brothers Circus, Rowesville, S.C., June 17, 1938."

He stood astounded. There had never been a circus in Rowesville before. Maybe not in Bamberg, Bowman or Branchville as far as he knew. He walked closer to read one of the signs that listed: "Maria's Trick Dogs," "The Tragivore, Thrills on the High Wire," "Fuo See, Kieto, and Lee Sing, 100 Pins Flying in Mid-Air," and "Cowboy High Riding, with Western Stars and Champion Horses."

At the bottom of the incredible list in the largest letters came the piece de resistance: "Challenge Goliath, the 500 pound Alaskan Bear; Any Man Who Puts Him Down, Wins \$20 cash." Twenty dollars! An unbelievable sum in a town where 15 cents bought a pound of pork chops.

"You goner 'rastle the bear, Louis?" The challenge scared him a moment as he turned around to face Vance Boone, a cousin and classmate. "I don't know, are you?"

"You and me can't. You have to be 14."

They walked to Ash's busier than on other weekdays. Outside, ice cream in hand, they edged up to one of the little circles of adult men, all pointing at and expostulating over the signs. The usual "joshing" over fishing, hunting and baseball had been shoved aside as Rowesville began a week-long feast of new excitement.

The show also dominated the neighborhoods and playing fields. "Are you goner fight the bear? I dare you to."

"If you don't, you're chicken."

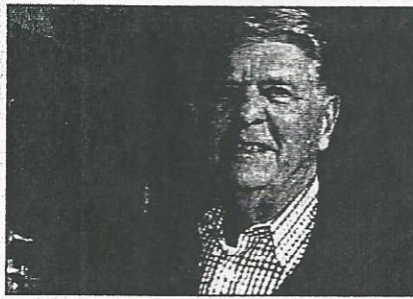
"I dee double dare you to!"

By midweek, at least half a dozen had declared their man-vs.-beast intentions. As Louis recalls, all were 17 or less; all were middleweights or less.

Saturday, the show day, he washed early, dressed early and ate early. Insisting to his parents that he was determined to get the center seat in the middle of the ground row, he left home just before 2, walked three blocks to the big tent, bought his ticket and was seated with some of his friends a full hour ahead. "I was determined to see every move in that fight."

At a loud drum roll, a handsome ringmaster in a tuxedo and top hat appeared in front of the small orchestra. "Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Ogledorf World of Wonders." His overpowering voice rang out a welcome befitting the president of the United States.

Then, to the tune of "Happy Days



## THOMAS LANGFORD SOME EDISTO STORIES

Are Here Again," all the performers, in glittering gold and red costumes, marched around the show area. Next, Maria's 10 frisky white and brown little mongrels dashed out to jump through hoops, dance on their hind legs and push tiny baby carriages holding minuscule puppies. "The Man on the Flying Trapeze" a popular song, backed up two muscular, bare-chested men and a pretty girl who performed on a wire only 6 feet off the floor. They danced, did overhead flips and rode on each other's shoulders. Half the 400 residents of Rowesville clapped happily.

Between acts, two bizarrely costumed clowns fought with umbrellas, stole each other's pants and threw buckets of chopped paper into the bleachers. Then came the next-to-last act and, to Louis, the best so far. In red 10-gallon hats and silver-encrusted chaps, two horsemen, one on a black stallion, one on a white stallion, raced inside and around the entire tent. A cowgirl, wearing white-fringed leather and riding a brown horse, came into the ring, and with a long whip, conducted the three horses in a canter to the notes of "Bye Bye Blackbird." They rode while standing on the rumps of their mounts and kept pace as the riders flipped to one side touching the ground with their boots, then leaping to the opposite side.

In his heart, every man present loved and envied these stars of the west.

Finally, the ringmaster called: "And now ladies and gentlemen, the highlight of the show, which you have been waiting for. Goliath, our 9-foot (he was probably nearer 7) Alaskan bear will take on any man in the audience who has the courage to come into the ring and wrestle him to the ground for the grand prize of 20 cash dollars."

Several attendants unrolled a large canvas in the center, a sizeable square marked inside it. The audience began looking around for Goliath, who was not in sight. At least a dozen males, nearly all under 20, had been popping up and racing toward the ringmaster.

"You must be 14 or older to fight with this monster of the Canadian wild; if you will line up over here." He beckoned to the side of the ring. "Keep in mind that Goliath is wearing a steel-bar muzzle and cannot use his teeth to bite you," he encouraged.

The assortment of would-be gladiators

kept looking around for their opponent until another drum roll sounded, two curtains at the side of the orchestra opened and there, according to Louis, stood (on hind legs) the tallest, heaviest most thick-furred bear any of them had ever seen. At the end of the ringmaster heavy leash, he roared, then fell to all four of his leather-covered feet and car into the ring. The fighters, eyes widened stared, then broke ranks and, except for a half dozen, hightailed back to the bleachers.

Those left stood their ground warily as the ringmaster called Richard Hunt, the first boy in line. He stood, scared down to his heels, took a stand, stretching out his arms and spreading his feet apart. At his signal, Goliath hurled toward Richard until his monstrous head butted him flat to the ground, then lay on top of him. Louis remembers he could see nothing of Richard except or hand protruding from under the four-inch fur.

Next to meet the challenge was A.L. Bonnett, who kept running not to get caught, but Goliath rammed him prone also. Ladson Boone (another cousin) weighed in at all of 120. His tactic was run around the ring, then he leapt toward the bleachers and rushed to the top. Seeing what was happening, the trainer let the leash go and Goliath raced up the stand, hot on his tail. The people screamed, leaped up, scrambled down, some over each other, and fled outside. It was a reenactment of Moses parting the Red Sea, Louis said.

"Fleeing male and female bodies, flailing arms and wide eyeballs were all could see. Meanwhile, Ladson had reached the top row, jumped from the back of the stand and disappeared."

The rest of the audience kept their seats, bent over with laughter, while the trainer raced to Goliath, caught the leash and pulled him back to the ring.

Ten minutes later, after the ringmaster had restored order, Freddie Stokes, one of Rowesville School's toughest athletes, waited until Goliath reached him stepped aside to dodge, then, in another second, flung his body on top of the bear, who realizing his disadvantage, began to jump, whirl, toss and roll to shake him off. But Freddie held on, clutching hands of fur, trying to get a hammerlock on the bear's shoulders.

Bedlam erupted, Louis says. "It may have been only a couple of minutes, but it seemed like 10," as Freddie used every ounce of his strength and rose to the pinnacle of a local hero. The trainer called "halt," and handed him a new \$20 bill.

As years passed, and old friends asked the same question, "How did you hang on to that bear," he always repeated his first reply: "To tell the truth, I was scared to let go."

Retired editor and public relations executive Thomas Langford's column is titled "Some Edisto stories." Let him know if you have stories to share: 803-534-2097.