

# Greatest show in Surf City

Circus

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**E**LEPHANTS treading ponderously the length of Pacific Avenue?

Sure, years ago.

Circuses arrived in Santa Cruz as regularly as the seasons, before the days of paved roads and railroad tracks. Summer was circus time. Kids looked forward to circuses as eagerly as they looked forward to summer vacation.

The earliest shows before the 1880s, usually approached Santa Cruz from San Francisco and San Jose, either by one dirt road through the Santa Cruz Mountains or by another dirt road through Watsonville.

The Santa Cruz Mountain road, called Mountain Charley Road today, was a toll road. Two men, both named Charley, owned the major portions of it because it passed over their land. Charles McKiernan, a settler from Australia, owned the northern Los Gatos end. Charles Christopher Martin, a Scot from Maine, owned a sizeable hunk in the middle, north of Scotts Valley.

In those days — the 1850s on — toll roads were maintained by the property owners who also collected fees from all travelers. For example, a horse and buggy paid a fare of 37 cents. There even was a fee for chickens.

Winter storms could wash out whole sections of that rough, winding trail through the mountains which ran along the tops of ridges as it still does today. It was originally an Indian trail over which the Santa Clara area Ohlones traveled to and from the coast and the coastal Indians trudged inland.

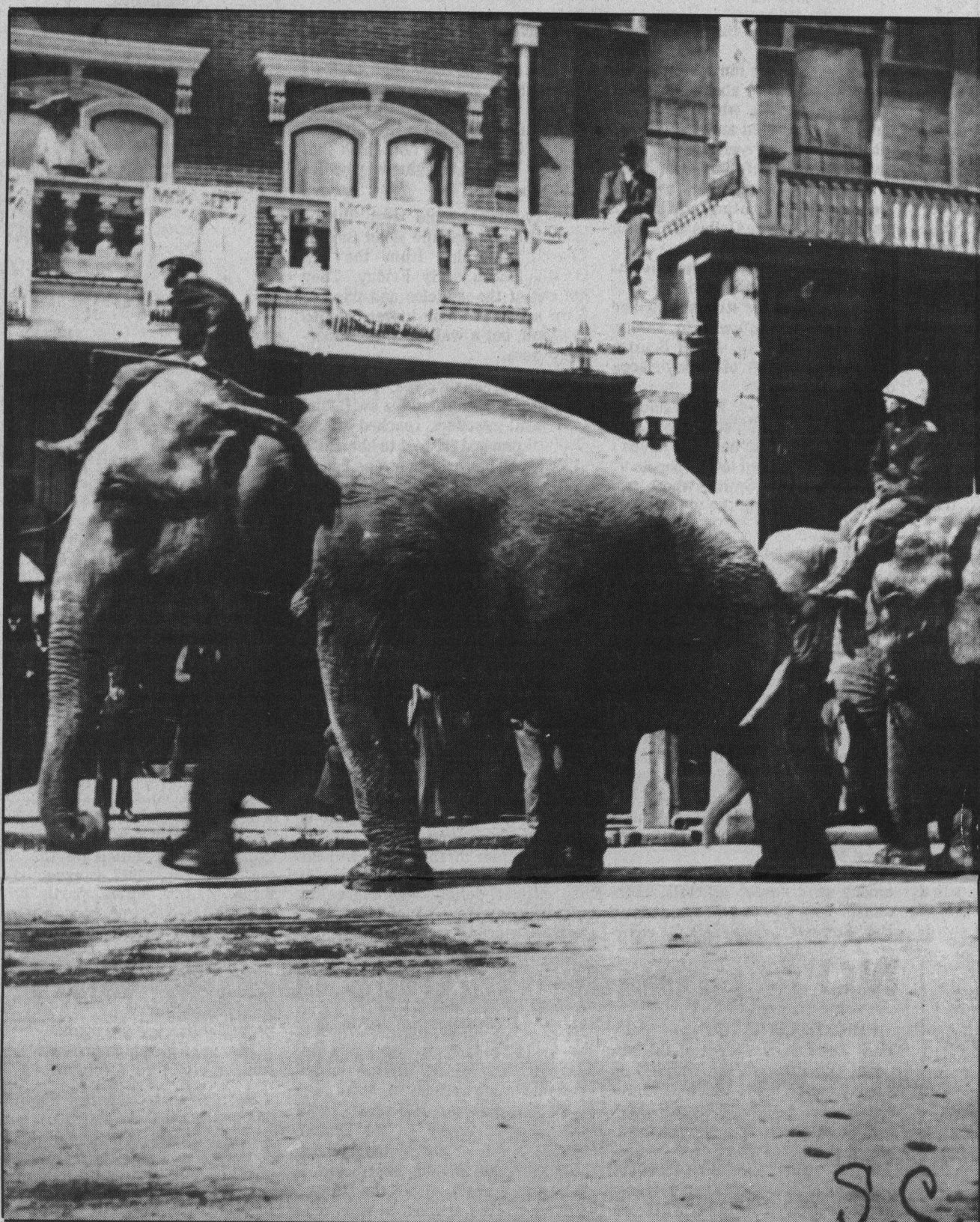
McKiernan collected toll at his house located near today's county line; Martin collected at the Station Ranch.

One intriguing story has McKiernan trying to collect from a reluctant circus owner. McKiernan refused to open his gate to let the circus pass, demanding payment. The circus man finally threatened to turn the lions loose on McKiernan. McKiernan was a tough, old mountain man, though. He had survived a hand-to-hand fight with a grizzly bear in the mountains near his cabin.

"Go ahead, turn them loose," McKiernan said. "I have a bullet in my gun for every lion."

The circus man shut up and paid.

When circuses arrived in Santa Cruz they "parked" on handy vacant lots. At various times they used what today is the Santa Cruz High School football field, or the Barrett Tract off River Street near Encinal. Once a circus stopped at California and Bay Streets, up on the bluff. Another location often used was near the Water Street bridge at Market Street; today a medical office complex stands there. There was a lot of open space down near the beach on the Liebrandt acreage, and that became a favored spot used for more than 25 years by the Ringling Brothers "World's Greatest Shows," and by Barnum and Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth." Today that site is home to Casa del Rey retirement hotel and parking lots. Later, those two circuses merged.



Margaret Koch archives photograph

An elephant parade up Pacific Avenue was the best publicity a circus could get.

## A glance at history

So how did elephants get to Pacific Avenue?

In the 1870s, an elephant parade up the main street was the best advertisement a circus could get. One early-day show, Cook's, even performed on a vacant lot bounded by Pacific Avenue, Elm, Cedar and Maple streets.

The earliest shows arrived in town in horse-drawn wagons. Later circuses came by railroad with their animal wagons loaded onto flat cars. Unloading the train was an exciting show in itself and kids got up early — 4 or 5 a.m. — to watch the fun, for that was when the circus train usually arrived.

The elephants and camels were paraded up the avenue first, followed by horse-drawn wagons containing lion and bear cages. Circus excitement spread like wildfire. Of course a circus advance man had visited town a few days earlier to plaster huge

circus posters on every available barn and building, and to give out some free tickets.

Everyone knew the circus was coming and everyone within earshot knew it had arrived the morning of the informal parade with its brassy calliope music splitting the air.

Every kid in town who could, followed along the tail end of the parade out to the circus grounds, hoping for a job watering the larger animals. Elephants can hold a lot of water; so can camels, horse and zebras. Those kids in their buttoned boots and knickers pumped and pumped and carried and carried until they were exhausted but happy. The labor was a joy because the kids got to see the animals close up and also watch while the circus was being put together.

It must have been fascinating and probably still is. Circus crewmen hammered iron stakes

into the earth with heavy mallets and the elephants were chained to the stakes by one foot. But before the great beasts were chained, they did their part to put up the huge, heavy tents, pulling and straining with all their tremendous strength in harnesses which were fastened to big blocks and tackles. Workmen rode the elephants, directing them with a toe nudge behind the ear or prodding them with an iron rod. As the elephants pulled on the ropes the tents went up slowly. In addition to the main, largest tent there were usually the sideshow tents, a cook tent, dressing tents and the animal tents.

When showtime was announced with a fanfare of trumpets, the workmen who had raised the tents and hammered the stakes would appear in exotic costumes as Indian princes riding elephants or Arabian sheiks leading camels.

The earliest circuses in Santa Cruz were one-ring affairs that mainly featured trained horse and dog acts, gymnastics, some monkeys and a couple of bears or a lion or two.

1857 was a good circus year: a South American show arrived in town, also the Pioneer Circus. General admission was \$1 and box seats were \$2. Town kids who watered the elephants and other animals, got in free.

Once in the late 1920s a particularly notorious elephant came to Santa Cruz with a circus. He was Jumbo, widely advertised as an untameable African elephant with a terrible disposition. Rumors flew (helped along by the advance man) that Jumbo had run amok in another town and had tipped over an automobile in his mad rage. Of course, everyone in Santa Cruz HAD to see that vicious elephant.

And there he was, chained apart from the other GOOD elephants, and Jumbo had chains on three feet instead of one foot. He just stood there, swaying back and forth, fanning his ears gently, looking at the stream of gawkers who passed. No one dared to offer him a peanut. Everyone secretly hoped he might show a little of that famous rage — just enough to liven things up a bit.