

When the Circus Came to Town

by Kern Hagg

#2 In a Series

In 1953, when my family moved to Stonegate, we soon learned of a wonderful three-ring circus which came to town every summer. Imagining the northwest corner of the intersection of Dryden and Kensington and before there were beautiful townhomes there, and before there was the Arlington Market and before there was Mel's Pure Oil full-service gas station, there was nothing but Illinois prairie grass which ran all the way from Kensington down to Miner. Each summer, a traveling three-ring circus came to town, and the children of Stonegate were in for a treat. For me, it was fun just to watch the huge tents being erected on the property. I remember the men who traveled with the circus struggling to pound long metal stakes into the ground for the purpose of securing ropes which held up the tents. The small tent on the north end was strictly meant for animals and their feed. The "big top" in the middle included bleachers, trapeze equipment and a big safety net in the event someone would fall while performing. Cotton candy and cold beverages were omnipresent during the performances. The smaller tent on the south end was full of gaming devices. Adults and children could choose any one of 10 or 15 games of chance, and the costs were between five cents and a quarter.

Animals included elephants with a leg chained to a massive post in the ground, lions and tigers in cages as well as a harnessed zebra and several workhorses. Of course, there was the mandatory snake lady. There was a carrousel which rotated with two ponies on which children could ride. I remember bales of hay stacked 10 feet high to feed the animals while on that property.

I was about eight years old when I paid a dime to spin a wheel which was much like a roulette wheel. I won! Then, I won again and again and again, but I was winning nickels and I wanted to win dollars. I rode my bike back to our home on Derbyshire, and I raced upstairs to clean out my piggybank. It had a rubber stopper underneath the belly, and I remember shaking out all the coins therein. I believe I had about \$11 in coinage when I raced back to the circus. I went back to the same wheel having put most of my money on the table. When I spun the wheel, it suddenly stopped at a black space which indicated I had lost it all. I was shocked beyond belief that I could lose all my savings so quickly. For the balance of my life, I have never enjoyed gambling, and I know it goes back to that game of chance at the circus. From that day forward, I have never bought a Lotto ticket, never been in a casino, and I do not really enjoy getting into office pools. As traumatic as that experience was for me in 1956, it probably has paid dividends to me ever since because I have never gotten the bug to begin gambling.