

FEATURETTE-MALLORY-GAINESVILLE CIRCUS

Gainesville Community Circus

One of America's most unusual circuses lives on in two museums and one zoo.

IN 1930, LOCAL NEWSPAPER EDITOR A. MORTON SMITH organized Gainesville residents into a small circus to raise funds for the community theater. Housewives stitched costumes, men hammered trapeze riggings, and teenagers practiced horseback acts. The homegrown show was such a hit that, during the next quarter century, the Gainesville Community Circus performed some 360 shows locally and in nearly 60 cities in Texas and nearby states.

The all-volunteer circus had three rings with bareback riders, trapeze and high-wire artists, acrobats, jugglers, and clowns. Its big top (largest of seven tents) could seat 2,500 wide-eyed fans. The circus boasted ornamental tableau wagons, a calliope, circus band, and trained animals, including horses and chimpanzees, plus one lion and an elephant named Jerry.

Some 1,500 Gainesville residents eventually joined the circus, performing for hundreds of thousands of spectators. In the 1950s, a tragic fire destroyed the big top and equipment, and ringmaster Morton died. The circus folded and its animals spent their remaining years in the town's fledgling zoo.

Costumes, photographs, performance equipment, and newsreels recall the circus at the Museum at Santa Fe Depot and the Morton Museum of Cooke County (940/668-8900). The Frank Buck Zoo (940/668-4539) honors the native son, film star, and animal collector who once served as honorary ringmaster of the Gainesville Community Circus.

--Randy Mallory

RESOURCES:

- Steve Gordon, museum interim director
- Susan Kleven, dir, Frank Buck Zoo
- <http://www.frankbuckzoo.com/History.html>
- Texas Handbook Online