

Swallowfield, 1923

By Ralph Bates

IN August, 1923, Swallowfield, Kentucky, was a sleepy little village about 13 miles north of Frankfort, toward Owenton on a gravel road that was kept up by the local farmers.

It consisted of two churches, a Church of Christ and a Baptist church; a large blacksmith shop; a post office; three general merchandise stores; one gasoline pump (15 cents a gallon); a two-room school house and a flour and corn mill. You could buy anything you needed from a cigar to a wedding dress.

About 20 families lived in the Swallowfield community. Our farm was about two miles south where the main road crossed Elkhorn Creek. We always planted corn right up next to the road. And this August, the roasting ears were ripe. Of course, this was before radio and TV and there were no telephones in that end of the county. Travel was mostly by horse and buggy and we seldom saw a car.

On this Sunday morning in early August about 11 a.m., all our family was gathered at our house. The menfolk: dad, uncles and cousins — about 20 of us — were all seated on the front porch visiting, and the women were all in the kitchen cooking Sunday dinner. It was a hot and steamy day. Suddenly we heard a calliope. We thought it was coming from the river as steamboats frequently made a stop at Quire's Hotel and Fishing Camp on the river and put on a show. However, we soon realized the music was coming from the road, and that it was a circus troupe headed for Frankfort. We men called the women and they took dinner off the stove. We all ran down the lane to the main road about one-fourth mile away.

Sure enough, it was a circus that had played in Owenton the night before and was moving in buggies and horse-drawn wagons. The wild animals were in cages on wagons. There were two elephants with a little African boy riding alongside. We were at the

gate hovering by the gate post because we had never seen anything like this before.

One of the elephants must have been hungry because it reached over into the corn field and got three or four ears of corn with its trunk. The little boy herding the elephants struck it with his little leather whip and said, "Alice, don't do that!" She let out a yell and I hid behind the gate post.

There was an old iron bridge that crossed Elkhorn Creek, and the elephant herder was afraid to take both elephants across the bridge at the same time. So he walked across first with Alice, the bigger elephant. The boy would say, "Easy, Alice," and with that command that big elephant would gently raise and lower her foot. They did that one step at a time until they had crossed the bridge. Then the boy returned for the smaller elephant and crossed the bridge quickly.

The elephants and their herder were leading the group of circus performers. The clowns, all dressed up, and the dancing girls in fancy dress, trapeze artists in costume were all following. It took about a half an hour for the group to cross the bridge in front of us. There were wagons painted red, green, blue and yellow, full of bears and tigers. Most of the residents of Swallowfield had joined in the parade and were still following the circus wagons, having traveled several miles.

I may be the only Swallowfield resident who remembers the day the circus came. It was a glorious day to remember. The animals, the colorful wagons and, especially, Alice the elephant, are the images I treasure. Memories are precious and this is one of my favorites. The day the circus came to Swallowfield was really something. Today only the two churches remain — the only evidence that the village of Swallowfield ever existed.

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