

“Elephant Walk, Circa ‘26”

By John Mark Lambertson

Originally published by The Ottawa Herald December 15, 1987

To the delight of sportsmen, Franklin County has seen its share of wild game through the years. Ducks, wolves, buffalo, prairie chickens, coyotes, deer and numerous other fauna and fowl have flourished here for centuries.

But in December 1926 a whole new species of wild game was sighted running across the fields of Eastern Kansas, to the astonishment of the locals. It was BIG game—11-foot African elephants.

This bizarre incident began just over the Franklin-Osage county line at Quenemo, where the “Honest Bill” Circus was being wintered. Then on the afternoon of December 11, 1926, the circus’ two star elephants, Diamond and Old Tex, were taken outdoors for the first time in several weeks.

The elephants, apparently preferring to turn the brief airing into an extended outing, broke away from their trainers and went on a rampage along the west edge of Quenemo.

Old Tex’s holiday was cut short as he was soon recaptured, much to the relief of his owner. Tex had a criminal record of sorts, having killed several people a few years before. There had been talk at the time of electrocuting the giant pachyderm.

Diamond’s reputation was just the opposite. His publicist with the circus claimed that Diamond once saved the life of a little boy by using his trunk to whisk the child out of the path of a speeding fire truck.

Diamond’s hero status, however, meant nothing to the good people of Quenemo, who saw their fences and outbuildings bulldozed over.

After a brief standoff in a field north of town, Diamond headed out across country to the southeast with his owner “Honest Bill” Newton and trainers in hot pursuit.

As for the local farmers, it must have been an astonishing sight to behold—an 11-foot-tall African elephant, touted as the largest in the world, loping across the Kansas prairie. Fences were of no concern to him, for, as The Ottawa Herald quipped, his itinerary held “no regard for marked highways.”

Through Osage, Franklin, Coffey, Anderson, and Allen counties he zigged and zagged for a day and a half with posses of farmers and townfolk joining the pursuit.

On Sunday night, a few miles north of Iola, several loads of buckshot discharged by “Honest Bill” persuaded Diamond to head back north. By Monday morning he was wandering about the Garnett school grounds to greet the arriving children—much to both their terror and delight.

The story, of course, provided a series of avidly read front page updates and The Herald played it up with a tongue-in-cheek “Elephant Hunting News Bureau.” The Herald’s “elephant correspondent” sent back a detailed and humorous account from the supposedly treacherous front lines while stalking the giant prey.

Other stories came out of “elephant country” telling of the beast’s antics, from picking up pigs to climbing onto front porches. Exaggeration ruled in the excitement, such as the ridiculous account of a 14-foot stretch Diamond’s trunk made through a barn window underneath a remarkably placid cow, so as to siphon a pail of milk.

Diamond’s escape ended somewhat forlornly, however, with the cold December weather taking its toll on the tropic-bred beast. After being chased for more than three days, the worn-out

and frostbitten elephant was captured in a field near Kincaid. His ears and tail were frozen, and, while being warmed by a huge bonfire, bullets were plucked from his hide.

Later, in heavy chains, he was led off on an all-night march to Garnett under the guard of his trainers mounted on circus horses.

Ottawa was the ultimate destination as the circus was to perform there in a few days. But several more hours were required just for the sad creature to hobble to Richmond. As darkness came on the next night, a Ford coupe crept ahead of the procession, at one mile per hour, to light the way.

At Richmond, Diamond spent the night in the Barbee garage and thawed before a large fire. Ice water was poured over his frozen, peeling ears to relieve their condition.

The next day finally brought an end to Diamond's six-day escapade. Wrapped in canvas for protection, the pathetic monarch slowly and painfully drug himself the last 15 miles to Ottawa, trumpeting his fatigue.

The circus did come to Ottawa that weekend, complete with parade and shows. It was held in the armory building at 412 S. Main, where Diamond was "hospitalized." The doorways of the originally scheduled location, the basement of the auditorium, proved to be too small for the elephants and dromedaries.

But to everyone's disappointment, Diamond was not able to participate in the festivities. He was still recuperating from his chilly romp on the Kansas veldt.