

The Hanging of Big Mary: Someone Worth Remembering

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Big Mary and speciesism

As an active elephant researcher and writer, it is one of my goals to remind readers of nearly-forgotten performing elephants who have died under the insufficient care of humanity. Undoubtedly, we have very little idea what true “rights” elephants (or any other animal) “want”, but we know they want and deserve to live pain-free and out of fear. No one truly knows if captive elephants are “happy,” or not. However, it appears obvious elephants do not thrive in captive circus environments. Moreover, as an animal advocate I ask that we actively investigate how humans can provide optimal conditions for the non-human animals on Earth either in their natural wild habitats or in captivity. Circus elephant captivity has led to some horrific and disturbing incidents, and one of the most unique and disturbing cases is Big Mary, the only known elephant in history to be executed by hanging. It happened in my home state of Tennessee, USA, and it remains one of the more enigmatic folktales of the Southeastern United States. Most accounts seem to focus on the human aspect of the incident, and being committed to expanding the sphere of moral consideration to non-human animals, I write this in remembrance of the elephant, first and foremost, in remembrance of Big Mary ⁽¹⁾.

There is good reason for this less speciesist article on Big Mary. The story, since her undeserved death in 1916, has suffered from many embellishments and inaccurate retellings and I feel the main logic of the story often gets obscured. Big Mary has become a personal obsession of sorts, and I wish to revisit her life and death. As the very few researchers who have spent vast time chasing down the facts about her death all agree, the verifiable facts are few and are always receding further into the dark reaches of time. Oral histories are notoriously difficult to verify, and the varying accounts of Big Mary on the internet and in print are frustratingly fraught with contradictions and varying degrees of coloration. I will be primarily referring to the most complete version of her story, *The Day They Hung The Elephant* by Charles Edwin Price, published by The Overmountain Press in 1992 ⁽²⁾. Price seeks to “replace folklore and myth with logic” ⁽³⁾; however he readily admits “that some of the situations in this book have been partially fabricated to fill in voids where facts were lacking.” ⁽⁴⁾ He also admits that during the two years he researched his book he had a difficult time separating fact from fiction. Working largely from his account – widely considered to be the authoritative source – I think it is proper to revisit the hanging of Big Mary and let her live again through our memories almost a century after she was wrongly killed. There are various reports and accountings of the incident (in fact there appear to be four versions of what happened), and I do not claim this to be the absolute factual one (as other authors have so claimed). However, I do feel this one is the most considerate of Big Mary as a sentient individual.

There are several articles that callously discuss the incident with typical speciesist nonchalance. Very few of the published versions on the internet cite sources or attempt to give any ethical theorizing to their claims. In fact, possibly one of the more confusingly crafted accounts implies elephants are vicious beasts and the only reasons one wouldn't want to kill an elephant are sentimental. The article, after speaking highly of trophy hunters, appears to incorrectly interpret another Mary article seeming to imply it is unfortunate "that such a homicidal creature would be charitably received at the elephant sanctuary in Tennessee. Where an elephant killed a woman last week."⁽⁵⁾ To imply the elephant is homicidal by nature displays ignorance of elephant behaviour and psychology. Of course circus and zoo history is rife with tales of elephants rampaging and killing humans, and elephants have killed humans in Asian and African natural habitats. However, to cite this without giving due examination to the possible confinement, abusive training methods, and damage to their psyche that comprehensively culminated in the rampages – or even worse to dismiss the elephant psyche altogether – is more typical anthropocentrism from the supremely self-satisfied human, little more than a naked ape out of control, to quote Paul Watson. Much like racists, heterosexists, androcentrics, and bigots, speciesists are unaware of their speciesism. Hopefully as education becomes available to more people, this bigotry will cease and animals' personhood will be recognised. It appears the people of the town in which Big Mary was hanged want to blame the people of another nearby town for the callous hanging of Mary. What no writer seems to have yet done is to accept the blame for what happened to Mary and the other billions of animals humanity has trod upon on behalf of the human race. Perhaps then we can move on toward a more compassionate existence and retrospect of historical abuse.

One thing I do not care for are the pejoratives Mary has acquired over the years. The original *Sparks World Famous Shows* flier simply bills her as 'Mary: The Largest Living Land Animal on Earth.'⁽⁶⁾ Robert A. Nowotny says it was reported she was talented in many ways. The circus supposedly billed her as being able to play over 25 songs on a musical horn and was even the pitcher for the circus baseball team with a batting average of 400. Whatever she actually could or could not do, after she killed her unskilled handler she became known as 'Murderous Mary', 'Mighty Mary', and 'The Killer Elephant' and other cognitive dissonance-reducing monikers that are anathema to Mary. It is my argument that the people in whose charge Mary was placed were simply unskilled, uneducated, and ignorant of the vast amount of information we now possess regarding elephants and proper elephant care and treatment and as a result we should refocus on Mary in the retellings of this tale. The most distressing part of Big Mary's story may not be that she was killed and shackled with an unearned reputation that has lasted nearly a century; it may be why she was killed. Ultimately, it appears Big Mary was possibly killed simply because she was hungry and wanted a piece of fruit.

Let me explain.

Walter 'Red' Eldridge

The Sparks World Famous Shows was a small to medium sized circus travelling the pre-World War One Eastern United States, and on September 12, 1916, it played the then booming Southeastern Tennessee town of Kingsport. The circus had a herd of five elephants, and Mary was by far the biggest. As Price points out, in those days a circus was judged by the amount of rail cars comprising its train and the number of elephants it

had. Other shows had more elephants and more rolling stock (The Barnum and Bailey show was dominating the circus circuit in those days with its 84 rail cars), but Charlie Sparks only had five elephants and ten rail cars. ⁽⁷⁾ As for elephants in those days, the bigger the star elephant attraction, the more successful the circus. Big Mary, it is told, was huge. The circus handbill stated Mary was '3 inches taller than Jumbo and weigh[ed] over 5 tons.' However, circuses were fraught with over-the-top exaggerations and on the handbill, a drawn version of Mary was pictured next to a human. If the pictures were drawn to scale, Mary would have been over 30 feet tall. Circuses – as is the case all too often today – simply could not be believed as they were masters of sophistry committed to garnering as much profit as possible. Times have not changed. Nonetheless, large elephants did not come cheap to pre-World War I circuses, and they all coveted them in order to draw large crowds.

A drifter named Walter 'Red' Eldridge was hired just the day before, on September 11th, 1916, in St. Paul, Virginia, to work with the circus's elephants as an animal trainer. He had never worked with elephants and was completely ignorant of handling and care specifics. This appeared to be the norm in those days. It was reported he had an immediate affinity for most of the Sparks elephants, though Big Mary worried him. Price gathered much of his information for his book from townspeople of Erwin and a few eyewitness accounts. He reports of Eldridge that "he had grown fond of little Mabel (the smallest elephant), she was his favorite...Mary was another matter....Eldridge feared her...There was something about her that Eldridge didn't trust – something about her (maybe her sheer size and bulk) that made him uneasy." ⁽⁸⁾ Perhaps this unease agitated her. We now know that elephants are very sensitive animals who can indeed pick up on other people's moods and feelings. For whatever reason, Big Mary spooked Eldridge a bit. Within two days of Eldridge being hired by the circus, both he and the elephant would be dead.

Being only hired the day before, Eldridge was riding Mary – elephant ankus in hand – leading a procession of elephants through Kingsport to a water hole where the elephants could drink and romp on September 12th. Price writes that a watermelon rind was near the side of the street and Mary swerved in attempt to eat it. Elephants love fruit. Eldridge prodded her with the sharp bull hook to get Mary to keep walking. Wanting the fruit, Mary broke formation and walked toward it. In his inexperience and frustration, Eldridge hit her hard in the side of the head. Big Mary wrapped her trunk around Eldridge, plucked him off her back, and slammed him violently into a wooden drink stand. Then "the elephant calmly walked over to where Eldridge was lying, placed her foot over his head and squashed it like a ripe melon." ⁽⁹⁾

The town's blacksmith rushed outside and shot Mary five times with a small gun which did not affect her. Supposedly another man shot her with a .45 to no effect as well. Other accounts report the .45 only knocked little chunks of flesh out of her, not harming her severely. The remaining elephant keepers managed to get Mary and the other highly agitated elephants back to the circus even though Charlie Sparks himself galloped to the scene of the death on horseback, only remembering at the last moment that elephants are morbidly afraid of horses, according to Price. However, the elephants were led back to the circus.

Surprisingly, Mary performed later that evening and all went well with the show. During those pre-internet and mass media days, news travelled slowly. Even so, the townspeople, and the surrounding towns that were slated to host upcoming circus

performances, demanded Mary's destruction at worst and disaffiliation with the Sparks Circus at best. In fact, they were completely set on it. Price reports that a huge group of vengeance-minded people in Kingsport were shouting "kill the elephant" in unison soon after Eldridge was killed. When Johnson City and other near-future stops said Sparks could only bring his circus to their town if Mary was not with them, the owner of the circus bowed to the wishes of those townspeople who wanted him to execute the elephant for the sake of the upcoming profit of those near-future shows. It was the next day, in Erwin, Tennessee, when the elephant was actually killed. And why was Big Mary executed? It could easily be argued she was killed simply because she was hungry and wanted a piece of fruit.

How to kill an elephant

And here is where some details regarding Charlie Sparks' supposed love and tenderness toward Mary get a little fuzzier upon which other writers have not commented. First off, there was much passionate discussion on how to kill the elephant. It was known that the town blacksmith, Hench Cox, had ineffectively emptied several rounds into Mary as soon as she killed Eldridge. Perhaps in the hope of defending Mary, Charlie Sparks said there wasn't a gun big enough to kill her in the whole state. Price, however, claims the owner knew an elephant could be killed by shooting into the ear canal. It seems Sparks was trying to save Mary. If it was out of compassion for the elephant or concern for his investment, history is unclear. Supposedly some people suggested electrocuting Mary (Topsy the elephant had been electrocuted with Thomas Edison's help in 1903). Townspeople bent on vengeance were also supposedly bringing a Civil War cannon to shoot Mary to death. Some felt the best way to kill her was to crush her slowly between two opposing steam engines while some even suggested tying her head to one railroad engine and her legs to another and have the trains take off in opposite directions thereby ripping off her head ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Price suggests Sparks agreed to the suggestion of hanging from a train derrick in the nearby rail yard since it was the most humane. This seems suspect to me. If Sparks knew an elephant could be killed by shooting through the ear canal quite easily, why would he not suggest this when the cries of the village mob ensured her death was imminent? One writer argues shooting her would have been too difficult to do due to the large public interest in the case. Dominey posits: "Shooting her in the four soft spots on her head would be both difficult and dangerous with the large crowds that would certainly gather around to watch." ⁽¹¹⁾ Still, if Sparks cared at all about Big Mary (as some writers clearly claim), it is logical he would simply shoot her beyond the view of any angry mob, arguably providing her a more humane death. Price says Sparks knew "elephants could be killed very easily—even with a shotgun. All you had to do was to fire into their ear canal." ⁽¹²⁾ Dominey's position seems shaky. If Sparks truly cared for the elephant, he would have insisted on a more humane death. Instead, he agreed to the gross spectacle of hanging the star of his show. He even publicised it.

Mary's history

Mary did not perform in the Erwin show that afternoon, the day after she had killed Red Eldridge in Kingsport, Tennessee. Instead, she was left nervously chained outside the circus tent. Rumours, as usual, spread. People were saying Mary was a demon, a

terrible bane, a killer elephant. It was circulated that Mary had killed three, six, eighteen, or even twenty men before. Hilda Padgett of Erwin, Tennessee, writes:

"In some writings about Mary it is speculated that she was a 'killer elephant' that had been sold from one circus to another. That is not true. Mary had been with the Spark's circus for twenty years ... Charles Sparks and his wife, Addie, were very caring people. They saw that the animals connected with their show were well cared for. The trainers were instructed to use 'gentling care.' [no citation given]." ⁽¹³⁾

Dominey's research seems to agree with Padgett's version. He says:

"Mary was more than just a performer to Charlie Sparks. His father had purchased Mary in 1898 when she was four years old, and she had been the family pet ever since. After Charlie married Addie Mitchell, the circus's head cook and animal doctor, Mary, in essence, became the child that this childless couple never had. Charlie firmly instructed his employees to be kind, gentle and respectful to all his animals, especially his beloved Mary." ⁽¹⁴⁾

Not specifically credited, but the three sources listed on Dominey's version are closely linked to the town of Erwin. This deserves comment because other writers disagree. Rogue elephants of the time were often sold to other circuses under other names. It appears that Mary might have been sold twice previously. In opposition to Padgett's offering, in the book *Wild Tigers and Tame Fleas*, Bill Ballantine suggests Mary was originally called Queen and after killing her keeper was sold under the name Empress. Then her name was changed to Mary and she killed a child before coming to the Sparks Circus. He writes:

"In the old days, circuses simply hushed up a killing by an elephant (after all, wasn't a roughneck just an expendable nobody?), then changed the murderer's name and palmed the animal off on another show. Thus Queen, who choked her keeper to death with her trunk, a la boa constrictor, became Empress, a change which didn't deter her from killing five more persons on one bloody rampage. Under a third name, 'Mary,' she trampled a child during a street parade. Mary, to some accounts, was given a particular send-off. She was hanged from a railroad derrick." ⁽¹⁵⁾

However, other Erwin, Tennessee based sources agree with Padgett and claim Mary was a childhood pet of the Sparks family and lived with their family over twenty years. Price's account (considered the most canonical) does not include this information and implies Sparks was not acquainted with Mary for decades. In fact, he states of Sparks: "he probably knew that Mary had killed before – or at least had a strong suspicion that she had ... Yes, Sparks was certain of it. This had not been the first time Mary had killed someone." ⁽¹⁶⁾ However, this could indeed be one of Price's admitted flights of fancy; nonetheless, there is no mention at all of Mary having been the Sparks' family pet and first wild animal of the circus. If she were a lifelong pet of Charlie Sparks and the Sparks family, it appears fantastic he would allow her to be hanged when he could have simply shot her, ending her life in a moment.

Once again, it is impossible to ascertain verifiable truth from oral historical inaccuracy. Frustratingly, two logical approaches can be applied to the particular claim of Mary's status as a Sparks family companion animal. First, since these claims come from residents of Erwin, it could be assumed these kinder stories are attempts to give the situation a better tint, to make the circus and Erwin appear kinder. It is well

documented that many people in Erwin would like to forget the whole event and rue the fact the legendary story keeps surfacing now and then. Ruth Piper is a name that often comes up in Big Mary research. Vannordall Schroeder says of Piper she “has made it her mission to memorialize Mary, to wash the town clean of elephant blood. Piper believes that Erwin has for too long taken the rap for Mary's death: ‘Kingsport, the railroad, and Mr. Sparks are to blame for what happened to Mary – not Erwin. People feel so guilty about it – we've got to release it. It is a sad, sad thing that happened, but we have to let it go.’”⁽¹⁷⁾

Remembering captive elephants

The impetus behind my performing elephant research is that we must remember what has happened to these animals who have died under forced service to humanity. By remembering them, and repeating as accurately as possible their stories, we help provide concrete reasons for helping those elephants still in circuses, zoos, magic shows, and other environments that cannot possibly enable them to live in the manner for which they evolved. However, not to digress: On the other hand, one could also assume these oral histories from the residents of Erwin are the more accurate versions since they originate closer to the historical scene of the crime, closer to the oral historical source. It comes back down to where it began: there is no way to truly know the details behind this fascinating and tragic case.

But we know she was hanged and most logically and likely died in pain, confusion, and terror.

The hanging

On behalf of Charlie Sparks and the circus, the public was invited to her execution. Most accounts say 2,500 people were present while one puts the crowds at over 3,000. The elephant was led to the derrick and her rear leg was chained to the side of it to secure her while the other elephants were led away. Sparks felt it would be fitting to have the other elephants escort Mary to her gallows, and they did not appear to want to leave her. Price maintains they were led away to a watering hole before Mary was killed. Mary was tethered alone to the derrick, and a chain was put around her neck. The first time she was hoisted, struggling, into the air the 7/8 inch chain – not surprisingly – broke. Before it did, however, some eyewitnesses reported the roustabouts forgot to unchain her back leg from the side of the derrick and the sounds of her tendons tearing and bones popping were clearly audible. When the chain broke, she fell to the ground with a sickening crunch, as Price describes it, her hip horribly broken. In fact, there is hardly any doubt Mary's hip was indeed destroyed. Eyewitness George Ingram reports: “It made a right smart little racket when the elephant hit the ground.”⁽¹⁸⁾ Price reports the sound of her hip breaking sounded like “a rifle crack and ricochet.”

One supposed eye witness has reported that when Mary landed she ran about terrorising people until they secured the second, this time fatal, chain around her neck. With all due respect to the resident of Erwin (who may actually remember it this way after all these decades), this is impossible and only serves as anathema, according to Price's account and the most likely logic. With a broken hip, Big Mary was not running anywhere nor was she a danger. In fact, she most likely sat on her great haunches in

much pain and terrifying confusion or – I hope – numb shock. Soon a larger chain was placed around her neck, her leg was unchained, she was hoisted again, and her vibrant and unique life ended after about ten minutes of suspension and suffocation. The remaining four elephants, with some trouble, were led back to the circus train from the watering hole. Once source says: “According to historical articles on the Sparks circus, the elephants trumpeted loudly as they were taken away, sensing that Mary was missing. These same articles claim that it took several performances for them to adjust to Mary’s sudden absence.” ⁽¹⁹⁾

Whatever truly happened, there is no doubt that the elephant was hanged on a rainy day in 1916. Apparently, the people of Erwin want to blame the people of Kingsport. Some want to blame the incident on the inexperienced Red Eldridge. Some writers want to place the blame on Charlie Sparks while some have passionately defended him and his circus. What no writer seems to be doing until now is accepting the blame for the murder of Big Mary – and the billions of other animals humanity has trod upon out of its sheer ignorance and anthropocentrism – on behalf of humanity. Perhaps then we can move along to a more compassionate existence. Regardless of the details leading to it, the elephant was hanged. The famous picture taken on that misty, rainy day is credited to Eddie LeSeurer in places and other people in others. Whoever snapped the picture then and owns the rights to it now, the picture has been contested by *Argosy Magazine* who refused to publish it upon submission calling it a fake. However, it has been proven genuine according to Price. It is a bit grainy due to the bad weather that terrible day, and has been touched up numerous times, but many people agree the photo is real. After the ten minutes of hanging by the neck, Mary died. One source says they left her hanging four about a half-hour and was then pronounced dead by the local physician, Dr. R.E. Stack. ⁽²⁰⁾

Confusing stories

Then some more cloudiness enters the story. After being pronounced dead, Mary was buried in a grave about 400 feet down the track. It is reported by Price that the *Associated Press* later asked the Clinchfield Railroad to exhume Mary, re-hang her from the derrick, and allow them to get proper pictures of her. Gratefully, Clinchfield management did not honour the request. ⁽²¹⁾ In fact, no one knows where Mary’s grave is though it is accepted she is buried on railroad property. Another story argues her body was burned on a pile of railroad timbers, though the grave is more widely accepted.

There is also the matter of Mary’s tusks to consider. Any neophyte Asian elephant researcher can easily report that female Asian elephants do not have tusks. In fact, only some male Asian elephants have them. The elephant in the picture – assuming the picture is accurate and actually Mary – is clearly an Asian elephant. The small ears, bumpy head, more rotund body, rounder back, and stubbier legs clearly depict an Asian elephant. Also there are clearly no visible tusks; this is consistent with the facts regarding *Elephas Maximus*. Not consistent, however, is Price’s reporting that Charlie Sparks ordered three of his roustabouts to “dig around where the head is and cut off Mary’s tusks ... they’re valuable.” ⁽²²⁾ If Mary was indeed a female Asian elephant, this is an improbability. I only found one writer who commented on this physiological aspect of the story. Once again, the inaccuracies and mysteries loom.

It is relevant to examine the newspapers of the time period and quickly consider the four less accepted versions of the incident. All the following versions are adapted from Joan Vannorsdall Schroeder's article 'There's a Skeleton in a Train Yard in East Tennessee.'
(23)

First, there is a lengthy eye witness report by William H. Coleman, 19 at the time of witnessing Mary's death. He describes the incident:

"There was a big ditch at that time, run up through Center Street ...and they'd sent these boys to ride the elephants ... There was, oh, I don't know now, seven or eight elephants ... and they went down to water them and on the way back each boy had a little stick-like, that was a spear or a hook in the end of it ... And this big old elephant reach over to get her a watermelon rind, about half a watermelon somebody eat and just laid it down there; 'n he did, the boy give him a jerk. He pulled him away from 'em, and he just blowed real big, and when he did, he took him right around the waist ... and throwed him against the side of the drink stand and he just knocked the whole side out of it. I guess it killed him, but when he hit the ground the elephant just walked over and set his foot on his head ... and blood and brains and stuff just squirted all over the street."

A second version appears in the September 13, 1916 issue of the *Johnson City Staff*:

"[Mary] collided its trunk vice-like [sic] about [Eldridge's] body, lifted him 10 feet in the air, then dashed him with fury to the ground ... and with the full force of her biestly [sic] fury is said to have sunk her giant tusks entirely through his body. The animal then trampled the dying form of Eldridge as if seeking a murderous triumph, then with a sudden ... swing of her massive foot hurled his body into the crowd."

This second account is troubling due to its colouration and supposition of Mary's internal feelings of "murderous triumph." Also, no other accounts even suggested Mary gored Eldridge with her "giant tusks" which, in all probability, never existed. This account also removes all consideration from Mary and is among the most speciesist.

Thirdly, one of the *Johnson City Press-Chronicle's* staff writers suggested in 1936 that Mary may have simply been bored. The writer reports: "The elephant's keeper, while in the act of feeding her, walked unsuspectingly between her and the tent wall. For no reason that could be ascertained, Mary became angry and, with a vicious swish of her trunk, landed a fatal blow on his head." This is obviously very much different from the other accounts and not reported in any eye witness accounts I have come across.

Finally, a fourth version suggests Mary may have been in great pain. Erwin legend tells that Mary had two abscessed teeth, discovered only posthumously. Perhaps, this version offers, Mary was in such pain and suffering from her teeth that when Eldridge touched her with the bull hook she went berserk. Again, this fourth report is unsubstantiated and impossible to verify. Four versions. No conclusive proof.

The further we get from September 13, 1916, the more obscured the facts become. Hopefully a writer will undertake a full-length major work focussing on Mary before the dim reaches of time completely lose all light of truth. Certainly, it is unfortunate more writers do not tell the story with more consideration to Mary. What is known about elephant handling in the first quarter of the twentieth century is that knowledge of elephant biology, physiology, psychology, and familial bonds were completely unknown.

Elephant emotions

Major long term research of elephant families and individuals did not begin until the last third of the twentieth century and previous elephant lore was primarily ignorant fanciful stories of magic and Far East mystery. Elephant abuse was rampant, and the misconceptions and misunderstandings about the great animals were numerous. Topsy, the previously mentioned elephant who was electrocuted on January 4th, 1903, by Thomas Edison at Coney Island's Luna Park, was very abused. She was executed by electrocution because she had killed three people including a trainer who had fed her a lit cigarette. Interestingly and relatedly, hanging was considered as an execution method for Topsy but after the intervention of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (founded in 1866), hanging was deemed inhumane.⁽²⁴⁾ One can only assume the ASPCA was unaware of the situation in the tiny Northeast Tennessee town of Erwin in 1916.

It has now been posited, by researchers such as Iain Douglas-Hamilton, Anthony Martin-Hall, and others, that elephants may indeed have an awareness of death. Joyce Poole has widely and famously written about elephant emotion and communication. Gay Bradshaw and others have recently argued elephants' famous and long memories and complex psyches may play a role in their developing post-traumatic stress disorder⁽²⁵⁾. Many behaviours associated with grief, non-maternal mothering, mimicry, art, a sense of humour, altruism, self-awareness, vast memory, and possibly even language⁽²⁶⁾ point to the fact that elephants are far more aware than possibly known in 1916.

In line with this, it is interesting to note that during the performance the day after Mary's death, the elephants acted strange indeed. The elephants performed the same routine they had been performing with Mary for years. The performance went well, but as they were being led away one of the elephants, Shadrack, broke away from the herd. An account appearing in the September 14th, 1916, version of the *Johnson City Staff* recalls:

"Someone yelled 'The elephants are loose', but this was superfluous as the angry snort had already warned the people ... women tumbled over, men were knocked down in the wild scramble, hats were smashed ... only the hasty capture of the beast by the keeper saved life ... many were painfully bruised, but none seriously."⁽²⁷⁾

Was this outrage prompted by Mary's murder? Since we now know elephants will sometimes return to the bones of fallen family members in the wild annually for years, perhaps this supposition is not as sentimental as some detractors might claim. However, it is interesting to note that in the article published in the *Staff* the day after Mary's hanging, there is no mention of her whatsoever. The Show went on just as it never happened.

The unknown drifter

The facts remain sparse. No one knows from where Red Eldridge drifted in or if he had family or if anyone missed him after he died. It is believed he was from St. Paul, Virginia, and was sent there for burial. There are audio recordings from several eye witnesses on file at the East Tennessee State University Burton-Manning Folklore Collection, but of

the life and times of Walter 'Red' Eldridge, no one knows. It's known he drifted into St. Paul, Virginia, one week before he signed up with the circus. In St. Paul he worked at the Riverside Hotel cleaning and doing odd jobs. He then signed up to work with the Sparks Circus elephants and one day later he was dead. Everything else regarding him is unknown.

Mary folklore

In the afterward of his book, Price says: "There have not been any large scale works written on the hanging ... the few articles written in recent years about the elephant are filled with errors and are clearly influenced by the oral tradition." ⁽²⁶⁾ Price claims the best is the one written by Tom Burton and published in the *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* in March 1971. However, I'm still surprised the article published in the *Staff* the day after Mary's hanging did not mention the spectacle of the murder at all. It really was as if nothing had happened, as if Mary never existed. In fact, many performing elephants have died horrible deaths and their stories are not told. After being forced into the service of humanity, elephants have been hanged, electrocuted, gunned down, burned to death, exploded, bombed with napalm, cut down with swords, destroyed by land mines, and have died of various diseases, overwork, torture, and starvation in the insufficient care of humanity. By remembering Big Mary as a sentient individual who was forced into an unnatural life and ultimately murdered, we realize the greater dimensions to life on planet Earth.

Regardless of whether the residents of Erwin, Tennessee wish it to be so, Big Mary was hanged in their town. Robert A. Nowotny reports: "There is an antique shop in Erwin memorializing – or should I say capitalizing – on Mary's death. The owners of the Hanging Elephant Antiques Shop sell T-shirts emblazoned with Mary's likeness, which also graces the side of their building." ⁽²⁸⁾

Plenty of people want to retell the story to get the facts straight. Angela K. Brown is one of the few writers to offer anything on the incident. The following is from her article '1916 Elephant Hanging Still Haunts Erwin, TN, which discusses some of the inconsistencies in the papers of the time ⁽²⁹⁾:

"Newspaper accounts differed widely and were influenced by emotion and rumors, [Charles Edwin] Price said. In one colorful – but unsubstantiated – story, the sheriff arrested Mary and chained her to the jail in Kingsport before letting her travel with the circus to Erwin. Another account that remains popular but is untrue had the townspeople of Erwin actually putting Mary on trial, convicting her of murder and sentencing her to death. 'When you have an event that happened so long ago, especially something this bizarre, folklore takes over in a lot of ways,' said Price, who lives in Gate City, Va. Erwin resident Ruth Pieper, who has researched the hanging, has tried for years to get approval for a memorial for Mary and to display an exhibit about the hanging. Both ideas have been rejected by city leaders. 'They want to keep it quiet, but it's part of our history,' Pieper said. 'And if it's told correctly, people will understand and won't blame Erwin anymore.'"

Unfortunate stories of bygone eras

As stated in the beginning of this article, the crux of the matter is not about assigning blame for what happened to Mary unless we assign it to the proper guilty party: the speciesist and anthropocentric human race. Tennessee, just as each state of the Union, has plenty of unfortunate stories of bygone eras of which no one is proud. The story should not be told solely in order to reassign blame away from Erwin, Tennessee. This is understandable, and I mean the citizens of Erwin no disrespect. However, the bigger picture from my perspective is telling the story from a carefully ethically considered point of view focusing on Mary, one of the true victims of the incident. That statement also implies no disrespect to the late Walter 'Red' Eldridge, because he undoubtedly died a horrifying death as well. However, if blame must be placed on individual humans, perhaps it should go to Charlie Sparks who hired inexperienced drifters completely ignorant of animal care to handle ten thousand pound elephants. Perhaps not. Of course Eldridge is a victim (as well as any of the people who worked in the circus with Mary who truly cared for her), but I urge the reader to consider the truth that Eldridge *and* Mary were victims of what appears most logically to be Sparks', and other circuses of the time, possible greed and unethical animal care practices. Again, there is no proof to this position; it simply appears logical from my vantage point.

Big Mary will have a chapter of her own in my book project currently underway. In fact, this article is a shortened version of the chapter, and in the expanded version which will be in the book, I will be referencing Burton's article in a more in-depth discussion of Big Mary and speciesism. I maintain Mary was a non-human animal person who was subjected to humanity's commoditisation and reduced to chattel. There are many reasons people argue against animal advocates and continue to abuse animals such as performing elephants. Scott Plous maintains underlying factors for speciesist behaviour including "power, privilege, dominance, control, entitlement, and the need to reduce cognitive dissonance when committing harmful acts."⁽³⁰⁾ In my book, I will elucidate.

Saving elephants

As for now, I simply hope more people become aware of the hanging of Big Mary in September of 1916 and begin to ponder the captivity of elephants in circuses and zoos today who are not yet dead and *are* in dire need of help and compassion.

It is most likely that not all elephant trainers and handlers are brutal and uncaring people; in fact some of them most likely truly love their charges and are simultaneously unaware of the abuse they have wrought on their trainees through isolation, confinement, and pain application. However, some unlucky elephants have been paying the price of their cruel and inconsiderate trainers over the past few centuries in America. Topsy was framed (see note number 24), and Big Mary is also briefly mentioned in Eric Scigliano's *Love, War, and Circuses*. Currently, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth is on trial in federal court in D.C. for numerous violations of the Endangered Species Act. Even with all this negative publicity and declining circus attendance, Ken Feld (Ringling's sole owner) says he will only quit using elephants in his show when people quit showing up. Ken Feld believes "A Circus just isn't a circus without elephants."⁽³¹⁾ He knows people are drawn to the magnificence of elephants and want to see them. As long as people are ignorant of the unbearable price elephants in circuses pay so the public can come and gawk at them, Ringling will use elephants (assuming it keeps its elephant keeping license upon the close of the ensuing trial, that is). Less people keep showing up, but Ringling still makes \$100 million a year from the

people who do. Consider that Barnum & Bailey was abusing elephants in Big Mary's time as well. In the early twentieth century, James A. Bailey simply eliminated male elephants when they became problematic. The *New York Times* reported in the Barnum & Bailey's 1903 European tour "five of its elephants were killed for ... being 'ugly.'" ⁽³²⁾ Today, Ringling Brothers appears no less ugly.

I truly hope an elephant researcher with a true animal rights focus who grants moral consideration to non-human animals will indeed one day complete a full scale work on Big Mary. I also hope people who hear the story of Mary will understand it is not the spectacle of the hanging that makes the story worth telling. It is the story of an abused and misunderstood elephant being murdered that is important. The ignorance of the people involved is the item of import, the past we must not replicate. This makes the tale contemporary because at this very minute many of the 600 or so performing and captive elephants in the United States are undergoing similar abuses, mistreatments, and torture. It is my hope that the public will become educated on elephants, drop the misconceptions of bygone eras of dark ignorance, and one day save the quickly vanishing elephant. Let the record show I admit the complicated contemporary relationship of captive elephants and Americans are complex and most likely not as clearly defined as either side wishes them to be, but my personal paradigm is that a circus is no place for an animal as complex, intelligent, emotional, and dependent upon familial bonds and learning as an elephant.

As for Ken Feld's statement on his particular circus and elephants, the answer is simple. Don't show up.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the moral consideration of animals, please see Gary Francione's *Animals As Persons: Essays on the Abolition of Animal Exploitation*. Columbia University Press, 2008. Although not in total agreement with everything Professor Francione posits, I do agree with his argument that non-human animals do merit true moral considerations as persons. Attempting to use less speciesist language, the relative pronoun "who" will be applied to Mary instead of the grammatically accepted "that" throughout this piece.
2. Charles Edwin Price's *The Day They Hung The Elephant* is, to date, the only in depth study of Big Mary's Story. In the early nineties, Price spent two years in Johnson City, Erwin, St. Paul Virginia, and the surrounding area interviewing the few remaining surviving witnesses to the hanging. He also compiled material from listening to oral-history tapes from the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University. The slim volume is partially supposition, but it is required reading for anyone intrigued with Big Mary.
3. Page 3 of *The Day They Hung the Elephant* by Charles Price. Johnson City: The Overmountain Press, 1992. Note: all page numbers refer to this same book unless otherwise attributed.
4. pg. 39

5. Laura, James. "It's Hard to Kill an Elephant."
http://laurajames.typepad.com/clews/2006/07/its_hard_to_kil.html Accessed on 12-15-08
6. Original circus handbill printed on the cover of *The Day They Hung the Elephant*
7. pg. 4
8. pg. 10
9. pg. 14
10. pgs. 23-4
11. Dominey, Craig. "Murderous Mary."
http://www.themoonlitroad.com/murdermary/murdermary_page001.asp
Accessed on 12-15-08
12. pg. 16
13. Padgett, Hilda. "The Hanging of Mary the Elephant"
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~tnunicoi/mary.htm> Accessed on 12-15-08
14. Dominey, Craig. "Murderous Mary."
http://www.themoonlitroad.com/murdermary/murdermary_page001.asp
Accessed on 12-15-08
15. Mary (Big Mary, Murderous Mary) at Sparks Circus. The Elephant Database.
http://www.elephant.se/database2.php?elephant_id=1974 Accessed on 12-15-08
16. pg. 16. Price, Charles *The Day They Hung the Elephant*. Johnson City: The Overmountain Press, 1992.
17. Vannorsdall Schroeder, Joan. *There's a Skeleton in a Trainyard in East Tennessee*. <http://www.blueridgecountry.com/elephant/elephant.html> Accessed on 12-15-08
18. Vannorsdall Schroeder, Joan. *There's a Skeleton in a Trainyard in East Tennessee*. <http://www.blueridgecountry.com/elephant/elephant.html> Accessed on 12-15-08
19. Dominey, Craig. "Murderous Mary."
http://www.themoonlitroad.com/murdermary/murdermary_page001.asp
Accessed on 12-15-08
20. Mary (Big Mary, Murderous Mary) at Sparks Circus. The Elephant Database.
http://www.elephant.se/database2.php?elephant_id=1974 Accessed on 12-15-08
21. pg. 35
22. pg. 36

23. Vannorsdall Schroeder, Joan. *There's a Skeleton in a Trainyard in East Tennessee*. <http://www.blueridgecountry.com/elephant/elephant.html> Accessed on 12-15-08
24. Topsy (elephant) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Topsy_\(elephant\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Topsy_(elephant)) Note: Thomas Edison captured the execution on film and later released it under the name *Electrocuting an Elephant*. Again, this was a speciesist attempt to gain name recognition and accolades and was not an attempt to remember the fallen Topsy or to understand what human behaviour led her to her outrage. The video can be viewed on the Wikipedia page. For an intriguing account of the life of Topsy, please see chapter 15 ("Topsy Was Framed") in Eric Scigliano's *Love, War, and Circuses*
25. <http://www.kerulos.org/projects.html#ptsd> Accessed on 01-04-09
26. Elephant Intelligence http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elephant_intelligence#Death_ritual Accessed on 12-12-08
27. pg. 39
28. Nowotny, Robert A. *Mary the Elephant*. <http://needtovent-movies.blogspot.com/2007/03/mary-elephant.html> Accessed 12-15-08
29. Brown, Angela K. *1916 Elephant Hanging Still Haunts Erwin, TN* <http://www.gotricities.com/content/article.dna?idnumber=020603132233> Accessed 12-15-08. Note: I have seen Ruth Piper's last name spelled both 'Piper' and 'Pieper' as in this article. I am unsure as to the correct spelling and apologise for any inaccuracy.
30. pg. 509. 'Is There Such a Thing as Prejudice Toward Animals?' by Scott Plous. Published in *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*. New York: McGraw Hill Humanities, 2002.
31. Griffith, Leslie. *Circus Elephants and Tuberculosis*. Published on Leslie Griffith Productions. http://www.lesliegriffithproductions.com/my_weblog/2008/04/circus-elephant.html Accessed 12-15-08
32. pg. 203. Scigliano, Eric. *Love, War, and Circuses: The Age-Old Relationship Between Elephants and Humans*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

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