

ELEPHANT GYPSY GOES WILD AND IS KILLED NEAR HERE.

The Monster Brute of the Harris Nickel-Plate Shows Tramples her Keeper to Death and Runs Amuck.
After Terrorizing the Business Portion of the City, she Dashes out to Pine Park
and was Shot Down Six Miles Above the City Sunday Morning.

Valdosta experienced a sensation Saturday night such as no other city in the country has ever witnessed.

It was a chase by scores of people after a monster five-ton elephant, which had trampled its keeper to death and was standing in defiance of all who should come within its reach.

After a chase lasting all night long and far into Sunday morning, the big brute was killed by Chief of Police Dampier, six miles above the city, with a single shot from a Krag-Jorgensen rifle. The animal had been shot dozens of times in the past, and this is said to have been the first animal of the kind ever killed by a rifle ball in this country.

The elephant belonged to the Harris Nickel Plate Shows, which gave two performances here Saturday and which broke tents that night to go into winter quarters at Pine Park. The animal was named "Gypsy" and she had been seen many times in this city. She was one of the largest elephants in the world. The show was here for two weeks during the State Fair and gave two performances daily, the acts by "Gypsy" being features of the performances.

The show went from here to Lake City for two performances and then visited Macon, Cordele, Tifton and other places along the Georgia Southern road, returning here Saturday morning for the last two performances of the season.

Elephant Under Perfect Control.

The big beast was in charge of James O'Rourke, who seemed to have her under perfect control. She was an exceedingly intelligent animal and her acts in the circus ring were the cleverest ever witnessed here. Among them was the blowing of a harmonica, Gypsy being the only elephant in the world which had been trained to blow a wind instrument of any kind.

All day Saturday, O'Rourke, the elephant's trainer, complained of being sick and that afternoon he began to take quinine and whiskey in pretty liberal doses. He was seen to take a drink of whiskey just before mounting the elephant to go to the park and one of the showmen spoke to him and suggested that he had "better cut that out."

At O'Rourke's command, the elephant kneeled down and he crawled up on her head and then he gave the signal for her to move on. The great beast started off from the show grounds, east of the city hall, toward Patterson street and thence to the Georgia Southern passenger depot where O'Rourke expected to get a change of clothing to put on. He remained at the circus cars a short while and started back up town.

This article continues on pages 2 - 6. It is from the then semi-weekly Valdosta Times Tuesday, Nov. 25, 1902.

a short while and started back up town along Patterson street, turning at Hill avenue toward the show grounds, but turning again at Ashley street toward Central avenue. The showmen say that the elephant expected to go in the car at the depot and when she was brought back up town it angered her.

Turned Down Wrong Street.

The turn at Ashley street was made and Gypsy ambled along toward Central avenue, where a turn was made to the left, leading toward Patterson street, but crossing that street and continuing the slow pace toward Toombs street. A number of parties on the street called out to O'Rourke and told him that he was going the wrong way, but he paid no attention to them. Chief Dampier was sitting at his stable when the elephant passed there and he called O'Rourke's attention to the fact he was on the wrong street, but a mumbled answer came from the man on the elephant's head, and the chief supposed that he wanted to go a side street to get out of the way of the vehicles and street cars on Patterson street.

Two young men, Smith and Christian, followed the elephant from Patterson street to Toombs and were close to her when O'Rourke fell off of her head. They stated that the elephant stopped a moment as if to wait for him to resume his position, but a moment later she kneeled down over him and crushed every bone in his body, rolling the limp body along with her trunk and tusks for probably fifty yards.

Gypsy an Integral Part of the Lore of Lowndes

Soon the restorations of the 1905 Lowndes County Courthouse and the 1906, The McKey, now a boutique hotel, will be completed. Visitors, tourists and technology gamers will find points of downtown history part of their Valdosta

Her Keepers' Death Reported.

She then turned toward the side of the street and began grazing on the grass there as if nothing had happened. Chief Dampier heard her crushing O'Rourke and ran over close enough to see that he could do nothing for the man. He then went to the circus and informed the managers of what had taken place. In a short while the entire circus force was on the ground trying to control the animal, while Manager Wilson and Sheriff Passmore were trying to get the crowds to stand back.

One of the clowns, Barney Shea, who was formerly her keeper, undertook to lead her toward the depot and place her on the cars there and it was believed that he would succeed, as the animal knew his voice and followed him nearly to the Plant System depot. In the meantime, a large crowd had gathered and excitement was running high. A train stopped on the crossing where the elephant was to pass and this, together with the excited crowds, seemed to rattle her.

She turned back toward the Christian church, from which some of the members of the circus were calling to her in "elephant talk," but it was apparent that she was getting thoroughly aroused. She grabbed an electric light pole with her trunk and shook it until the lights flew out all along the street. Then, she began to hurl bricks and pieces of timber through the air.

(Gypsy an Integral Part ... continued) ... experience.

This extensive newspaper article has just become available in digital form. It will be on the Historical Society's website for the public to make use of it. It is surprising how much of the Gypsy story survived into the future being told correctly. Some Gypsy rampage happenings were not yet exposed and thus could not be included in this day-after *Valdosta Times* issue.

Other newspapers wrote telling of the grand publicity that Gypsy the elephant was bringing Valdosta, and chided Atlanta that they were missing out. This article provides information and perspectives concerning the rampage we had not known.

Elephant Thoroughly Aroused.

Billy Mincer, another of the clowns in the circus, was hemmed in a rear door of the new Christian church, but was pulled out and hurled some distance by the angry animal. She started to renew her attack upon him, but he was pulled out of the way by some parties who were near by. He was in an unconscious condition and was carried to the Valdes Hotel for medical treatment. In the meantime, Barney Shea and Clem Kerr, the latter being the advance agent of the circus, were in the new Christian church calling to "Gypsy" and trying to get her under control. Shea fired at her with a pistol several, but the bullets did no harm except to make her mad.

For a couple of hours the elephant was master of the situation in that section of the city. She seemed to pay very little attention to home folks, but a number of times indicated a very keen desire to get hold of some of the circus crowd. They seemed to fear her more than any one else, probably because they knew her better, and they were careful to keep out of her way. Especially is this true of Barney Shea, her former manager, who stated that she had old grudges against him that she would never forget.

After an hour or two, spent in promenading up and down the side-walk in front of the Valdes Hotel and the new Christian church, Gypsy turned up Toombs street in a full gallop and as far as the eye could reach, under the swinging electric lights, her huge form swayed along with the alertness of a rabbit. Her steps, by actual measurement, were from eight to nine feet each. She followed Toombs street to the vacant lot beyond the residence of Mr. B. H. Jones, when she cut across to Patterson street and went on to the park.

O'Rourke, Rourke and the Florist Business

This article tells of "James O'Rourke." In subsequent days, the newspaper issues corrected the name to "Rourke." In lore the deceased has been written of as James "Whiskey Red" O'Rourke. He was thus listed in the cyclical historical plays in Sunset Hill Cemetery. At the museum we have almost ceased attempting the correction to Rourke. *The History of Lowndes County Georgia, 1825-1941* relates this story, "A huge circus elephant, Gypsy, escaped and killed her trainer. The circus people insisted on buying flowers for the funeral." This Gypsy event initiated the forming of florist businesses in Valdosta.

The Big Brute at Pine Park.

Then Chief Dampier and a large posse followed her to the park for the purpose of killing her as she had proven herself entirely unmanageable and her owner, Mrs. Harris, had stated that she could not rest until she was sure the brute was dead. Her former keeper Shea got up in the stand over the State Fair office and called her to him. She was in the rear end of the fair grounds, but she answered his call. Chief Dampier and his posse were on top of the ticket office. The big beast walked up within fifty yards of them and stopped. The moon was behind the clouds and only a dim outline of her could be gotten. The chief drew his Krag-Jorgensen rifle and fired at her two or three times.

The wounds were evidently painful, but not fatal to her. She gave one shriek and started on a full run toward the fence in rear of the grounds. She found a plank off and, with her huge trunk, brushed away a panel or two of the fencing like it was a row of tooth picks. She took the cross road toward the Cat Creek road and turned up that to Cherry Creek. It was then nearly four o'clock Sunday morning. Chief Dampier and his posse followed her for some distance and then returned to the city to get lunches, secure horses and wait for light to dawn upon the scene.

The Chase Toward Cherry Creek.

By day light, the chief and his crowd were ready to go on the hunt again. His posse consisted of his first lieutenant, Mr. M. A. Briggs and Messrs. James Gates, D. A. Sinclair, Lawrence Walker, Roy Hightower, Dave Roberts and one or two other parties. Mr. Briggs and Chief Dampier were in a buggy, while the other parties were on horse back. They left the city about five o'clock and followed the big animal out toward Cherry Creek on the Nashville road. At several places they saw where the elephant had stopped in the road and had evidently stood there some time, the impression on the ground looking as if she had lain down.

The first sight of the big mountain of flesh and blood was near Cherry Creek and all came to a halt. The elephant, blind in one eye, was standing across the road with his good eye turned toward the city evidently watching in that direction. Her big body was swaying to and fro after the manner that elephants sway themselves when standing still. When she caught a view of the crowd she turned toward the north and started off in a rapid walk.

The parties lighted and started in pursuit through the woods. The elephant finally came to a stop and Chief Dampier ran around to her side, taking a position probably seventy-five yards from her. The excitement of the chase, together with its fatigue had made him nervous and he was afraid to try and fire at her without taking good aim. The chief got a good rest for his weapon on a fence and took deliberate aim at her head. The Krag-Jorgensen rifle cracked with a sharp "ping" and the big brute fell to her knees and then over on her side. One shot had done the perfect work of destroying her life and when the parties reached her she was nothing more than a huge bulk of inanimate flesh.

Elephant's Death Reported.

Chief Dampier fired one more shot into her head and other members of the party fired two or three times from their Winchesters and pistols. An examination of the death-wound showed that the bullet entered her temple and went probably three feet deep in her head. Another shot from the Krag-Jorgensen rifle had gone entirely through her neck. The Winchester shots had only entered an inch or two and had probably done no more than tickle her.

Chief Dampier and his posse returned to the city and reported the death of the elephant, and the announcement came as a great relief to the circus people. They had been uneasy all night long and were really glad to know that the great brute had been killed, even though it was a big financial loss to them. All day Sunday large crowds went out to the scene of the killing and scarcely anything else was talked about on the streets. The tragedy of the night before and the excitement incident to the chase after the big animal made it the most sensational event that Valdosta has ever known.



Above: The 2007 elephant statue and garden exhibit at the museum remembers Gypsy. It is a favorite photo stop on the museum grounds. Mrs. Lucille Summerlin of the Fellowship Home was interviewed in 1992, when turning 100, by the *Valdosta Daily Times*. One of her most vivid recollections told in the article was of the rampage of Gypsy the elephant. The event for her then was ninety years ago in 1902, when she was ten years old. Writers told that the story of Gypsy would continue for years and it has.

Burial of the Dead Keeper.

The body of the dead keeper, O'Rourke, was carried to Ulmer's undertaking rooms and prepared for burial. It was found that several of his bones were broken and the body was badly bruised. It was placed in a very fine casket, bought by Mrs. Harris, owner of the Nickel-Plate Shows, and was buried in the city cemetery Sunday afternoon at four o'clock, the services being read by Mr. J. Duffy, of the Catholic church. The hearse was drawn to the cemetery by six beautiful white horses and all of the circus people, together with many people from the city, attended the funeral.

O'Rourke, it is said, had been with the circus for a number of years and had always managed the elephant. He came from San Francisco, though his family resides in New Orleans. It is said that he came near losing his life once or twice under "Gypsy's" huge form, but was rescued. It is also said that several times, while he was intoxicated, the animal has picked him up and placed him in the car, and that on other occasions she has lifted him back on her head when he had fallen off. The animal was very docile at times, but on other occasions she has been perfectly unmanageable, having been sentenced to death a half dozen times and each time given a lease on life because the means of killing her were so hard to obtain.

Dead Elephant Draw Crowds.

The body of the elephant was buried a short distance from where she fell dead Sunday morning. A half a dozen horses were used to drag the remains to the grave which was prepared for them, but they were unable for the task and the body was finally cut to pieces with axes and moved a part at a time, four horses being used for the task.

The dead elephant proved to be a drawing card for hundreds of people from this city, as well as the surrounding country. It is estimated that fully three thousand people visited the place where she was killed to get a view of her huge carcass, many of these walking six or seven miles to see the sight.

Mr. T. G. Powers, of the Harris Shows, one of the animal trainers, was formerly in charge of "Gypsy" and knows her history as well as any other living man. He stated to a TIMES reporter yesterday that the animal was about sixty-five years of age and that she was among the first elephants ever brought to this country. She was imported by the O'Brien circus, which travelled through the country in wagons, in 1847. She has been owned by nearly all of the big shows in the country, each one of them disposing of her on account of her temper, though at fabulous prices owing to her wonderful intelligence.



Left: Fred Stikkel did a superb job portraying Rourke in 1999 in the cyclical play series, *Along the Paths of Paradise*, presented by Theatre Guild, production, and the Historical Society, concept and scripts. The plays were popular and were last presented in 2010 during Valdosta's Sesquicentennial Celebration.

Owner of the circus, Mrs. Harris, had the substantial obelisk shaped headstone, *photo left*, installed at Sunset Hill Cemetery in 1903 before the circus wintered in Valdosta that year. "The entire circus crowd went out to the cemetery Saturday morning at nine o'clock to visit the tomb of John Rourke, the elephant keeper, who was killed by the big elephant Gypsy, which ram amuck here last year." *Valdosta Times*

Traits of the Big Animal.

Mr. Powers stated that she had killed a half a dozen keepers in by-gone years, and in each instance she had delivered the death blow only when she had every advantage of her keeper. Like all other elephants, she never forgot a kindness or any injury. She would harbor an unkind act for years and then avenge it after the one who did it had forgotten all about it. Last year, in Chicago, she ran amuck and was conquered by Mrs. Harris, a delicate, frail little woman, who had nerve enough to rush at her with a pitchfork and defy her. On another occasion she would have killed the same woman had not O'Rourke, who was killed Saturday night, run to her rescue. Mrs. Harris remembered this act when she gave an order for a fine casket and for the dead man to be given a decent burial.

Gypsy is probably the only elephant of her size that has ever been killed by a rifle ball, and her death is a great advertisement for the Krag-Jorgensen army rifles, as well as for Chief Dampier who fired the fatal shot. Only a couple of weeks ago one of the Barnum elephants was carried twenty miles to sea, out of New York, and three or four tug boats were used to hang her and sink her remains into the sea.

All local photos that exist of Gypsy and this circus came to the museum archives from one album donated in 1978 by Mrs. J.C. Hunt. ACQ 1978-180-001. The museum had moved into the Carnegie in 1977 and the community was building our archives.

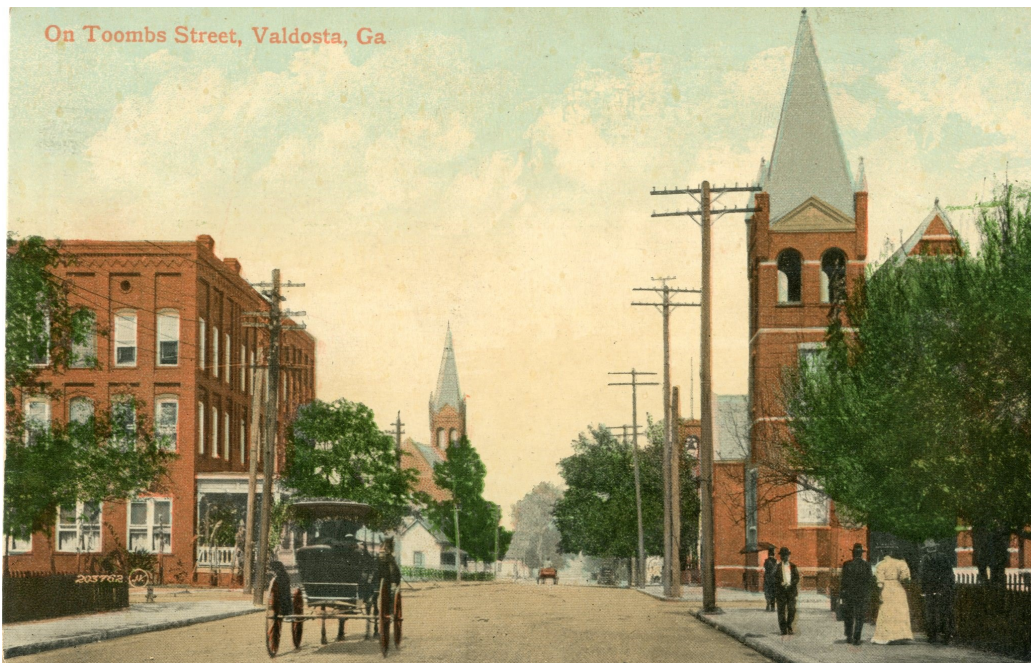
The Story Will Live for Years.

The killing of an elephant, in the woods near Valdosta, will be a story which will be told to generations yet unborn and it is highly probable that the veracity of many a truthful man will suffer from having repeated the tale. Even now, it is almost hard to believe, but the bones and white ivory tusks will form relics that will be kept for years by many who desire to keep such trophies to substantiate the fact.

There has been some talk of saving the skeleton of the big animal and mounting it for exhibition in this city. If such a thing can be done, the people of Valdosta can afford to pay a good price for it.

The death of Gypsy has given Valdosta more publicity than anything that has ever happened here, as there is hardly a paper in the country that has not printed the story of Saturday night's chase and its final result.

On Toombs Street, Valdosta, Ga



The rampage of Gypsy the Elephant began November 29, 1902. Articles describe dangerous activity downtown occurring in Toombs Street between the Valdes Hotel (*left in image*), and the First Christian Church, (*right in image*), both of which fronted on W. Hill Avenue. Both were built in 1902. Men hollered at Gypsy from the church windows.

In the distance is the steeple of First Baptist Church at the NW corner of Central Ave. and Toombs. It is said that Rourke fell off Gypsy near there and Gypsy broke a tusk maneuvering him, Ed Ferrell wrote of the tusk being at Valdes Hotel at one time.

MEMORIALS

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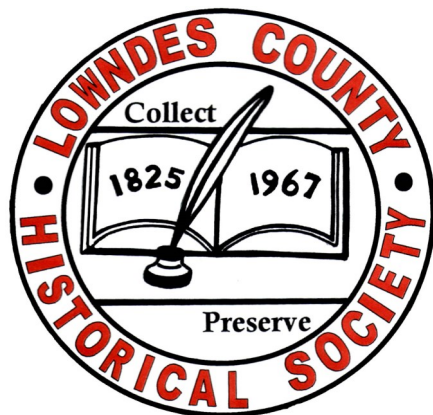
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**Gifts in Honor
The 90th Birthday of
Lilla Kate Parramore Hart**

by

Donald O. Davis
Edward and Rita Hightower
J. Edward Willis

**In this newsletter:
Recording the Lore of Lowndes
Downtown & the Countryside
Rampage of Gypsy the Elephant
1902 -2022**

Note: Family and Friendship Memorial Gifts will be listed in the upcoming newsletter. Due to a Bulk Mail machine processing problem in Jacksonville, over 125 out-of-region newsletters were all returned after a delay with Address-Not - Known stickers. The entire mailing had to be re-processed, therefore we continue to receive these Memorial Gifts.

Mail to: LCHS

P.O. Box 56

Valdosta, GA 31603

2023 Membership Application

Lowndes County Historical Society

Membership Category

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Address _____
Phone _____
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Individual \$25. ____
Family 30. ____
Business 50. ____
Contributing 100. ____
Patron 250. ____
Life 1,000. ____

MUSEUM CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Officers and Executive Committee

President, John Bennett; 1st Vice President, Ron Irwin; 2nd Vice President, Mary Young Manning; Secretary, Carol Irwin; Treasurer, C. Edward Hightower; Past President, Ex Officio, Sally S. Kurrie

January-March 2023.....2023 Annual Membership Drive
 January 15.....M. L. King, Jr. Day observed
 January 26 Meeting with Program by Lilla Kate Hart
 Feb 3-5.....LCHS at Georgia Association of Historians Conference VSU
 March 374th Squadron Vietnam Vets, Wives Program at Museum
 March 16..... Program for Garden Center, Inc. Luncheon
 March 16..... Board of Trustees Meeting
 March 23 Society Meeting and Program
 April 4,5 100 Years: Henry Ford's Productive Day in Valdosta
 May 13.....Museum Upper Gallery, Lloyd Greer Tour of Homes by VHF

Lowndes County Historical Society & Museum

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<http://www.valdostamuseum.com>

YESTERDAY & TODAY

Newsletter of
Lowndes County Historical Society

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Special Collections and Research

Amy Brown
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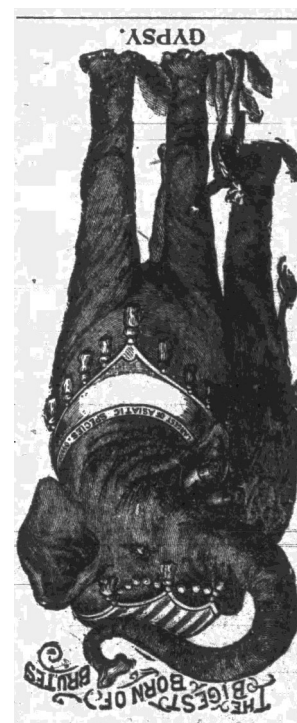
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