

# Cirque d'histoire

From the Great White North, Elizabeth Siegfried brings Sarasota circus history back to the Suncoast for a special exhibition.

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"RED HEAD"

The year: 2006. The place: a remote cabin in the Canadian countryside. Photographer Elizabeth Siegfried lets herself in, seeing the rustic homestead and its neglected contents through the eye of memory. It's the old family summer home—this simple cabin and a series of lean-tos hastily affixed to the exterior where in the past the children would gambol and sport and eventually sleep. The family was bigger then. On this day, the lean-tos are full of boxes and the boxes are full of squirrel nests. Siegfried opens the box in the corner: what appeared to be dishware revealed as a collection of film canisters bearing her grandmother's name. Home video, thinks Siegfried.

"Then I came across these canisters that said 'Sarasota,'" she says. Processing the film into a digital format that Siegfried could read took years—shipping canisters 30 at a time to a man in Montana—but revealed a treasure trove of Sarasota circus history in black-and-white and full color. Film shot in the early 1930s offers a glimpse behind the scenes at the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus winter quarters with candid shots of clowns, crowds, trainers, chimps, elephants and strongmen astride their steeds. Footage shot between 1940 and 1942 documents the circus' traveling shows to Rochester, New York—greasepaint tramps, stiltwalkers, more elephants and a bright red clown car flanked by motley fools. With no audio for guidance, Siegfried enlisted the help of retired Ringling clown Jackie LeClaire, now in his 80s, to shed some light on the subjects' identities and stories. In one frame, LeClaire found his own father.

Bringing her own artistic vision to what her forebear began, Siegfried isolated individual frames from the film for a collection of photographic prints that could more easily be disseminated or displayed. "I wanted to share these images with the public because I knew that they were historically significant," says Siegfried, who initiated conversation with the Circus Arts Conservatory and the Ringling Museum in hopes of eventual donation. "That's where they should be ultimately." This November, Suncoast circus fans have their own opportunity to peruse this rediscovered bit of circus history with an upcoming exhibition at the Phillippi Estate Park 100th anniversary celebration. Housed in the Edson Keith Mansion, *CIRCUS!* will showcase 42 single images from Siegfried's

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collection of prints, as well as a handful of sequences—multiple frames comprising a brief narrative or, in the case of the exhibit's signature stilt-man, a larger-than-life figure. All prints will be available for sale, with profits going to Phillippi Estate Park and the Circus Arts Conservatory.