

# 1940s Ringling circus photos discovered

FROM SUE BYRON

Photographer Elizabeth Siegfried is known for her self-portraits, meditative landscapes and narrative sequences. Her latest photographic series captures the intersection of her family history and the legacy of the circus.

In 2006, Siegfried discovered a wooden crate that turned out to be a box of wonder. It was filled with forgotten 16 mm film footage that her grandmother, Elizabeth Chapin White of Rochester, New York, had shot between 1927 and 1945.

The films' appeal transcended nostalgia. Beyond offering touching glimpses of family history, the images testified to the power of her grandmother's singular artistic vision.

As an amateur photographer and filmmaker, Elizabeth White had an eye for action and an instinct for the significant moment. Siegfried immediately recognized her grandmother's achievement. As they say, "it takes one to know one."

The films inspired Siegfried to celebrate her grandmother's vision with a cross-generational



PHOTO PROVIDED

**Polkadot Clown photo from Cards Without Words by Elizabeth Siegfried is part of a special showing at Phillippi Creek Estate in November.**

artistic collaboration. Working from still frames in the films, Siegfried reinterpreted candid moments and enlarged them into photographic prints.

According to Siegfried, her grandmother's artistry had informed her own work — even before she discovered the lost film footage.

"Historically, my family has been matriarchal," she said. "From what I've learned from personal experience, watching these 16 mm films and listening to family lore, my maternal great-grandmother, grandmother and mother

shared a solid sense of identity and positive strong will. I've used historical images and film footage of these women in my own work to create narratives about family, the passage of time, a sense of place, and memory.

"I'm constantly amazed at how similar my own photographic sensibility is to that of my grandmother."

Siegfried, who recently moved to Sarasota with her husband, the composer James Grant, was also surprised to discover the Sarasota connection behind many of these images. Her grandparents

had vacationed here from the 1920s through the 1940s. Her grandmother's camera had captured the moments.

There was also a strong circus connection.

Siegfried's grandmother had taken films on the family's trips to the Ringling Brothers Circus performances in Rochester, New York, in 1940 and 1942. These remarkable images show scenes of equestrians balancing on backs of sturdy horses, zebras munching hay, elephants strolling the grounds with their trainers, and circus clowns cavorting for onlookers.

"I had an overwhelming feeling of wonder and excitement when I found the films," she said. "My husband and I had already fallen in love with Sarasota and had planned to move here before I discovered the film treasure. The 'coincidence' seemed entirely meant to be."

Area residents can view these extraordinary images next month in "CIRCUS," an exhibition presented by Phillippi Estate Park to commemorate its 100th anniversary. This exhibition, scheduled for this

November, features black and white and color photographs of what early visitors to Sarasota would have seen on the back lot of the winter home of The Greatest Show on Earth.

The Ringling Bros. circus wintered in Sarasota from 1927 to 1959 when it left to move to Venice as it changed from a tent show to one that performed in arenas.

"These prints provide a time capsule of an era when Americans were fascinated by exotic animals, the antics of clowns and high flying artists of the circus," says Priscilla Brown, park manager of Phillippi Estate Park. "The result is a new look at the humor and glamour of Sarasota's history with the

circus."

Brown adds that Friends of Sarasota County Parks will benefit from a portion of the sale of limited-edition images, prints, posters and cards from the anniversary exhibition. Funds will be earmarked for the renovation of the Keith Farmhouse, the original building erected on the estate.

"CIRCUS" will be at the Edson Keith Mansion in Phillippi Estate Park, 5500 South Tamiami Trail, Sarasota. The exhibition will be open to the public on Thursday, Nov. 10, 11 a.m.-3 p.m.; Friday, Nov. 11, 11 a.m.-3 p.m.; Saturday, Nov. 12, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; and Sunday, Nov. 13, noon-4 p.m.

## CROSS

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