

"Why the Elephants Came to the Stable"

(Revision of original story: "The Thumb Island Elephants"-Steve Burt)

As Miss Elvira Whipple stared out the front window of the living room the snow continued to fall. A foot had fallen that night and another foot was predicted to fall before morning. There would be no Christmas Eve service for her.

Miss Elvira had fallen and broken her hip a few years before and now she avoided situations where she might fall again... if possible. Besides at age 94 Miss Elvira had decided that perhaps it was time to tell her story...the year of the most memorable Christmas Eve of her life. The story that would clear up an 85 year old mystery about the two small paper mache elephants who stood in the Congregational Church Christmas Nativity stable each year.

She went and got some beautiful stationary out of her desk and as the wind howled and the snow fell Miss Elvira began to tell her story....a Christmas Eve much like the this one....a large snowfall that would cause an accident that changed the townspeople of Thumb Island forever.

The year was 1909 and Elvira was almost ten years old. She could hardly eat supper that Christmas Eve for the excitement of the Christmas Eve Service. It was her favorite service of the year.

She always got there early and sat on the front pew so she could watch her mother sing (she was in the choir) and her daddy assist with the service since he was a deacon. All the long white tapered candles would be lit and the Christmas music would fill the room. The smells of fresh greenery would envelope the sanctuary letting everyone know Christmas had arrived.

There were actually five churches on Thumb Island where she lived. Actually it wasn't an island at all...it was surrounded by water on three sides so it was a peninsula in Connecticut. It connected to the mainland at the northern end and that is where the Coastal Railroad was located.

The five churches consisted of the Baptist, the Catholic, the Congregational, the Episcopal and the all-black Methodist church known as Shiloh. Her daddy had told her all about the differences in the churches one day.

- 1) Baptist- They dunked at their baptisms and had the longest prayers
- 2) Catholic- Everyone seemed to avoid the new Catholic priest in town but nobody had any trouble buying Catholic fish at the local market
- 3) Congregational- Elvira's church was a good "middle of the roader" her daddy explained and they just sprinkled water for their baptisms.
- 4) Episcopal-Her daddy said it helped if you had money to go to that church and if no money...at least a good lineage which directly went back to the Church of England
- 5) Shiloh-The only black church in Thumb which consisted mainly of the porters and stewards who worked for the railroad - their church building was the closest to the tracks. (Elvira loved walking by it in the spring and summer when the windows were up...the gospel music made her click up her heels and snap her fingers to the beat.)

The organ had just started playing a medley of Christmas hymns when suddenly the peace and calm of this special service was shattered by a loud cry of "Friends We Need Your Help!" A railroad porter stepped out from the back of the church. No one

moved or reacted...everyone was in shock...nobody from Shiloh had ever been in the Congregational Church.

Once again the man shouted: "A wagon's stuck on the tracks. We can't get it off. Please...it's a big circus wagon!" The congregation immediately emptied and followed the porter to the grade crossing.

It was there that the crowd discovered a huge wagon tipped over on its side. It was bigger than two stagecoaches...brightly colored and across the end of the wagon...it read BARNUM and BAILEY-THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH. The wagon had small slits for windows on each end. A man stood at one window cooing softly the way a mother does to comfort a child...a team of four draft horses stood there still hitched.

Little by little all five congregations began to descend on the grade crossing as the news quickly spread. The Shiloh congregation had been struggling for an hour prior to the call for help to get the wagon set back upright. But the snow and icy rails, that had caused the wagon to tilt making a curve, along with the weight of the elephants, proved too difficult a task for them.

Elephants! The excitement in the crowd mounted. Little Elvira ran to look through one of the slits. Another little girl from the Shiloh church named Hannah was holding a lantern and peeking in on a mother elephant whose ear was crushed holding onto her baby elephant. Her eyes seemed to stare right back at the two little girls as if silently pleading for help. They were the most beautiful eyes...like cow eyes. Elvira remembered her teacher had once said that an elephant's hide didn't feel rough and dry...but soft and silky...she wished she could feel it.

By now all the clergy-men were trying to figure how to get the elephants out...but there were steel bars on each end and the sliding door was packed up against the snowy ground. No one could lift a five-ton elephant and her baby.

After much discussion...the only solution seemed to be to try to skid the wagon along the top of the tracks for a couple of hundred yards to the beach where the tracks ran on the top of a rock pile. They could then tip the wagon down and not up...let gravity do the work for them to upright it again.

But first the tracks had to be cleared of the foot or more of snow and make a wide path to the beach. People quickly disappeared...reappearing with shovels, ropes, and chains. Two oxen were brought in and more horses. Folks tied on more ropes and every single person grabbed on like it was the tug of war competition at the county fair.

At first everyone pulled but then Elvira's father gave her and Hannah a lantern each to stand on the rock trestle in case they had to signal the 11:30 freight train from Mystic which would be carrying a snowplow.

Elvira and Hannah were shivering, atop the tall train trestle, in the cold as they looked down on the sweaty men, women, and children pulling below. All the lanterns had been laid beside the tracks and embankments as they worked...and now atop the trestle looking down...they saw the most beautiful sight!

It was as if the illuminaries were lighting the way to save the elephants...it was far lovelier than any Christmas Eve candlelight service Elvira had ever seen.

Elvira saw white folks and black folks, horses and oxen, Catholics and Protestants (the sprinklers and the dunkers) all working side by side. Lordy, Elvira thought, what God wouldn't give to have her and Hannah's view. As soon as she thought it...she realized God was right there witnessing it with them... His arm around each of them.

It was a little past 11:30 when the wagon reached its destination. Everyone held their breath..Ka-Wham! The wagon crashed into the frozen beach and all four wheels snapped like soda crackers but the wagon now stood upright. The terrified elephants trumpeted and banged against the wagon walls...then they were eerily quiet. Hannah and Elvira said a prayer..."Lord, Bless those elephants-AMEN!" Then a voice rang out from the darkness that they were okay.

Everyone started hugging each other and cheering...some people sat in the snow and wept from sheer relief. Suddenly Elvira heard her father say, "It's Christmas Day!" She had never seen him so excited. "O Come All Ye Faithful" he began to sing while everyone else joined in.

That's what everyone was doing when the freight train roared through...singing Christmas carols and smiling. The engineer thought this must be a celebration for him so he cut his speed in half, waved and grinned while yelling out 'MERRY CHRISTMAS' from his cab like Santa Claus from his sleigh.

The elephants were taken to the Congregational life-sized stable from the living nativity scene and given hay and grass. Elvira remembered walking over later Christmas Day to check on them and they did feel soft and silky.

The day after Christmas some crewmen from the Barnum and Bailey circus arrived with a new wagon, loaded the elephants, and disappeared from sight as the townspeople waved, cheered, and yes...even wept.

It was a few days later that Elvira and Hannah came up with the idea to make paper mache elephants to remember this special Christmas Eve...AND for 85 years the two little elephants stood at the edge of the stable looking in on Baby Jesus each Christmas Eve.

All the people who remembered the story and the reason for the paper mache elephants were now long gone...except for Miss Elvira Whipple. So on this snowy Christmas Eve Elvira wrote down her memory of the Christmas Eve of 1909 and by doing so...she solved the mystery of why elephants came to the manger of the Congregational Church each Christmas Eve.

It was Mr. Martin, Elvira's long-time neighbor for over half-a-century who made the discovery when he grabbed the extra outside key to check on her Christmas day... (after calling all morning and getting no answer.) He found that Miss Elvira had passed during the night. On her tabletop Christmas tree he found an envelope attached to a branch with a clothespin containing her story.

That week her story came out in the local paper and was immediately picked up in syndicated columns all over the country. The youth groups from the same five churches in Thumb, Connecticut decided to undertake a year-long project to make two life-size elephants from paper mache for the Congregational Living Nativity stable.

Today the elephants stand by the manger, watching over the Baby Jesus, to remind everyone of that special Christmas Eve when the town of Thumb all came together to save the lives of two of God's greatest creatures.

It was Elvira's last gift to the towns people she loved...her story of unity, understanding, and compassion...the story of why the elephants came to the stable.