

WAY WE WERE

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A group of children meet a Wirth's Circus elephant 1941, shortly after Philip Wirth junior retired as ringmaster; (right) elephant power to move a railway carriage circa 1925 in Lismore; and the resting place of Harry Dale.

Elephant proved it had 'killer' memory

Queensland's only death by elephant was anything but an accident, writes **Dot Whittington**

SHE was the star of the show and then she turned killer, making headlines around the nation when she perpetrated Queensland's first, and only, death by elephant.

Toby – a female despite her name – had been troublesome even before she crushed her keeper at the Childers railway station on June 27, 1909.

She had arrived in Australia from America and was already performing when she was acquired by the NSW Zoological Society in 1887 for about £90. She quickly became a star attraction at Sydney's first zoo and for more than a decade drew huge crowds.

She could remove the keeper's hat, ring a hand bell, sit on a seesaw, play a mouth-organ "with infinite skill and pathos", perform tricks on command and give rides to children.

When the zoo hit hard times in 1904, and could no longer afford to keep a disobedient elephant, she packed her trunk and joined the Wirth Brothers Circus, which paid

£200. Toby then happily walked from the zoo to the docks and boarded a ship for New Zealand with her trainer Mr J. Burrows who soon became known as Captain Burrows.

After a three-month tour she was shipped back and her circus career took off.

Toby became star of the ring and was also a good worker, hauling carts and loading heavy equipment on the circus train.

Wirth's, billed as Australia's own "Greatest Show on Earth", concocted a delightful story to impress audiences: She was born on the march of General Roberts relief expedition to Candia (Crete) in 1877 and Captain Burrows had taken care of the infant elephant.

On his discharge from the British Army, he had brought her to the Sydney Zoological Gardens.

When she was purchased by Wirth Brothers, Captain Burrows was specially engaged to travel with her as she would submit to no one else.

Touring the east coast on specially chartered trains, the circus went to the Brisbane Ekka and towns around Queensland, with four-tonne Toby promoted as the largest performing elephant in the world.

In August 1907, they arrived at Dalby, and there was a near-miss when Toby, who had been showing ill temper, was hauling a railway truck.

When the guard put on the brake, she seized him with her trunk and dashed him hard against the buffers.

The caretaker rushed up and gave her a "severe thrashing". The guard had no broken bones but was severely bruised.

Then came her famous demonstration of "elephants never forget".

While the circus was being shipped from Rockhampton to Townsville, an engineer played a practical joke.

He replaced the inside of an orange with cayenne pepper and threw it among the elephants. Toby, the biggest, snapped it up quickly and gave it a crunch: "The effect was instantaneous, for with a terrific bellow the poor beast tugged at its leg chains, to get to the water tank. The others became frightened, and the whole herd started trumpeting."

The keepers were mystified by the commotion and those who did know, weren't saying. All was revealed a few weeks later when the circus boarded the same boat for the trip back to Brisbane.

When the engineer passed Toby, she picked him up in her trunk and tried to dash him overboard.

He was saved by the riggings and then told the story, admitting it served him right.

By now Toby was famous so it made news around the nation

when she killed Harry Dale, a 40-year-old New Zealander, who was filling in as her keeper while Captain Burrows was away.

Toby was loading heavy timbers in the goods yard. As always, a large crowd had assembled to watch.

According to some accounts, Dale had been particularly cruel in his handling of the elephant, hitting her repeatedly with a spiked hook.

Toby turned on him. Dale had unwisely gone between the elephant and a railway wagon and was pinned. Toby "crushed the unfortunate man with its massive head, almost flattening the keeper's body against the side of the truck".

Most of Dale's ribs were broken and his chest crushed "like an egg-shell". He struggled to his feet, ran a few metres, collapsed and died.

Harry Dale is buried at Apple Tree Creek Cemetery, just west of Childers, where the Wirth's Circus crew erected a headstone.

Toby was, according to the papers, to be destroyed, but Wirth's managed to save their valuable – by now she was worth £2000 – albeit troublesome, investment and Toby died on April 29, 1915, after a short illness.

Mourned as the oldest and cleverest elephant of the herd, doing tricks "of almost human intelligence" she was aged at least 80 with some guessing she was more than 100.