



Three rings under the big top

Circus thrills all ages, sizes

The smells of the circus are poignant. They evoke vivid images from childhood when all the world was quite magical, bright and large, especially the world inside the big top. There's the smell of greasepaint, of hay — and most of all — the smell of the animals.

The Circus Vargas, officially the largest traveling circus (as listed in the Guinness Book of World Records), set up its orange and blue big top in the parking lot of Valley River Center this week. The three-ring circus is presently on a 10½ month tour that will take them through California, the Northwest, with an eventual final stop in Chicago.

The trailers and vans of the circus people are parked in double rows behind the big top. Sometimes as many as three generations of a single family travel with the show.

The animal trainer leads slow motion elephants through the tall grass. He shies away from the photographers.

The circus people are international, they talk in Italian, Spanish and English. Groups of kids feed animals and care for their brothers and sisters.

Siberian Tigers, the number one act in the show, pace the cages.

A circus on tour is like a mobile city. "We have the good, the bad and the indifferent," says clown Billy McCabe, mugging in the photo at left with fellow clown Dale Longmire. "And the ugly," adds Longmire, applying his clown makeup in the photo in the upper left corner.

But then the ringmaster is caught by the long white spotlight in the center ring. A single long blast from his whistle commands the silence and huge eyes of children in bleachers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Circus Vargas," he shouts. And the fantasy that is forever magical to children and adults begins to unfold.

Photo essay by Mark Pynes

