On Circus Day, time stood still. Banks and schoolhouses shut their doors, and unpaved Main streets were clogged with folks from down the block and across the county.

Children stood alongside businessmen as everyone strained to hear the air calliope, also known as a steam organ, and squinted to see the first cart of the horse-drawn spectacle: the circus parade.

As cart after cart passed through the throngs, people who might never have ventured more than a few miles from where they were born stared tigers, monkeys and elephants straight in the eyes.

“Back then, it was an annual event,” said circus clown Joey Kelly of St. Louis. “You saved up for it. When circuses came to town, a lot of businesses shut down, so you could make a day of it.”

Janet Davis, associate professor of American studies at the University of Texas at Austin and author of “The Circus Age,” said the circus was the biggest thing going at the turn of the century.

“It was the one form of entertainment that brought the world to people’s doorsteps in such a totalizing way,” she said.

After the stock market crashed in 1929 and new forms of entertainment helped close the curtain on the glory days of the traveling circus.
employment exceeded 20 percent, many circus-goers exchanged their entertainment dollars for bread. The circus industry lost much of its audience and, through that, much of its financial base.

The years from 1929 through 1939 comprised the worst decade since the Civil War for the circus, said Bill Stolz, senior manuscript specialist at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, which is housed at MU’s Ellis Library.

Despite the industry’s difficulties, interest in the circus has survived. The old circus was the focus of this year’s One Read program, a two-county reading program coordinated by the Daniel Boone Regional Library. One Read used “Water for Elephants,” a novel set in the 1930s that follows a struggling circus, as the centerpiece for events and book discussions. The novel was checked out more than 2,300 times from branches of the Daniel Boone Regional Library, said Sally Abromovich, a librarian at the Columbia Public Library and member of the One Read panel.

As traveling circuses rolled into Columbia, former circus performers led book discussions, and circus documents were unveiled.

All the while, one question persisted: What was it really like?

**Failing Economy**

Immediately following the 1929 stock market crash, the circus industry seemed relatively stable. But when the recession compounded the country’s financial woes, circuses suffered as well. Many were forced to fold their tents for good.

“People actually had no money to buy tickets for things like the circus,” said Jim Corgan, a Columbia resident and One Read participant who lived through the Depression with his family. “This would be one of the things that was just outside the realm of our experience.”

The remains of one of the countless circus casualties of the 1930s are housed in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection. The letters, telegrams and photographs of the Parker & Watts Circus, which were presented by Stolz during a One Read program, tell the story of its swift fall from grandeur.

Charles H. Parker purchased the circus in October 1937. Just two years later, in November 1939, the troupe ended its final season.
in 1937. Instead of attending performances, Stolz said, many towners, as they were known to circus people, pleaded for jobs as evidenced by hundreds of folders of letters in the Parker & Watts archives from people seeking work.

But Parker & Watts was not looking to hire. In fact, the circus was fighting to survive.

On May 2, 1938, early in the circus' first season of traveling, Parker wrote in a letter to a business partner: “If there is a scarcity of money everywhere we cannot continue at our present expense. We can make salary cuts under existing conditions and can dispense with certain people; with poor business there are a few positions that can be consolidated.”

In Sara Gruen’s “Water for Elephants,” the fictional Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth cut its payroll by forcing “disposable” workers off the speeding circus train in the middle of the night in a tactic known as red-lighting.

In an interview during her book signing at the Columbia Public Library, Gruen said that form of red-lighting was cited in historical documents.

Former circus tight rope walker Gale Fuller of Fulton, who performed with his family as part of the Fuller Troupe during the Great Depression, recalled a less brutal form of red-lighting. During the One Read book talk he led, Fuller said foun dering circuses gave unwanted workers the wrong destination or simply left them behind.

Sometimes tight circus finances even divided families.

Joey Kelly, grandson of the famed Depression-era “sad clown” Emmett Kelly of Houston, Mo., said his grandparents’ act - as well as their marriage - was toppled by cutbacks. Economic strife, he said, “changed lives, not only for the circuses, but for the performers.”

The Kellys’ “lightning-fast double trapeze act” was initially billed as the “Aerial Kellys,” and they performed together for several years. But when the Depression arrived, circuses “just started dropping because of financial difficulties,” Joey Kelly said, and the duo had to split their act into separate performances.

Joey Kelly said the breaking point came when Emmett Kelly’s wife, Eva Moore, wasn’t hired back, and Emmett had to leave her behind.

“He had to do it because of the Depression,” Kelly said. “Some job is better than no job.”

THE ALLURE OF THE CIRCUS

In May 1938, Parker wrote that the recession had arrived in the Midwest “in fuller force than before.” An ad for the circus touted the “lowest prices in big circus history,” but with no indication of an end for this recession, as Parker wrote, the public, like the circus, had to prioritize.

“Not everyone could afford it,” Fuller said. “Older people didn’t generally go to the circus, but they did everything they could so that their children could go.”

“Water for Elephants” reader Wayne Anderson of Columbia remembers taking in the excitement of the Seils-Sterling Circus Big Top in 1936, even though his family had lost their farm, and money was hard to come by.

“I’m sure (my father) had to make some kind of arrangements for us to be able to go,” Anderson said.

Seils-Sterling had winter quarters in Springfield that season and performed in the Missouri towns of Macon, Moberly, Boonville and Mexico, according to a route book tucked in with the Parker & Watts documents at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection.
By then, traveling circuses were in flux and cutting expenses. In “Water for Elephants,” Gruen's Benzini Brothers show peddled lemonade cut with the animals’ leftover drinking water to unwitting patrons. The fictional circus might not have been the only one to do so.

More than anything about his day at the circus, Anderson remembers the clowns. But after the painted pranksters, “I remember the terrible lemonade,” he said. “... I remember as a kid complaining about it.”

At the same time the circus community suffered, the greater American community suffered, and people searched for commonality.

“We were all in pretty much the same boat,” Fuller said. In those hard times, he said, people felt more isolated, and the circus was some excuse to come together.

While attendance dwindled during the Depression, Fuller said there was continued interest in the circus because of its ability to “break up the monotony of their everyday lives, which was usually a lot of drudgery.”

As circuses tried to avoid shutting down, one of the first casualties was the grandiose street parade, Kelly said.

“Back in the turn of the century, it wasn't unusual to see a 40-elephant herd” tromping down the street, he said, along with dozens of clowns, athletic performers covered in sequins, llamas, tigers and more.

When the parade went, so did advertising, in a sense; where people would flock to see the circus herd display itself free of charge and have their curiosity piqued and desire for more goaded, they now saw only an empty street.

**FINANCIAL RUIN**

Eventually, novel forms of entertainment, coupled with the Depression, helped push the traveling circus to the brink of collapse.

In the mid-1930s, a movie ticket cost about 25 cents, according to the Motion Picture Association of America. Since circus tickets averaged 25 cents for children and 50 cents for adults, according to the Circus Historical Society, people with little disposable income may have had to choose: Go to the Big Top, or see a movie about the Big Top.

With radio and motion pictures emerging, there were “too many slices of the pie vying for the dollar,” Kelly said. In its heyday, he said, the circus was the whole pie.

Contending for dwindling entertainment dollars, Parker’s frustration was evident: “The natives all seem to know we are coming,” he wrote, “yet we do not get the business.”

Despite circus owners being unable to “pay anything like the (union) scale,” as Parker wrote, the circus crews kept the gaunt shows running. They ate cookhouse suppers of “fried dry salt potatoes” or “creamed beef,” according to Parker & Watts’ menus.

“Maybe that was why my grandfather walked around chewing cabbage,” Kelly said.

Fuller lived on similarly scant rations.

“We always had something to eat,” he said. “(But) it might be we were going to have bread and gravy for dinner, and that was it, bread and gravy.”

Parker & Watts wasn't the only circus trying different tactics to save money and fill the performance tents.

The Seils-Sterling circus made a swing through Columbia on April 22, 1936. Seils-Sterling increased its advertising as the Depression continued, and sometimes reused stock posters from other shows, inserting “Seils-Sterling” where the other circus’ name had been, according to the Sheboygan County Historical Society in Wisconsin.

Seils-Sterling’s innovations carried the circus through a few more seasons.

But in 1938, according to a documentary by the Sheboygan County Historical Society, the owners were forced to let some of the top acts go and asked the other employees to take a 25 percent pay cut. Even then, they still could not meet expenses.

As unemployment spiked nationwide, the circus business faced its hardest year ever, and the Seils-Sterling “Show of a Century” collapsed.

In “Water for Elephants,” the Benzini Brothers circus symbolizes the waning of the industry. Even after all its efforts to save money and draw a crowd, the Benzini Brothers circus fails and is sold off in bits to scavenging, smaller circuses.

“In the end of the book, the circus is in its demise,” Abromovich said.

Seils-Sterling was split on the auction block. Parker & Watts limped back to its winter quarters and placed this “for sale” ad: “Circus, complete or in part. Elephants, horses, animals of all kinds. Cages, trucks, tents, seats, light plants, stake drivers, calliopes; in fact, everything pertaining to circus. This is a complete big show. If you have cash, let us know your wants.”

**STILL APPEALING**

In 1919, the renowned Ringling Brothers Circus chugged into towns across America with 1,200 workers and erected its canvas city spanning nine acres in about two hours. Its Big Top seated 10,000 people, four times the minimum population to qualify as a
city at that time.

In the early 20th century, the circus functioned “as a powerful agent of global representation,” Davis wrote in “The Circus Age.”

It encompassed contrasting senses of nostalgia and “subversion of established social hierarchies” in many transitional periods throughout the century, she wrote.

Put simply, the circus mirrored the spectrum of social issues at that time.

In doing so, it created “an increasingly shared national culture,” Davis wrote. But the frenetic show-and-tell, a whirl of colors and sounds and shared experiences, an overwhelming sensory array that kept audiences coming back for more, shoved that shared culture toward mass media consumption.

And radio and Hollywood fulfilled those sensory desires.

In the year 1900 there were more than 100 circuses traveling the U.S., according to the Circus World Museum. Today, the museum puts that number at about 30.

In the modern hyper-multimedia age, Davis said, competition for the circus’s traditional role saturates daily life.

“When the circus comes to town today, it’s a totally different experience,” Davis said. “It doesn’t shut anything down. You still find big crowds at the circus, of several thousand at least, (but) it’s not going to be the sell out show today, typically.”

Kelly, who now leads the small Joey Kelly Cir-
three-ring circus is very much of an American tradition. When we say the show must go on, that’s a very real phrase.”