

Famous Wallenda Family Member Dies



by Rev. Austin Miles

The best known high wire act in circus history would be The Great Wallendas. The Patriarch of the family, Karl, came to America with his troupe from Germany under contract for the Ringling Brothers Circus. Their act was an immediate hit in America, receiving a ten minute standing ovation in Madison Square Garden at their first U.S. appearance.

The chilling highlight of their presentation was the Seven High Pyramid on the high wire, a chilling display with four men on the wire, two men balanced atop them with a pole on their shoulders where a young woman would make her way to the top, a chair would be scooted out to her, she would carefully sit in the chair as they made their way to the middle of the wire, stop, and the young woman would put her feet on the bottom rung of the chair, as she slowly made her way up to stand on the seat of the chair. She would then stand on that chair, which tilted back and forth, bringing screams from the audience then make her way back down which required extremely delicate movements.

And there was no net or safety harnesses.

People's hearts would literally stop as this process took place. Mine certainly did since I was born with a fear of heights. I still get nervous standing on a street curb. That young woman was Carla Wallenda, Karl's Daughter who was 15 at the



time I met her. I was 17 and had been hired as a clown and received national publicity since I was the youngest clown of all. Indeed, I was the original Kokomo the Clown.

This was the Cole Brothers' Circus at the Chicago Stadium. I had a clown bit I did right after the Wallendas presentation. I had become acquainted with Carla and we visited both before and after their act. She was so charming, friendly and totally relaxed. Not me, I was a nervous wreck before doing my clown act which presented no danger to me except possibly to my ego. I could not believe how brave she was. How could she be calm when she will be going up there?

We saw each other often after that engagement as we appeared on circuses throughout the U.S. including Hawaii. So we literally grew up together. Meanwhile I was upped to be the Ringmaster, with the red tails, top hat and put the show through its paces.

She was so much fun to be around since she had an explosive sense of humor. While in Hawaii, a Tidal Wave was scheduled to hit the island, so four of us jumped in a car and headed up the nearest mountain. We were settled in when a big fire broke out and we had to accelerate back down that mountain. Carla said, "Hawaii is a strange place. The ocean chases you up the mountain and the mountain chases you back down to the ocean."

Nik Wallenda was her nephew and gained fame by traversing Niagara Falls and The Grand Canyon. She was asked by a

reporter if she was related to Nik Wallenda. "No." she said, "he's related to me—I was here first."

Most are familiar with the tragedy in Detroit. The 7 high pyramid collapsed throwing the troupe to the ground. Two of the family were killed and her brother Mario was paralyzed for life. What was left of the troupe incredibly showed up the next day to perform. Yes, a tradition of show business – The Show Must Go On. And that was demonstrated under the most extraordinary of conditions.

This troupe will go down not only in circus history, but history in general. They accomplished on the high wire what no other troupe could do. One time a troupe member fell and seemed to fall so gently that a reporter said it looked like she was flying. Hence the new billing, The Flying Wallendas. Even though that would describe a trapeze act, not a wire walking act, it stuck.

Once after a show, there were gatherings outside the trailers with refreshments for all to enjoy along with passing along the latest news about the circus world. Karl and I were sitting together. In the distance we could see the shadow of his high wire in place at the field where we performed. He looked, then said to me, "You know, Ven I am up on dot vire, I feel like young man again. But now dat I am here, I feel like old man again. Dot is wvy I love dat vire."

The most fascinating man I ever knew, Karl Wallenda, fell to his death in 1978 while walking 100 feet high between the towers of a hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Karl was never expected to fall to his death from the wire. For me, I thought it would be him slipping on a banana peel.

Carla died this past Saturday, March 6th in Sarasota at the age of 85. She made her high wire debut when she was six weeks old. Karl rode the bicycle on the high wire and her mother, Helen, sat on his shoulders, holding the infant and

introducing her to the public. As a toddler, Carla appeared in a 1939 newsreel showing her being taught to walk the wire by her parents.

It was a highlight of my life to know that family. They were incredible.

ANALYZING TODAY'S NEWS FOR TOMORROW'S HISTORY

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