Designing an Elephant Blanket

Grade Levels 4-6

This classroom activity is based on The “Big Top” Show Goes On: An Oral History of Occupations Inside and Outside the Canvas Circus Tent. It is provided courtesy of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program (OOHRP) at the Oklahoma State University Library.

Formally established in 2007, the OOHRP has collected and preserved firsthand accounts from individuals who have witnessed historic moments. The program explores the lives and contributions of Oklahomans from all walks of life.

The “Big Top” Show Goes On is one of many projects undertaken by the OOHRP. This oral history project aims to preserve the voices and experiences of those involved with the work culture associated with Hugo, Oklahoma’s tent circus tradition. Many circuses have called Hugo home through the years, but only three currently remain. As the number of traditional tent circuses dwindles, their continued existence in Oklahoma is a testament to the dedication this circus community has for providing a magical experience to be shared by people of all ages. Made possible by a 2011 Archie Green Fellowship from the American Folklife Center, oral history transcripts, recordings, and images from this project are available not only at the OSU Library in Stillwater but also the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

The OOHRP invites you to explore the website (www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/circus) and learn more about Hugo, Oklahoma’s connection to the circus.
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Background

Have you ever thought about how designing costumes for animals is probably much more difficult than designing costumes for people? For one, animals don’t always hold still! After you read the following oral history interview excerpt from Barbara Byrd, a third generation circus owner, think about designing costumes to be used in the circus.

Barbara Byrd: We [used to] come up with a new theme [every year]. And at that time, we probably had maybe sixty or seventy people performers in the circus, plus the animals you have to costume, also. So it was quite a task. It was a full-time job. We would be in our basement eight, nine, ten, twelve hours a day, making the costumes. We went from the design to purchasing the materials to cutting out. It went all the way through the process in our basement. And sometimes it’s harder to fit the animals than it is the people. It’s harder to get them to stand still. But at that time, we were carrying with us eighteen or twenty elephants, so we made each elephant a blanket. And they were very detailed. We had a Mexican theme, a South American theme. We had a Knights of the Round Table, we had a Roaring ’20s, we had an Under the Sea. I mean, every year we would have a different theme. So it was quite a time consuming and very expensive thing that we did.

And then, of course, on the road there were always repairs and making of things that got destroyed. [An] elephant might eat the corner off of one of the blankets or something, or it would get blown off and caught onto a tent stake and get torn. There were always repairs to be made. So it was a very all-encompassing task, making the costumes, but that’s the icing on the cake. If they went in there in their street clothes, it wouldn’t be very pretty. So I think it’s a very important part of the circus. And we carry the tradition on today. We are constantly making new costumes. We don’t have quite as many performers as we used to.

Activity

As part of this activity, you will design a costume for the largest animal—the elephant. An elephant blanket might sound easy, but you have to think about things like how will it stay on? Also, it should look good on each side and from the top. Sometimes elephants rear up on their back legs, and when they walk they are too large for one to see the entire thing. Create a design you think will be appealing from all angles in the space given.
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