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HEADLINE: 2 elephants are scratched from billing: A circus sends its big stars to Arizona for behavior training after they get loose Yucca Valley.

BYLINE: Jeremy Berzon; The Press-Enterprise

BODY:

YUCAIPA

Teddie Smith took her two children and four neighborhood kids Friday to watch the elephants raise the Big Top.

The only trouble was the elephants had been shipped to Arizona for a stint in charm school — this after they escaped Thursday evening in Yucca Valley and caused a bit of a stir.

"Oh boy," Smith said, the surprise and exasperation in her voice. "The kids will be disappointed because they've never seen an elephant set up a tent, except for in 'Dumbo.'"

Officials of the Culpepper & Merriweather Circus said that the two African elephants, Barbara and Connie, have been sent to the traveling circus' Queen Creek, Ariz., headquarters for a while to work with their trainer.

Circus owner Red Johnson said the elephants had hooked up with their current trainer only recently, and their unfamiliarity with him could have contributed to Thursday's incident.

About 8:30 p.m. Thursday, as the circus was closing up in Yucca Valley, Connie, a 14-year-old, escaped onto local streets, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department officials said.

Residents flooded the sheriff's office with emergency calls. The elephant wandered three blocks until it was caught, authorities said.

While circus workers were looking for Connie, the other elephant, Barbara, 16, got out of her trailer, officials said. Witnesses reported that Susan Annette Vonderheid, 29, a circus
employee trying to get the elephant back under control, was "trampled," authorities said.

Vonderheid was treated at Hi-Desert Regional Medical Center for hip and thigh pain and was released, sheriff's officials said.

Johnson, the circus owner, downplayed Thursday's incident, saying that Connie "just got spooked a little bit and came right back." Johnson said Vonderheid fell near the elephant and suffered minor bruises.

The 16-year-old circus travels from city to city in the West and Midwest from March to October. It is sponsored in each locale by a local organization that receives some of the ticket sales for community projects. Proceeds from the shows in Yucaipa will help pay for such things as pager services for San Bernardino County sheriff's reserve deputies at the Yucaipa station.

The Big Top at the circus is usually raised with the help of elephants.

"It's been that way for 100 years," circus tent boss Gypsy Cory said. On Friday, circus workers raised the big tent instead.

About two dozen residents wandered onto the circus grounds Friday morning, expecting to see the elephants raising the tents and a special show afterward in which the trainer talks to spectators about the elephants.

The circus, scheduled to be performed twice Friday and twice today, usually includes elephant tricks and elephant rides, officials said.

"We came to see the elephants," said Kevin Wooster of Yucaipa, who showed up Friday morning with his wife and daughter. "The circus is not really that much without the elephants."

Joanne Wilkinson of Yucaipa said her 2-year-old daughter, Jayde, was "bummed out" because the animals were not there.

"All she wants to see are the elephants," Wilkinson said.

Ten-year-old Valerie Bickel said she would still enjoy the circus without Barbara and Connie. "I was planning on riding them," she said. "There will be other things. The show must go on."

Circus officials said that even without some of their star attractions, there are still performing dogs, fire eaters, clowns and other performers, as well as a petting zoo with animals ranging from ponies to a pot-bellied pig. Tickets at the
door are $8 for adults and $6 for children. Officials said the absence of the elephants will not affect admission prices.

Circuses that travel from town to town have been controversial recently in the Inland area. Animal-rights groups have contended the animals often are not well cared for. Corona banned circuses in January, and the Temecula City Council is expected to consider a ban on circuses soon.

While the Culpepper & Merriweather Circus has seen protesters in other Inland area cities in the past, there were none in Yucaipa as of Friday evening, authorities and circus officials said. Bernie DeYoung, captain of the Sheriff’s Department’s Yucaipa station, said he was not aware of any protests during past circus performances in Yucaipa.

Culpepper & Merriweather officials say they treat their animals well. DeYoung said he agreed.

"From what I’ve seen, the animals all appear to be well-fed and well cared for," DeYoung said.

GRAPHIC: Peter Phun; The Press-Enterprise; 1. Pat Mansker, left, and Valerie Bickel watch some of the animals Friday at the Culpepper & Merriweather Circus in Yucaipa. 2. Curt and Kim Wilkinson of Yucaipa brought their son Reed, 5, to watch as crew members from Culpepper & Merriweather Circus stake the ground in preparation to put up the Big Top tent. 3. Crew members from Culpepper & Merriweather Circus stake the ground in preparation for raising the Big Top tent — without the help of elephants.; PHOTOS

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