

# Culpepper & Merriweather Circus

P.O. Box 813, Hugo, OK 74743

**Culpepper & Merriweather Circus, operated by Eugene “Trey” Key III and Key Equipment Company Inc., has failed to meet minimum federal standards for the care of animals used in exhibition as established in the federal Animal Welfare Act (AWA). The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to provide animals with shelter from the elements, enough space to make normal postural adjustments, and proper veterinary care, nutrition, and handling. The USDA confiscated an underweight and apparently inbred tiger cub from Culpepper & Merriweather, and the circus’s license was suspended for six months by an administrative law judge. Contact PETA for documentation.**

**May 27, 2021:** Culpepper & Merriweather obtained Wendel, a 4-month-old lion cub, from roadside zoo operator Jason Clay in Texas. The lion previously used by the circus, Francis, reportedly died in October 2020.

**October 2017:** Trey Key paid Joseph “Joe Exotic” Maldonado-Passage—subject of the Netflix documentary series *Tiger King*—\$5,000 to house lion Francis and tigers Solomon and Delilah at the Greater Wynnewood Exotic Animal Park (aka “G.W. Zoo”). A worker at the facility testified in a federal criminal trial that Maldonado-Passage used a shotgun to kill five healthy tigers in order to make room for Key’s big cats. Maldonado-Passage is serving a 21-year sentence in federal prison for these and other crimes, including

trafficking in endangered animals and two counts of murder-for-hire.

**September 25, 2017:** While exhibiting at Culpepper & Merriweather Circus shows in Weatherford, Oklahoma, dog exhibitor Natalie Cainan was cited by the USDA for failing to have evidence in the program of veterinary care that the attending veterinarian had made a regularly scheduled visit to the premises within a calendar year. The report noted that a lack of regularly scheduled visits may result in inadequate veterinary care for the five dogs.

**July 24, 2016:** During a USDA inspection of Culpepper & Merriweather in Hugo, Minnesota, a USDA employee walked by an enclosure housing dogs, who managed to knock open the door to the enclosure and bite the official.

**May 11, 2015:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for not having a current written program of veterinary care available for review at the time of the inspection.

**December 20, 2011:** The USDA ordered a suspension of Culpepper & Merriweather’s AWA license for six months and ordered the circus to cease and desist from further violations of the AWA. The decision stemmed from a complaint filed by the USDA on July 16, 2009, alleging that Culpepper & Merriweather, along with affiliated animal exhibitors, willfully violated the AWA on multiple occasions between 2005 and 2008, including in relation to the handling of three tiger cubs. According to the order, before the 2008 circus season, Trey Key boarded sibling tigers Solomon and Delilah and a lion named Francis at a facility in Kaufman, Texas, owned by another animal exhibitor, Doug Terranova. Terranova apparently failed to separate the tigers, and in May 2008, while on tour, Delilah gave birth to three cubs, presumably fathered by her brother. The inbred cubs

were taken from their mother, and within days, two of them died. In August 2008, the lone survivor, named Tubbs, was confiscated by the USDA after he was found in the cab of Terranova's truck at the Iowa State Fair. Tubbs was underweight and had skin abrasions from an ill-fitting harness and a wound near his eye. (See the August 14, 2008, and August 15, 2008, entries below.) According to the order, Culpepper & Merriweather "demonstrated a shockingly cavalier attitude regarding the health and safety of animals that they owned."

**March 21, 2011:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to have facilities constructed and maintained in such a manner as to contain and protect the animals from injury. One lion and two tigers were kept in an arena from which it would be possible for them to escape while waiting to perform or while being exercised.

**August 15, 2008:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for repeat violations for failing to provide the 3-month-old tiger cub identified during the previous day's inspection with adequate veterinary care or an appropriate diet. Although the cub had been examined by a veterinarian, the inspector wrote that the veterinarian "was not qualified to evaluate the animal due to lack of knowledge, experience, and training in the specialized medical, nutritional, and husbandry needs of big cats." The veterinarian had never practiced big-cat medicine and told an USDA official that she was not familiar with hand-rearing big cats and was unaware of their nutritional needs. Culpepper & Merriweather was also cited for giving false information to USDA officials by continually denying the presence of the tiger cub on the premises.

**August 14, 2008:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to provide a 3-month-old tiger cub, who was "thin with readily visible boney structures

including his backbone and hips" and had "an unthrifty hair coat," with veterinary care; improperly handling the tiger cub, who was being housed in a dog crate in the bunk of a tractor trailer without air conditioning in temperatures of 89 degrees and higher; housing the tiger cub in a plastic dog crate that measured approximately 30 inches high, 20 inches wide, and 37 inches deep and didn't provide sufficient space to allow the animal adequate freedom of movement; and failing to provide the cub with an appropriate diet, which, the inspector wrote, "if continued will result in malnutrition, nutritional deficiencies, and/or medical problems."

**June 5, 2008:** Two elephants preparing to perform with Culpepper & Merriweather Circus in WaKeeney, Kansas, got spooked when strong winds came through the area and tornado sirens sounded. The animals escaped and ran through town, causing minor property damage and frightening residents. One woman claimed that she had been chased into her garage. The elephants were pursued by police, sheriff's officers, firefighters, and circus workers. One elephant was tranquilized three times by authorities in an effort to slow the animal down. The elephants were on the loose for approximately three hours before they were recaptured and loaded onto trucks.

**June 28, 2005:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to have a complete diet plan for the big cats.

**February 14, 2005:** A USDA report of an investigation claimed that Culpepper & Merriweather exhibited animals from an invalid site between March 22 and October 26, 2004, for a total of 219 performances.

**January 6, 2005:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for a repeat violation for failing to provide animals with adequate shelter from inclement weather.

The enclosure housing eight goats had a dirt floor that was wet and muddy at the time of inspection due to rain on previous days. The inspector noted that this was the second inspection conducted at the new location and that the facility was still in violation of the AWA.

**September 1, 2004:** *The Hawk Eye* (a Burlington, Iowa-based publication) reported that two African elephants owned by Culpepper & Merriweather Circus—Barbara and Connie—had died in early 2004. According to the *African Elephant Studbook*, 22-year-old Barbara and 18-year-old Connie reportedly died from viral encephalomyocarditis.

**June 4, 2004:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to provide animals with adequate shelter from the sun, failing to have a completed perimeter fence, and failing to provide three tigers with adequate shelter from inclement weather. One tiger was housed in a transport cage, and the other two were in an enclosure with no sidewalls to protect them from the rain and a mud floor with no dry space. The circus was also cited for a tiger transport trailer that was structurally unsound and needed additional ventilation.

**April 16, 2002:** According to *The Arizona Daily Star*, Culpepper & Merriweather was fined \$6,400 for an April 2000 incident in which two elephants and several farmed animals escaped while the circus was touring in California.

**March 14, 2002:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to maintain the structural strength of a transport trailer housing goats, horses, and a llama. The panels of the inside walls were pulling away from the side of the trailer, and a panel toward the back of the trailer had rotted along the bottom.

**October 31, 2001:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to provide an elephant who had a split toenail and a large buildup on her foot pad with adequate veterinary care; failing to maintain the structural strength of the perimeter fencing around the elephants, which was sagging and had a gap that was big enough for a human or another animal to get inside the fence; failing to have a perimeter fence of sufficient height around the elephants; and failing to maintain the structural strength of the elephant transport trailer, which had a broken metal panel protruding into the front of the trailer and a small hole in the top.

**May 13, 2000:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for a repeat violation for failing to have a completed written program of veterinary care and a sufficient number of qualified elephant handlers present at all times. The inspector wrote that the elephants must be taken off exhibit and away from any potential public contact until the licensee could demonstrate that the facility had at least two qualified elephant handlers.

**May 10, 2000:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for repeat violations for failing to have a complete written program of veterinary care, failing to submit the required itinerary to USDA Animal Care, and failing to provide goats, llamas, and a pig with adequate space in a transport trailer. The animals rode in the front compartment of a horse trailer, and the inspector noted that transporting a pot-bellied pig in the same compartment as a full-grown llama could lead to injury. The USDA also cited Culpepper & Merriweather for a repeat violation for failing to have a sufficient number of qualified elephant handlers present at all times. The inspector noted that the elephants must be taken off exhibit and away from any potential public contact until the licensee could demonstrate

that the facility had at least two qualified elephant handlers.

**May 8, 2000:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriwether for repeat violations for failing to have a sufficient number of qualified elephant handlers present at all times, failing to provide a tethered camel with adequate space, failing to have a complete written program of veterinary care, and failing to submit the required itinerary to USDA Animal Care. The circus was also cited for restraining an elephant named Connie with chains of insufficient length, resulting in her inability to place her feet in a natural position, and failing to have an adequate number of sufficiently trained employees. Due to the lack of trained employees, the farmed animals and camel were not provided with water until approximately two hours after unloading and were allowed to roam freely for several minutes until the set-up process was complete, the elephants were able to tear down the canopy partly while no employees were present, and a scrape over Connie's left eye went unnoticed until pointed out by the inspector. At one point during the inspection, it was noted that no employees were present within view of the tethered elephants, who were within 20 feet of a public road on a lot that was not securely fenced. A barrier fence was present, but an adult could easily step over it or a small child could go through it. Additionally, according to the inspection report, the farmed animals escaped unnoticed several weeks prior while the circus was in Fillmore, California, and two llamas ended up on a busy highway.

**April 28, 2000:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriwether for repeat violations for failing to have a complete written program of veterinary care and failing to contain a goat who was observed climbing out of an enclosure. The circus was also cited for mishandling elephants after the April 20,

2000, escape of two elephants. The inspector wrote, "[The i]ncident appears to have resulted from a lack of sufficient, qualified elephant handlers." The USDA also cited the circus for failing to have an attendant present during periods of public contact with animals, failing to provide a tethered camel with adequate space and exercise, failing to submit the required itinerary to USDA Animal Care, and failing to provide goats, llamas, and a pig with adequate space in a transport trailer. The animals rode in the front compartment of a horse trailer, and the inspector noted that transporting a pot-bellied pig in the same compartment as a full-grown llama could lead to injury.

**April 20, 2000:** Two elephants escaped while Culpepper & Merriwether was in Yucca Valley, California. An elephant named Connie wandered through the city before being recaptured, while another, named Barbara, reportedly "trampled" a circus worker, who had to be treated for hip and thigh pain.

**April 20, 1999:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriwether for failing to have a complete program of veterinary care and failing to have an enclosure that would properly contain a goat. The goat was able to escape and was found loose during the inspection. The inspection report also noted that the camels were lying on the ground, extending their heads and necks out from the enclosure in an effort to graze. The bottom rail was bent and detached from the vertical bars, and the camels were lifting the entire enclosure up while grazing. The vertical bars had sharp ends extending into the gap, presenting a possible hazard to the camels' necks and heads.

**December 22, 1998:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriwether for failing to store hay in a way to protect it from deterioration or contamination. The inspection report also

noted that both elephants still had a moderate buildup of necrotic skin tissue and that during a foot cleaning, an elephant named Barbara was found to have a flat-headed screw-type object in her foot that was approximately 5/8 of an inch long. The object was removed from her foot, and the inspector noted that the licensee may need to make closer observations of the elephants' feet during daily care in the future.

**August 13, 1998:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to maintain a transport trailer in good repair. The floor of the trailer had areas of excessive wear. The inspection report also noted that an elephant named Barbara had accumulations of dead skin on her forehead and above both of her eyes.

**July 14, 1998:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to have a current program of veterinary care, which hadn't been updated in more than a year; failing to have inventory records for a pig; and failing to provide two elephants with adequate veterinary care. Both elephants had necrotic skin present on their heads and faces.

**March 28, 1998:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to have adequate barriers to protect both the animals and the public. The circus had been using a cloth banner to separate an animal display from the public, and at the time of the inspection, recent strong winds had blown down that barrier. The circus was also cited for failing to provide elephants with adequate veterinary care. One elephant, named Connie, was in need of routine foot care, and inspectors noted that the soles of all four of her feet were uneven and pitted. Both elephants had necrotic skin present on their faces and heads. The USDA also cited the circus for failing to update the written program of veterinary care—even though an inspector had

reminded the licensee in November 1997 to have it updated by February 1998—and failing to have inventory records for a pig.

**November 13, 1997:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to maintain adequate records for a pot-bellied pig, failing to provide a goat who had excessively overgrown hooves in need of trimming with veterinary care, and failing to provide two elephants with adequate veterinary care. Both elephants had a slight to moderate buildup of necrotic skin tissue on their faces and the tops of their heads, and one of them also had it on parts of the ears.

**January 14, 1997:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to provide goats with adequate shelter and space. At the time of the inspection, there was a downpour and the shelter in the goat enclosure was only housing three of the eight goats. The report noted that the shelter could not hold the eight goats and give each animal room to make normal postural adjustments or adequate freedom of movement.

**June 10, 1996:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to have a complete program of veterinary care that included information regarding parasite control and euthanasia methods.

**March 27, 1996:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to have adequate disposition records for a zebra, failing to have adequate acquisition records for a pot-bellied pig, failing to provide a goat who was in need of a hoof trim with proper veterinary care, failing to update the program of veterinary care, and failing to repair a damaged wall in the elephant transport enclosure.

**December 5, 1995:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to have

an updated program of veterinary care, failing to provide a goat in need of hoof trimming with veterinary care, failing to have a written exercise program for a dog named Rocket, failing to have proper identification for Rocket, and failing to maintain adequate records of animals, including a young zebra who had died. The inspector also noted that an elephant was in need of foot trimming and that another had an open, draining cyst on her trunk.

**December 29, 1994:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to have adequate drainage in the corral area in front of the elephant barn. The area was noted to be very muddy in parts and covered in standing water. The circus was also cited for failing to maintain the elephant barn in proper repair. It had a large hole in the door.

**July 7, 1994:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to provide a camel, who had an enlarged right front foot, with veterinary care. There were no medical records to indicate that a veterinarian had examined the camel or had given approval for the animal to be used in the show, which had performances twice a day with the camel walking around the ring.

**January 14, 1994:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to maintain adequate animal acquisition records and failing to offer adequate shelter to animals, including a camel who had no adequate protection from the wind and rain and a llama, a pig, and five goats housed together with only one small shelter that was not suitable for all of them. The inspection report also noted that there was a shed on the property that could be used to house animals in emergencies, including sudden wind or heavy rains, but it was being used for equipment storage and was not suitable to house the animals. Culpepper & Merriweather was also cited for failing to have an attending veterinarian

sign an approved program of veterinary care at least annually. It had been over three years since the program had been approved.

**September 11, 1993:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to keep and maintain adequate records for the animals, failing to maintain the fence around the petting zoo in good repair (it had holes in it large enough for animals to stick their heads through), and failing to maintain an elephant transport enclosure in good repair. It had holes in the wood on both sides.

**December 1, 1992:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to provide an elephant with adequate shelter.

**September 8, 1992:** The USDA issued Culpepper & Merriweather repeat citations for failing to provide an elephant with adequate shelter and failing to have adequate enclosure fencing, including an 8-foot primary enclosure fence for the elephant and a 6-foot primary enclosure fence for the camel.

**June 15, 1991:** The USDA cited Culpepper & Merriweather for failing to provide an elephant with shelter at its winter quarters.