

Oral History Interview
with
Mary Rawls

Interview Conducted by
Juliana Nykolaiszyn and Tanya Finchum
June 13, 2011

The “Big Top” Show Goes On:
An Oral History of Occupations Inside and Outside the Canvas Circus Tent

Oklahoma Oral History Research Program
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An Oral History of Occupations Inside and Outside the Canvas Circus Tent

Interview History

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The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Project Detail

The “Big Top” Show Goes On: An Oral History of Occupations Inside and Outside the Canvas Circus Tent aims to preserve the voices and experiences of those involved with the work culture associated with Hugo, Oklahoma’s tent circus tradition.

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Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Mary Rawls is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on June 13, 2011.

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About Mary Rawls...

Mary Frazier Rawls was born in San Francisco, California in 1927. For a time her father, using the stage name of Jack Williams, was known as “The Human Fly” and would climb tall buildings for pay. He would also paint store and restaurant windows to support the family. As the Depression hit, he began moving around more and continued to paint signs but also began the transition to performing various acts in different venues. At the age of six, Mary recalls her father teaching her the carrying perch act. He also taught her mother how to juggle, and her two younger brothers would do a boxing match to add to the family’s act. As they moved from town to town the family would perform on the streets to help support themselves.

Mary was around the age of fifteen when the family joined their first show. Mary performed a high wire act for much of her circus career and transitioned to concessions after retiring from the wire. She married Harry Rawls, also in the show business, around 1947, and they worked for several circuses through the years including Cole and Walters, Carson and Barnes, King Brothers, and Kelly Miller.

The Rawls and their eight children traveled the country with various circuses but made their home in Hugo, Oklahoma.

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Mary Rawls

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Juliana Nykolaiszyn
& Tanya Finchum
June 13, 2011
Hugo, Oklahoma



Nykolaiszyn *My name is Juliana Nykolaiszyn and with me is Tanya Finchum. We’re with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at the OSU Library. Today is Monday, June 13, 2011, and we’re in Hugo, Oklahoma, interviewing Mary Rawls. How are you doing today?*

Rawls I’m doing fine, and you break the monotony for me. (Laughter)

Nykolaiszyn *Well, we’d like to begin by learning a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up.*

Rawls I was born in San Francisco, California, at St. Mary’s Hospital. The day that I was born, my mother said that there was something like thirty babies born the same day and right after that, the fleet left town. That’s what she told me. (Laughter)

Nykolaiszyn *And what year was that?*

Rawls 1927.

Nykolaiszyn *Okay. That’s probably the only date I’ll ask you today. I’m just kidding. (Laughter)*

Rawls I’ll do the best I can with the dates. November 11, 1927.

Nykolaiszyn *Well, tell me a little bit about your mom and your dad.*

Rawls Well, my mother was a juggler. She wasn’t a juggler when Dad married her. She was a very shy telephone operator that he met when he was trying to make a telephone call. She had one of those switchboard operator things. He met her, and of course, I guess he was a flirt or something, because they got to talking, and then they started dating, and

pretty soon she was married, and she had me. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *And what city did he meet her in?*

Rawls I can't recall the city, but it was in California.

Finchum *And what did your father do?*

Rawls He was a jack-of-all-trades, really, because if you remember, two years or so after I was born, 1929 was a really bad year. Nobody had any work. He was a sign painter. He could do almost anything with his hands. He moved to Texas, and he had a little sign shop there. Then when the Depression came on and the banks went south, he lost everything, because he had a mortgage on his shop and everything, and they just hit the road. My mother told me that when we were crossing the line from California heading east, the dust was so bad that she had to keep wetting handkerchiefs and put them over my face so that I could breathe. I guess I was about two years old when he finally had his sign shop, and he was doing real well until the crash came. Then it was a case of just moving around and doing sign jobs, and he just painted. He used to paint a whole sign, a café sign, "Dinner served here," etc., on the front window of a restaurant, and he would do that for a quarter, because that's all he could get out of it.

Well, pretty soon, along came Corky, my brother, and then along came Johnny, and we were still at it, going down the road sign painting or whatever could be done. Pretty soon, he started training us to do acts. I know when I was six years old he taught me how to do what they call a carrying perch. He has a belt that he wears and then there's a pole that goes up about twenty feet. I was taught to climb that and perform tricks on it, hand tricks, and one-hand flanges and stuff like that. Well, when we did that, the boys were still little, and so he hadn't trained them to do anything. He did teach my mother to juggle, and she had an awful time with that. There were a few theaters still that had vaudeville, down in the South, and they were just little humpy dumpy theaters. You didn't get much money, but you did get a salary. So he was teaching her to juggle. Well, she didn't have any trouble. She finally learned to juggle and was a good juggler, but she hated wearing those short costumes, "I'm not going out there!" I mean, the costumes come down to here in those days. She said, "I'm not going out there like that. I can't go out there like that!" but she did. (Laughs)

When the vaudeville business just died out, which didn't take long, we started busking. My dad would drive into a town, in our house. It was a homemade, home-built, house car, and he'd go see the mayor and get permission to do a little show on the street. He would pick out a place

where there was room enough to do it, and we would do a show. I mean, he'd do his chair balancing act, Momma would do her juggling act, and I would do the climbing up on the perch pole. Well, the only thing the boys could do was a boxing act, so they did a boxing act. Corky was the oldest. Johnny was not really that big, then. He would have been three, four years old and so, he would take on a comer from town. Well, Corky was pretty good at defending himself, but some of those town kids were pretty tough. (Laughs) I mean, he'd get a few bops on the nose. (Laughs)

I think the most memorable thing that I can recall from the busking days, we did a performance and we'd pass the hat. You'd do a trick, and you'd pass the hat. After the show was over and we were folding up our stuff, there was an old man that came up to my dad. My dad and I were just like this. (Gestures crossing fingers to indicate tight) He called my dad aside and he said, "I wanted to tell you mister, how much we appreciated you coming here and putting on this show. My kids haven't been able to go to a movie. We haven't had any money. We're broke as we can be, but it was just so nice to have a show the kids could see and enjoy. I wanted you to know how much we appreciated it." He said, "I didn't have any money to put in your hat, but I wanted you to know we appreciated it." That has stayed with me all my life. It has just made me feel like we were doing something worthwhile.

We didn't go do circuses for a long time. Finally, I guess by this time, I was about fifteen. My dad was still painting signs all the way, and there came a few times when he couldn't get a sign job, and he was making plans to break into a grocery store to get food. Before he did that he got a job, a window job, for fifty cents. Of course, for fifty cents you could buy a quart of milk, you could buy a pound of bologna, and you could buy a loaf of bread, and have money left over. So that took us for a long time.

Then we joined this show out in Kansas, and I cannot recall the title of it. The man that owned it was a cowboy, a trick rider, and it was a great little show to be with, very family oriented. It had a sideshow, and I don't know if you've seen the movie *Water for Elephants* or read the book. It comes on pretty strong on the worst parts of circus, but in the little shows in those days and age, they'd maybe have what they call a Three Card Monte game in the sideshow. The sideshow, they'd have it and then this guy would play this Three Card Monte, which is a gambling game and usually crooked. Then some shows would have what they call—I can't think of what they call it—but they'd run everybody out, all the women and children, and then they would have a coochie coochie dancer, and just the guys could come in and see that. That cost them an extra dime. So that's the way it was then, but on this show, we were out there, it was all very family oriented.

There's a caste system on a circus. You've got the performers and they all stay in the back yard. They have their trailers or their house cars or so forth. Then you have got the midway people that run the concessions, the cotton candy stand, the novelty stand and so forth. Then you have the working men and if you have a sideshow, you have got the sideshow people. These are groups that don't really mingle all that much. I mean, the back yard people stay to the back yard. The midway people stay in the midway, and the sideshow people stay to themselves. Not in a mean way. That's just that that's what you do. And like, you take the Three Card Monte, or have you ever seen a movie where they have the little shells? Well, they have that kind of stuff, too, and that goes on. I started to read that book, *Water for Elephants*, and I got through the first couple of chapters and I thought, "They're just picking the worst parts of it. They're not telling the true story at all. That's not the way it is." So I just didn't finish the rest of the book. I've heard that they've made a movie out of it since, and I haven't seen that one either.

I guess everybody's seen *The Greatest Show on Earth* on TV? (Laughs) Well, whenever they make a circus movie, they just can't get it right, and they don't tell the true story about it at all. It's so much more wonderful than what they've put it, but they've got to glamorize it. There's one scene in there where this girl is doing her act in the show and the boss canvasman, for Pete's sake, walks into the center ring and pulls her off the rig and says she can't do it. That's unheard of! He would have been fired and kicked off the lot! (Laughs) You just don't do things like that! So that kind of puts the kibosh on the reality of any movie about circuses, because naturally, they pick out the worst parts to show. And they don't show the family atmosphere in the back and how we all stick together and help each other. I mean, the whole back yard is one family, and it's the same with the sideshow and so forth, but pretty soon, sideshows kind of died and they became animal exhibits.

When Carson and Barnes opened over here this spring in Paris, they had a tremendous crowd. I mean, the tent was so full that they had people sitting on the ground, and it was a good show. They put on a real good show, but the prices of things have gone up so much. I mean, I used to run a novelty stand when I got a little bit too far gone to do the aerial stuff and so on, and I ran a novelty stand. Well, I was shocked. I had not wanted to go out and visit circus now because it's the life that I had, the life that I enjoyed, but it has changed so much, so much. When I found out you had to pay three dollars and fifty cents for a hot dog, and those plastic swords that they sell, twelve dollars for one of those, I said, "That is for the birds!" (Laughs) I'm just talking and talking and talking. Anybody want to ask a question? (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn

Sure. Going back to Kansas, when your family joined the circus, how long were you there?

Rawls

We were there for just one season and then we came to Hugo in the mid '40s, early '40s, and we joined the Cole and Walters. Herb Walters and his family lived here, and they used to have a house out here. We were with him for two or three years. In fact, we almost got fired the first day we showed up. My brother Johnny had been in the service. He was a Green Beret, and we had a homemade trampoline and it didn't work very well. (Laughs) The first show we did on Herb's show, the trampoline broke down, and Johnny had to get out there and get a sledgehammer and knock the thing back together, then go on with the act, and we almost got fired. We really almost got fired! Herb came across the lot headed towards Harry's [Mary's husband] trailer and Harry said, "Uh oh, here it comes. I know it's coming!" So Harry ran out right away and met with the boss and talked him out of firing us. He said, "Give us a week. Just give us a week." I had just had a baby, and I tried to do my swinging ladder, and it was a skinny ladder. I tried to go through to come out on the other side and do my thing, and I couldn't get through! I had to back up and go around. I was still too big in the belly. (Laughs)

So I can see how Herb felt when he came down. He said, "Good lord. They're going to kill my show." (Laughs) But he finally talked Herb out of it, and so we made the season with them. We made two or three seasons with Herb. They were nice folks, too. His wife is kind of uppity at times, but she was a good soul, too. We were there for a long time, and we spent time on the Carson and Barnes Circus. We were with the King [Brothers] Show. We were with Kelly Miller for years, over here, across the street. That was David's show [Mary's son]. We were down in Florida—at the time, David was taking out his show—well, David had it up one year, and he and his first wife really struggled and worked hard just to get that show going, but he made a success of it. He was twenty years on the road with Kelly Miller and never had a losing season. He made money each season, and a good, clean, honest show.

David would gather everybody in the big top on opening day. We opened out here at the fairgrounds, and he would line everybody up, working men, sideshow people, everybody on the bleachers. He'd give a speech, and he said, "Now, these are the rules. I don't want to see the sight of one beer can on the midway. I don't want to see you getting rough or snarly with any of the people," and a regular thing like that. He would introduce each group of people. We had the water man, we had the man that handled the gas truck, we had the big top crew, we had the boss canvasman, and he would introduce each one for their particular field in there. He ran a good, successful show for twenty years without

losing a dime and not cheating the public, either.

Finchum *And did you say David's your son?*

Rawls Yes, he's my oldest son. That's him up there on the far left corner.
[Mary points to a picture above her sofa]

Finchum *Can we back up just a bit? How did your father learn to juggle in order to teach your mother?*

Rawls My father couldn't juggle, but he taught my mother to do it anyhow, and I can still see her. In the back of our house car, there was a big double bed where they slept, and I won't stand up, but she was standing in front of the bed, and she'd start tossing these balls. She'd say, "I can't do this! I can't do this!" He'd say, "Yes, you can. Just do it this way. Do it this way." He'd seen so many jugglers. They'd juggle the balls, and they'd juggle the hoops, and they'd juggle the—oh, what do you call them? They look like the ten pins at a bowling alley. I can't think of them. Just clubs is what I'll call them. So she finally got to where she was a pretty good juggler. She would line up a bunch of cigar boxes that had been painted and sequined. She would stack them up about twelve high, and then turn one sideways like this and push them up and knock one off, push them up and knock one off, until she got to the last one, and that was the end of her act. She was still wearing a short wardrobe. (Laughs)

That was the funniest part, because you'd have thought he asked her to step out in front of the program stark naked, but I mean, they come down to the middle of your thigh. (Laughs) She was quite well covered. After vaudeville come out, we did a lot of club dates in the winter time. The Eagle's Club would have a big dinner or something, and they'd want something to entertain the guests. Well, we got a lot of those, Eagles and Lions and so forth, and we'd give maybe a fifteen or twenty minute program on their dance floor. I can remember one time my tight wire act, they had a low ceiling, lower than this (motions to her ceiling) in this club, and so Dad had to fix me up a pair of standards with a tight wire on them that was no more than this high [about eighteen inches] from the floor, and I was walking wire. Well, I was used to walking wire up there (gestures high in the air), and I took a misstep on the thing, and I fell and threw my arm out of whack, and I was out of work for a couple of weeks! (Laughs) Finally, I told Dad, I said, "I can't work on that little bitty wire," but we finished.

My brother and I did a wire act together, my brother Johnny. Corky was a juggler. He didn't like getting up in the air any. Another thing that happened to me on Herb's show, I was doing swinging ladder and I had made the jump up, but I had just gotten through with the kids in the

trailer, and I hadn't got my costume completely fixed up, and my bra came loose at the top. I'm sitting there like this (gestures crossing arms tight), and Jimmy was the prop man and he was swinging my ladder. I said, "Jimmy. Get me a pin. Get me a pin." I said, "Swing me and get me a pin." So he swung me, and I sat there gracefully swinging back and forth while he got me a safety pin to pin my bra together so I could finish the act. (Laughs) There are all kinds of things that happen like that sometimes.

Finchum

How did you learn that particular act?

Rawls

My dad taught me. My first wire rigging was made out of two by fours. My mother tried to walk a wire with me, but my poor mom, she was terrified of heights. She was never any good on the wire. She used a pole, and I always used an umbrella. Well, we were doing a pole act, and I was supposed to be riding on her shoulders across a wire. Well, we did that a couple of times, but she was just always so nervous and so afraid. You get her two feet off the ground and she's scared to death. Well, we took a fall, and that was the end of Mom's working on it. She said, "That's it. I'm not going to do it anymore." So it became my job. I learned to walk the wire, and at first, it was in short costumes and then later on, I started out in an evening gown and made my style out and pulled up on the wire. I waltzed across the wire, and then I waltzed back again. My gowns were made so all I had to do was go zip! And they would fall off and then I was in short costumes, and I did the rest of the act in the short costume. The splits and the cakewalk and then I'd sit at a table and balance on the chair, and somebody would hand up a tray to me, and I'd take a drink of Coca-Cola or something, on the wire. We did that a lot.

In the winter time, we had dates with Jimmy Cole up in the east, and a lot of his were school days. They would get the auditorium in a school and put on a whole show. There were a lot of fine people on that, too. Half of them I can't remember their names, but they were great people to work with. We'd spend the whole winter like that, which was a little rough for us, because we were not used to that snow and ice up there in that part of the country. (Laughs) I do go on and on, how about a question?

Finchum

What did you do about schooling? Were you still in high school or school age at that time?

Rawls

I have never gone to a public school. When we were small, we had this big old house car, homemade, and we had a dinette in the front of it, just over the motor. Dad would sit us down there and he taught us school. He taught us to read and to write and to do arithmetic and geography. A lot

of times we'd go to a school and they would have discontinued or unused schoolbooks and they would let him have them for free. Dad would just teach us there at the table. We went to school right there in the house car. We just picked up a lot on the way. I feel embarrassed sometimes to say it, but I never spent a day in a schoolhouse. Whatever knowledge I have, I've gained on my own afterwards. I have always been a voracious reader.

By the time I was five years old, I started reading little books. You probably don't remember it, because you're too young, but they called them Little Big Books. They were about that thick (motions about an inch), but they were only about that big (motions about four inches by four inches). I used to get those all the time and read them. Then my reading progressed and progressed and progressed until I read everything I could get my hands on. (Laughs) I can recall a scene in my trailer and Mom was having me do the dishes. I was washing the dishes, and I got a book in one hand and I'm washing a dish like this and reading the book, and Mom says, "Would you please put that book down and get the dishes done?" (Laughs) We had bunk beds for my two brothers and myself, and I had the top bunk, because I was the oldest. I would read at night, and she'd say, "Put out that light," then I'd say, "Okay." So then I had a flashlight. I pulled the covers over my head, and I read the book underneath the covers. (Laughs) So I got in trouble for that, too.

Nykolaiszyn

Did your father continue side jobs in addition to circus work?

Rawls

No. Once we began to get a salary, he didn't have to do that anymore. Now, he did do circus painting on the shows themselves, but he didn't go traveling, because we traveled from town to town to do the paint jobs. I remember one time—what the Sam Hill show were we on? Some show down in Texas went broke, and we were trying to get our way home because we didn't get our salary. Dad was painting our way home, back to Macks Creek. We used to live at Macks Creek. We finally got to the point where we bought a home in—well, it wasn't actually in Macks Creek, Missouri. It was between two, Camdenton and Macks Creek—and this is funny. Dad bought that house from a picture he saw in the real estate office, which was in Buffalo, and when we got there it didn't look anything like the picture. I mean anything. There was no driveway, and of course, Missouri then, was a lot more of a wooded area, especially up there.

Anyway, we sat in this house car on the side of the road, and my mom was dead set against it. She had Corky on her side, and she was dead set against it. Dad and I both wanted to stay there and make something out of this dilapidated, old house, and Johnny was the key one. We finally

swung Johnny our way. When we did things like that, it was with a vote among the family. Johnny hung out and hung out and finally, we talked him into our side. Daddy got out with a shovel and built a driveway so we could pull our house car up there and start working on this house. Oh, man! What a mess that was. Whoever had built the house built the floor out of unseasoned oak wood and it was a mess. When it began to season, the wood would, at the tips, curl up, and you should try sweeping a floor like that. I mean, it was a living mess! (Laughs)

My father was great for regressing because we had a big, old wood stove, the cook stove, and Momma had always had a gasoline stove in the house car. She would kick that thing and cuss at it and everything else. She couldn't get a fire going in it. I never had any problem getting a fire going in it. So she always called me and said, "Start this stupid thing!" It's one of those kind that had the heating thing up top where if you baked a pie or something, you'd go put it up there and keep it hot and so on. She cussed that thing out so many times, I can't believe it! (Laughs)

We lived there a couple of years, and then we went out. We used to play at county fairs. County fairs then were so different than they are now. I'm so disappointed in what they have here. They would have a nice carnival, but they always had a race track. There were either horses or sulky races or one or the other, and they'd have a platform on the infield of the track and then the grandstand in front. We did a lot of fair dates that way, too. We got out west, and especially in Kansas, I'd have the devil of a time, because I had my umbrella to balance with and here comes that Kansas wind that just about blows you clear off of the thing. One time, it blew the umbrella out of my hand and it landed way up in the middle of the infield. Fortunately, I had a spare so they gave me a spare. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *You mentioned the one circus in Texas that went bankrupt, and your dad had to paint his way back. In the early days, how was pay negotiated? Was it like a family rate?*

Rawls Well, Dad handled all the money. We got paid a family rate.

Nykolaiszyn *Okay.*

Rawls It depended on what you did and what you could put in the program. If you bring in fifty dollars or a hundred dollars a week or something like that, you do. But of course, you didn't have a lot of the taxes and takeout money. The water man always filled your water tank for you, and the gasoline was always provided for you on the show. You also had a cookhouse. Everybody ate in the cookhouse. That's another thing. When

we came onto Herb's show we had all these kids, of course, and the kids were not allowed to eat in the cookhouse, too many people, too many people. We finally got that rule turned down, and I got a picture of my son Michael, the youngest one up there, and he's standing up on the benches like in the picnic yard, and he's eating mashed potatoes. You can see the mashed potatoes running all down his tummy and everything. (Laughs) I've got that picture someplace. I wish I could find it real quick.

Nykolaiszyn

Well, tell us how you met your husband.

Rawls

Well, we were on a show in Florida—this is the one that went broke—and we had traveled down there, and the show was opening and we were hired for it. We spent the season on it, but when we first got there—this is funny—they must have been having rough times, even before we got there, because Mom and I were headed for the cookhouse. They were having wieners and sauerkraut and I said, “Oh, look, Mom. They're having wieners and sauerkraut!” Momma loved wieners and sauerkraut, and the other people in the cookhouse looked at us like we were nuts because they'd been eating wieners and sauerkraut for a week, because that's all the cookhouse could afford. (Laughs) So we didn't get much of a reputation that way, and Harry [Mary's husband] was on that show. We made the season, and he took a liking to me.

Of course, by this time, I was engaged to that fellow up in Nebraska. He owned a thousand acres of land that was all his own, besides what his dad owned. I was considering the fact of marrying him. We were sort of engaged, but he was a strict 'townner.' He would never have been able to live our life, and I don't think I'd have been able to live his, either. Anyway, I met Harry and he asked me to go up to the drugstore and have a Coca-Cola with him, and from there on he got real acquainted with my folks. They liked him quite a bit. I said, “Well, okay,” but I had a picture of Gerald, this Nebraska farmer, sitting on the dresser right by the door. Well, whenever Harry would come and visit us—and he spent a lot of time visiting my folks. He was trying to oil them up, I think—but he'd turn that picture around, make it face the wall. Then I would turn it back again. There was a time Dad said, “Why don't you guys go over to...,”—we were on a lot that had an ice cream parlor on one side—“Why don't you go over and get some ice cream, and we'll all have some ice cream together?”

Well, we went over and I got the ice cream, and I was going to pay for it, and Harry—Gabe, as he was called at that time, was insisting on paying. I said, “No, you don't. I can pay my own way.” And we had a big row. I insisted on paying for my own ice cream. “I don't need anybody to buy me ice cream.” (Laughs) He got mad. He didn't talk to

me for about two days, and finally he came stomping over to the trailer—and I mean stomping. And he said, “I’m going for a coke! You want to go?” (Laughs) And then we started dating. Well, we just started being friends on the show. When we got in the winter quarters, which is in Sebring, Florida, he asked me for a date, and it was Christmastime. We went to Midnight Mass together. I’m a Catholic, and he was a Catholic, and we went from there and he took me to breakfast. We used to do a lot of walking around town.

A real sad thing happened on that show while we were in that winter quarters. Some of the advance agents and billposters were not happy with the fact that the show couldn’t pay off. Everybody was sitting there, it was an old fairground, and we were sitting there, in our trailers and so forth, and it was kind of a nice time, in a way, but the show was broke. They didn’t get their pay, and they had three rings of liberty horses. That’s when all the horses trot around the ring and do different things. Those guys poisoned the horses. It was such a sad thing. I’ve got pictures of that someplace, too, where the horses are dying and so on, and it was so sad. Of course, Harry had a buddy, Leon Snyder, that he stayed with and so, we kind of palled around together through the winter quarters and so on. I’ll never forget, now this is kind of personal. I don’t know if you’ll get a kick out of it or not, but I did. We didn’t hardly even hold hands. We were just friendly buddies. Finally, he brought me home after one walk around town that we’d done. He’d taken me to breakfast and so on. Then we got to the step by my trailer and he says, “Can I kiss you goodnight?” And I said, “Yes.” Well, he kissed me like that (gestures a quick peck) and quit. I said, “You call that a kiss?” And I dragged him around behind the trailer, and I gave him a whopper and he ran all the way home! (Laughter) He was so shy!

We finally got together. He did a whip cracking act where he cuts off the papers and part of somebody’s hand, and he asked my dad if I could work in his act, if I could hold the papers for him in the whip act. And he said, “Well, if you promise not to hit her!” (Laughs) So I worked the papers in his whip act, and then the show went broke. So we left there and we went up east. It was the high school show in the auditorium and Jimmy Cole. Jimmy Cole, he booked those. So we spent a season up there, and of course, I was writing back to Harry all the time. He was still Gabe at that time, and he was writing me all the time. We finally finished the season up there, and we went back to Macks Creek. Harry was getting ready to come, and he hopped the bus to come up to Macks Creek. He was going to join the family.

The bus only went so far so he had to get out with his suitcase in hand, and he was walking. Of course, Dad and I were supposed to meet him at the bus stop. Well, we got halfway there, and here comes Gabe walking

down the street carrying his suitcase. (Laughs) We picked him up, and he stayed with the family, and Dad put him to work on the farm—ha! Ha!—and Gabe didn't like that much. Anyhow, we finally got engaged, and we got married at a little church about thirty miles from where we were living. Dad was not happy. He was not happy about it at all. I was the only girl in the act. There was my mom, but she was my mom, and I was the girl in the act, and he was not happy about losing me. I said, "You're not going to lose me. I'll still be here." He said, "Yes, but you're going to be married." I said, "Well, didn't you get married?" (Laughs)

Anyhow, we got married in that little church and like I say, Dad was moping and grumbling all the way along the line. My brothers tried to tie some tin cans and old shoes on the back of the car. Dad came out and saw that when we got through with the service in the church, and he said, "Get that junk off of the car! Get that off of the car!" Oh, he was getting upset. But he built us a trailer. He took an old—I know you have no idea what Celotex is, but it was a siding that they used to use years ago, and it was made out of pressed sawdust, and then it had a gritty layer on the outside. Dad took the frame of a Model A and took everything off of it except the frame and the cab, and he built us a house car on that. The mean sucker, he built two single beds, one on each side. (Laughter) Harry and I lived in that throughout the summer fair season that we were going on.

Finchum *When did you get married? What year?*

Rawls Wait a minute. I'll go get my marriage license.

Finchum *No, that's okay.*

Rawls Well, we were married for sixty years, and he passed away just four years ago. Well, it's not quite four. It's almost four. We retired from the business under Harry's insistence. We had a nice little house out in Southern Estates, that's just south of town out here out in the country. We lived there for twelve or thirteen years and Harry took sick. He was sick for two years. He got cancer. Several operations and so forth that didn't help much and he passed away. There weren't too many other people there. There were a few houses out there, but there was a lady down at the end of our street that lived by herself, and her son was in another town working. Nobody saw her for a couple of days, and we couldn't figure out why. She was right there on the corner. You had to come down to get to my house. To make a long story short, she had died and all of her windows and doors were locked, which old ladies do. They lock everything when they go to bed, and she just laid there until I got to asking the people across the street from her, and they got

interested. They'd had her son's phone number, so they called him and they found her.

Well, that kind of scared Dad and I both. We decided that we'd move into town. David had this house that he had owned, and it's an old house. It has been here for like, probably from statehood, and David had this whole thing remodeled and prepared for us, and then before Dad could move in, he passed away. So I moved in by myself, which was very comforting to have my oldest son right next door to me. So I've been living here for three and a half years. David's a good boy. He takes care of his momma. He still calls me Momma. I mean, he's sixty-three years old, and he calls me Momma. (Laughter)

Nykolaiszyn

Well, would you continue to develop acts with your husband after you got married?

Rawls

Oh, yes. We still did the western act. He did his whip cracking act and his rope spinning and so forth. Then I had to hold the papers in my hands and in my mouth, and he cracked those off. I was still doing the perch act with my dad, and then of course, when I got pregnant, that kind of put an end to the perch act. I still was able to do tight wire for a little while, but I had to make my costumes different so they couldn't tell that I was pregnant. It was shortly after that that we went home to Macks Creek, and then we got the job with Herb [Walters], and I was doing the wire act. My brother, Johnny, had just gotten out of the service, and so he went on the road with us. He did the trampoline act, and his wife didn't do anything. She was a 'townner' and she couldn't seem to learn anything or care about it so he just did the trampoline act. But there was another girl on the show who was an acrobat and she worked the trampoline with my brother, Johnny, and that took care of us.

That's when we came here [to Hugo, Oklahoma]. I guess we were with Herb two or three years, and we bought a house over on North G Street. I thought it was a castle, but it really wasn't much of a house. I mean, it was a home and had running water and stuff like that. To me, it was a palace. But it had a living room and a bedroom in one corner and then another bedroom behind the living room. All the kids had to sleep in one room. We got bunk beds, two and three high, for them to sleep in there. My daughter Margie, she's the oldest girl, is now an absolute neat freak. I mean, her house is immaculate all the time, and her kids were all raised up nice and clean and neat and yet, when she was a teenager, she was a slob. (Laughter) She'd take dirty clothes and stuff them back in her drawer. (Laughs) It's funny how kids change.

Nykolaiszyn

Tell us about your kids. Did they grow up in the circus?

Rawls Oh, yes, and Margie was never any good on the trampoline. She could not master the trampoline. But she did swinging ladder and Susan did swinging ladder. Kathy did wire act, and she worked in another act on the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus when we were over there. She assisted a man that did the spinning plate act. She just was out there in a little costume and handed him his props and that was all. But she did work on the tight wire. So they've all been in the business, and David went into the service. He was in the Marines. When he came back, instead of being a performer, he became a circus owner. Corky was a juggler, but I don't know, after a while the kids kind of all went their own ways. They didn't stay in the show business.

The only one that did was Johnny. Johnny's the youngest one of my crew [siblings], and he lives over in Calera, just South of Durant. He's on the internet, and if you want circus stories, he's the one you should go to. He has got a memory like I can't believe! Names, times, and he'll give you the whole scoop. All you've got to do is get him up on the internet. (Laughs) My daughter Margie knows where he lives. Margie lives in Calera, which is just south of Durant. But they were all in the business. In the show, the kids did their comedy boxing act, but then they finally went to trampoline. Johnny was really good on the trampoline and of course, my son David did trampoline too, and he was good. He could do a lot of backs—bang, bang, bang, bang, bang—just real good at it. Gosh! I'm sure going on and on. (Laughter)

Nykolaiszyn *You're doing great!*

Finchum *So there are eight children?*

Rawls Yes. There should have been ten, but I lost two, the last two.

Finchum *Well, as you learned to do the aerial act, did you have a safety net or anything below?*

Rawls No, it never was that high. These were small shows, and you can't put a net underneath a carry and perch act anyhow. (Laughs) There's a man down there holding you up. No, there wasn't anything that I did. Now, we had a flying act and they had a net underneath them. The flying act is different—the three trapezes when they go from one to the other and flip over and grab hands and so on—well, that's called a trap act, a trapeze act. You can do a single trap or you can do a trapeze, which is with a net underneath and all that. We had those on the show, too, but there wasn't anything that we did that we needed nets under us.

Finchum *How much did you practice? Or did you?*

Rawls Well, once you learned it you didn't practice, because you practiced every day. You did two shows a day, seven days a week. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *Would you ever get injured?*

Rawls Well, yes. Yes, I got injured once when Harry and I, we got off the road for awhile, and he worked for a company down in Texas. We were just off the road because I was expecting and he was trying to learn how to carry the perch. Well, I had worked for so many years. From the time I was six years old on up until the time I got married, Dad and I worked together. We just automatically knew the right moves to make at the right moment. Well, Harry and I were trying to learn to do the perch act together. Well, it didn't work out very well at all. I took a fall, and I smashed this fist all to smithereens, and that was the end of us trying to do an aerial act together. From then on, we turned more into concessions.

Talking about all my kids, I'm going to pull in another hooker on you here. I went in to do the web act, and I had all the kids in the trailer, and I was in the process of changing Michael's diaper. He was just a baby then. I didn't get the job done, and I had to leave and make my entrance. So I'm up here on the web, Spanish web, and who comes into the back door stark naked? Michael, standing in the back door just as nude as the day he was born. (Laughs) The entire crowd is laughing, and I can't figure out what they're laughing at. Then somebody—oh, it was Joey—he came and grabbed Mike, took him back to the trailer. I said, "What were they laughing at?" He said, "Your kid was in the doorway naked!" (Laughter) But there are a lot of little things like that that come up. It's like with the broken bra one time. The snaps all gave way, and he had to go get me a pin.

Finchum *Did you design your own costumes?*

Rawls Oh, yes. I made all my own costumes and of course, that was a good thing when I'd get pregnant. I got pregnant on Herb's show and we went to him. We'd been three seasons with him and this was our fourth season. Herb came over to visit us in the trailer and talk with us. This is when we were in winter quarters. He said, "Harry was telling me," he said, "We can't make a whole season, Herb. She's expecting a baby again." He said, "Again?!" (Laughs) So I said, "I can work up until the time I show." He says, "Well, I can handle that. Come on, make a season with me. We'll find something else for you to do." But I had to design costumes now that hid the fact, because I worked until I was about five months along. I had to put my beginnings here (gestures to her side) and put tons of ruffles down here (gestures around her stomach area) so it didn't show. (Laughs) Yes, I designed all my costumes, and I designed

them for the kids as well.

Finchum *So a sewing machine was your friend?*

Rawls Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Finchum *Was it hard to get fabric since you traveled so much?*

Rawls Not in those days, it wasn't. It wasn't hard at all. In the first place, there was a company in Chicago that handled all the materials required by show people, theatrical people, vaudeville people, and you could just write there and order something. They would send it out to you on the road or wherever you were at the time. They had those elastic net hose. They weren't solid hose but they were stretchy, elastic. They came later. But you got all your tights from them, and your pumps you got from them. I never would buy their pumps. I always liked to get my own pumps, and they used to make a slipper that you could buy in any store. I used to just buy those and wear them out on the wire until they were grooved, and just used those. They were little black slippers, and they fit with almost any costume.

That man that just left when you all came in was a repair man. My computer went on the blink.

Nykolaiszyn *Uh oh.*

Rawls Not computer, I mean my internet thing fouled up. He got it all straightened out for me. That's how I stay in touch with all my kids. I've got Margie and Chris, and Kathy is a lawyer. I'm glad she became a lawyer because she always was when she was a kid. (Laughter) She lives in Norman, and she married a guy out of the business. She got out of the business long before that, because we sent her to college up there at that Catholic college, St. Gregory's, and she went to college there. When she came out she started selling advertising for some of the auto makers around there and then, finally, she decided she wanted to be a lawyer. She spent a year or two studying and passed the grade and became a lawyer. She has her own law office now, and her husband lays all kinds of lines and tubing and things like that underground for either electrical equipment or for drainage systems and things like that. He does quite well. They're well-to-do, and she thinks everybody else is too, sometimes. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *Well, tell us about what you think are some of the more satisfying aspects of circus work. What satisfied you when it came to circus work?*

Rawls Well, there are a lot of things. In the first place, most of the shows we

were on were small, and if they weren't small, then you had a clique of small, and they were all friendly. You just felt part of a small town. It was very homey. Everybody knew everybody else, and it was just like you lived in a little town that picked up and moved every day. It was very cozy and of course, if you came out with circus slang or something, somebody knew what you were talking about. If you're talking to a 'townner' well, then you've got to explain what you're talking about.

Nykolaiszyn

Well, what are some examples of circus slang?

Rawls

Well, "The flag's up." What does that mean to you? Dinner's ready in the cookhouse. All right, "The eagle flew." Pay day at the box office. (Laughter) And of course, you know the word 'townner.' "Don't worry about him, he's a townner." (Laughter) That's all that comes to mind right off, but there are a lot of them. The name of the acts, for instance, trampoline—nobody really knows what a trampoline act is. They know the machinery of the trampoline, especially nowadays because they have them in school auditoriums and everything, but in the time that we were there, trampoline was a novelty. If you said, "Trampoline," they didn't know what you meant. If you say, "Swinging ladder," do they know what you're talking about? All they can see is a ladder swinging. "Perch act," that's a pole that you climb up and do tricks on, but if you just say "Perch act," they think you're talking about fishing. (Laughs) You've got the loop-de-loop. Now, this is one that I had a little trouble with, too, because I used to do the loop-de-loop.

Well, one time, we had a new prop crew. Prop crew, that's another one. They're the people that take the props in and stand them up and bring them out and so forth. Well, this time they did not level my swing. They didn't level it correctly. It was loose on one corner, and it has just got to be a little bit loose on one corner and your swing is all out of whack. What you do is you get in there and you stand on that swing and you pump and you pump and you pump until you go over and over and over, and then you stop and you go over and over and over this way (gestures flipping with her hands). I could not get that swing over. I mean, it would not go over for me! I'd worked so hard on it, that it really damaged my health. I was off for quite a little while, and Harry said, "I don't think you need to do the loop-de-loop anymore."

So I didn't for a while, but we taught Margie to do it and she did the loop-de-loop. The bar you stand on has got a crack in it this way, where the little round place is where you stick your foot down in it, and it fastens you onto the bar. You slide it over this way and it can't come out, so then you're pumping and pumping and you're upside down and sideways and everything else, but you're still hooked to the bar. There are a lot of little things like that that the crowd thinks, "Oh, she's

cheating!” Well, if you think I’m cheating, you get up here and try this, too. I’ll give you my shoes. (Laughs) You’ve got to do it with style and grace. I mean, you can’t just pump and pump and go around and round. You’ve got to go, “Ahh, haa!” (Gestures styling) Give it the jazz! (Laughter)

Nykolaiszyn *Was there anybody on the lot that kind of helped mentor young girls on the show?*

Rawls We had very few single girls on the show in the years that I was there. It just wouldn’t have worked. There were too many working men there and so forth. Any young girls that were performers were with a family so there wasn’t a whole lot of that. You’d occasionally see one, but she’s usually one that cozied up to the boss. (Laughs)

Finchum *Well, on a typical day, how early would you get started, and what would you do? Just take us through a typical day.*

Rawls A lot of it depends on what show you were in. I’ll tell you, on Herb’s show—that’s Cole and Walters—he come around at 4:30 every morning, and he’d bang on your trailer door saying, “Harry, you’re on the wrong lot.” Then you’d get up, throw the kids in their pajamas, put them in the back seat, and take off to the next town. When you got to the next town, the kids got dressed and you fixed them breakfast in the trailer or you got ready, because they didn’t serve a breakfast until about eleven o’clock on a show. After the big top was up that’s when breakfast came, and that was just about it. After awhile, you knew the time you had to get up anyway. It became a habit. You couldn’t sleep after a certain hour. (Laughs)

We had one year, three nuns traveled with the circus, and they had their own little compartment on wheels. Harry and I used to try to go to church every Sunday. When we hit another town they would go ahead and they would locate the church. So they would tell us where it was. Well, I was supposed to be setting up my novelty stand, this is after I quit performing, and I used to give my helper ten bucks to set up the novelty stand for me so we could go to church. The sisters would find out where the church was and let us know when we got in so we could go. We traveled a lot of times at night on Saturday. Most of the time it was really early in the morning, but before Saturday, we’d travel at night a lot of times. We would get in that night, which made it a lot easier because then we could stop at a café for a cup of coffee and ask them where the church was and they could tell us.

We didn’t always make it, because a lot of times we couldn’t find a church in the town. The Little Sisters traveled with us for three years.

Their order was Little Sisters of Jesus. They were just here this past winter. They came down to visit, and they're on the Carson and Barnes show now. They go out and that is their mission, to be there. I guess kind of like the formal priests and so forth. They have a job that they do and it's some kind of job on the show, either working the concession stand or mending costumes or something. Mostly, people mend their own costumes, but they go on and that's part of their mission. I don't know whether they were trying to make saints out of us or what. (Laughter) But they really loved the circus business. They loved the circus people, because it was a close knit family. They really liked that. Like I say, they're on Carson and Barnes now.

Nykolaiszyn

Well, how would you know how to get to the next town?

Rawls

You got a route slip that was made for you in the office and it was handed out to you. Also, they put up arrows. When you leave the lot, there's a little cardboard like this, that's got an arrow on it and you just follow the arrows. That's another saying, too, "Don't forget to follow the arrows." (Laughs) It was a little tough when you had to go through a city, too, because they were not doing that legally. They went either real late at night or real early in the morning so they could avoid the law, then so you could see it. Then sometimes, somebody would notice them and take them down, and then you're lost, "Which way? Which way? Do I go right or left? Do I go straight ahead? What?" (Laughs)

Finchum

And no cell phones to call.

Rawls

No cell phones. (Laughs)

Finchum

When you were traveling like that, how would you do your laundry and things like that?

Rawls

Oh, that's another thing. The advance man, the man that laid out the lot before you, he goes ahead of the show the day before, and he lays out the lot. I mean, he has learned from a diagram where everything has to go and he marks it out on the lot so that when you come in, you know where you're supposed to go and where's the back yard, where's the front yard, where does the water wagon sit, where does the donniker sit and so on. He does that and the first thing you do, if you've got a good advance man, you give him a cup of coffee sometime in the morning when it's cold and rainy out and the cookhouse isn't open yet or you just talk to him nice, he'll locate the Laundromat for you. So you head for the Laundromat. I've spent a lot of Sundays in the Laundromat. My girls used to gripe their heads off, because they went with me and I said, "Hey, these are your clothes, too. Help." (Laughs)

Finchum *When it was payday, was it usually cash?*

Rawls Oh, yes.

Finchum *So you didn't have to worry about a bank account or if there was no bank to cash it.*

Rawls No, because your income on a circus is referred to—your cost of running a circus is referred to as a nut and you have to know what your nut is. Then, when you do your show and you get the money, you get the money from the concessions, from the pony ride, from the sideshow, from the candy pitch inside the big top, and your ticket sales and so forth. Then, you have the cash and you pay in cash, and the rest of the money they'll ship to a bank. But they always carry a certain amount of money, because they have to for anything emergency that comes up.

Finchum *As the performer, were you guaranteed a certain amount or would it vary show to show?*

Rawls Oh, no, we'd get a flat-rate salary.

Nykolaiszyn *I guess you'd have to save, too, to think about the time when it was the offseason?*

Rawls Yes. But of course, when you've got a big family you can't save very much. You have to figure out something to do in the offseason that will bring in a little money.

Nykolaiszyn *So what would you normally do in the offseason?*

Rawls Go find another show.

Nykolaiszyn *Oh, really?*

Rawls Yes. A picnic where they would like a little performance or a nightclub or a Lion's club or an Eagle's club or something. They often have big dinners for their members, and they'll hire an act or two to put on in their show. I can remember one time, they had a low wire and there was a guy in the crowd that had a little too much to drink. One part of my act is I come out in an evening gown, and I waltz across the wire. Then I go out in the middle of the wire and take the evening gown off, and I'm in my costume for the day. He started whistling and hollering and making bad kind of cracks and so forth. They finally had to oust him out of the club, because he was lousing things up. I heard some guy say to him, "What's the matter with you, idiot? She's just a kid!" (Laughs)

- Nykolaiszyn** *Well, it seems when you're talking about the advance man, and even your interactions with your husband and your father, that communication is really important.*
- Rawls** Well, yes. Well, what do you mean?
- Finchum** *Working with the public, you'd have to be a people-person, really.*
- Rawls** Oh yes, yes. If you're not, they'll run you off of the midway, because that's when you come in contact with them. The back yard is supposed to be off limits for the 'towners' because there are too many ways that they can get hurt and then they want to sue you. That's one of the things that David said, "I don't want to see a beer can in one of these trucks. I don't want to see a beer can on that midway. The public is paying your salary. Treat them like you would if you're not going to get any salary." In other words, it was just automatic. You treated the public very well, and some public can be awfully rude, awfully rude, but you smile and go along with it and pass by it, because you're going to be in a new town next week, anyway. (Laughs)
- Finchum** *You'd have to communicate with whoever your co-partner was in your act, too, wouldn't you? I mean, you have to be able to read their signs, if something was going wrong and try to work around it.*
- Rawls** Well, that only happened rarely. I mean, you didn't communicate much when you were working. If you did, you did it out of the side of your mouth. That brings to mind another thing. I was doing my wire act and I had a trick where I would stand in the middle of the wire and I went through a hoop one at a time and I'd bring it up over my body. Harry was working my props, and we had an argument in the back yard. When he got ready to give me the hoop, he—oomph!—like that (gestures shoveling), kind of jammed it at me, and I got hot. I finished the act with a smile and went in the back yard and I said, "If you ever do that in the ring again, I will kill you! When you're in the ring, you are all smiles and nothing else. You don't show you're mad in the ring." And you didn't. I mean, you could have a couple on the show, a man and wife team, and they would be fighting like a couple of angry squirrels in the back yard and then they would go through the front door just as nice and as pretty and smile and do that, and they come back out of the back door when the act is over, (imitates arguing) right away. (Laughs) It happens.
- Finchum** *With birthdays and holidays, was there anything special with those?*
- Rawls** No, not particularly. Occasionally, if you had a real good boss or something, you might wish him happy birthday or something like that, or if you had quite a bit of family in the back yard, they would have a

little private thing. I know one of the things I always liked so much about Herb's show is after the show at night, the people would gather, they'd take turns, the women, serving a little lunch or some coffee or something like that in the back yard and everybody'd go to that trailer. The next time, it would be another trailer's turn to do it. Yes, when the show was over, you couldn't stay too long, because you had to get up and go to work the next morning, but if you had a two-day stand, boy, that was a plus. You really got to sit up and have a sandwich and just chew the rag and talk about old times and so on. It was fun. It was fun. It was real fun.

Finchum *Well, with eight children, how were they educated? Did they have a teacher on the lot, or how was that?*

Rawls They have a teacher now. They didn't at the time my kids were small, and we just taught them best we could. And then of course, when we moved into Hugo, we put the kids in school here. The school worked with us so good, because it is a circus town and they understood. That's when Mr. Parker was the superintendent of the school. Our kids would go to school there, but we'd take them out to go on the road, which was before school let out. They would let me take the books with me, and I would have to school the kids at the dinette every day, and then all the lessons they did on paper, I would take down to the post office and mail back here to the school. They said, "When you do that, now, when you come back in, they'll get two weeks in their next grade. If they survive in the next grade, they'll stay, but if they can't do the work, then they'll have to go back." I said, "Well, that's fine with me. I'll make sure that they won't fail." They always made it to the next grade. I used to have a little motorcycle, one of those little bitty motorcycles, because you didn't want to unhook everything from the trailer when you got on the lot. Sometimes you were quite a ways out of town. I'd ride that motorcycle into town to send them in. I had to mail them in. Every Tuesday I'd mail them in so they'd get to the school on time.

Finchum *That's impressive.*

Rawls You do what you've got to do.

Finchum *Keeping up with eight, that's a lot.*

Rawls Well, I didn't have eight all at one time. I mean, they did vary in age. I didn't have quintuplets. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *Would you do something for family fun when you weren't performing? Would you do anything in town, ever?*

Rawls No, you didn't mingle in town. About the only thing you ever did in town was go to the Laundromat. Now, the working men might spread out and go uptown. That's when they got talked to, to behave themselves. If they didn't behave themselves, they got fired because you can't make anybody in town mad. I mean, somebody you talk to might be working for the mayor. If you insult them or make them mad, then you've got problems all the way around so you just don't do that. If you do, you get fired—kicked out.

Nykolaiszyn *Well, if you could be anything growing up, anything you want. Say you did not have a circus career, what would you be?*

Rawls I can't imagine anything else. I mean, because all these people, these show people and these shows that are on, is like a huge family, and I don't always find that in town. There's always somebody that's gossipy or somebody that's spiteful or somebody that doesn't understand about show people and they're a little nasty with you, like snubbing you and that sort of thing. Now, I really can't think anything that I would rather have done than what I did. I'm sorry. I hope I don't sound smug, but I really enjoyed my life. Even the bad times—and there were bad times.

It's like the time that we were on Herb's show. His daughter had a son, but she was divorced from the guy, and the son came to visit, and we had horse people on the show. They had the liberty act, and they also did the single horse acts. This boy got to use one of their horses. Well, when he was on that horse, he lassoed Bobby, my second son, and the horse took off and it broke Bobby's neck. He had to go down to a hospital in Dallas, and he was there for a long time. They had to rebuild the inside of his neck. It was a new thing that they were trying. They'd never done it before, and they did it on Bobby and saved his throat. Now, he had a man's size Adam's apple even when he was a little boy, because they said, "It can't grow. We've got to give him a full sized."

But anyhow, he had that and he still has a little bit of hoarseness in his voice, but he was in the hospital down there for a long, long time and I was off the show. Harry had to take care of the kids and work on the show while I stayed down there with Bobby. It was a tough time, but the Masons were so good to us. They had been sponsors for one of our shows and when that happened, they were just so good. We had Bobby in the hospital first, and then we had to take him to a nursing facility. They are the ones that sent us down to Dallas to this doctor that that was his specialty, throat repair, and he went in there. It was the first operation like it he'd ever done. He transplanted the torn up throat—what do you call that?

Nykolaiszyn *Esophagus?*

Rawls Yes, thank you. He put in a man's size transplant in there and for a long time, Bobby had a hard time in school when we came back here, because he had a hoarse voice and he had this huge...

Nykolaiszyn *Esophagus, yes.*

Rawls Yes, and the kids used to call him "Horse," tease him and so forth. He was sweet on a little girl—this was in about the fourth or fifth grade—sweet on a little girl and he got her a box of candy, and she said, "I don't want that. You're ugly," and really hurt Bob, really hurt Bob. He and his wife have—what do I want to say? It's like a yard sale, only he's got all kinds of buildings over there. It's called The Junction. It's on Highway 70. It's east of Durant. They work that now, when he got off the road, because Mary was never on the road. His first wife, Maureen, was on the road with him, but their marriage didn't last. I don't know exactly what the problem was, but it didn't last. Maureen and I are still great friends. I e-mail her all the time, but Mary's a good wife to Bobby, a very good wife, but she just was never show people and he just got out of the business. He's a sign painter and an artist, too. Bobby did that elephant (gestures to a painting) and he did this (gestures to another painting), and I got so mad at him. Well, I won't say mad, but irritated, because that would have been the nicest kind of a Christmas card if he had just put the crib and Jesus down there where the clowns are all looking, and he never would do it.

Finchum *They're very good.*

Nykolaiszyn *You've probably been everywhere, seen everywhere, but you could live anywhere. Why did you decide to make your home in Hugo?*

Rawls Well, there have been several circuses that have wintered and have been in Hugo. We used to have a grocery store here. It was well known all around the country, but it's before your time. There have been forty-five circuses over the years that have wintered here in Hugo. The thing about it was, the people in Hugo were so accepting because the 'towners' in the time when I was a young person, even at the time I got married, they thought that people that travel the show were gypsies and thieves. It didn't make any difference how it really was, but that's what they thought. The people here in Hugo accepted us for what we were and they were good, they were understanding. You could get a loan at the bank, which you couldn't do anyplace else, and it was just an accepting town.

In those days it was a lot different than it is now. We had nice businesses downtown. I hate Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart, to me, is like a huge vacuum

cleaner that sucks up all the businesses downtown, because used to, the whole Second Street down there, you go in a store, “Why, hello Mrs. Rawls. How are you doing today? How are the kids?” and so forth. You go into the bank, any of them, everybody knew you. They knew you were with the circus, and they still liked you anyway. So it was a great feeling. Why wouldn’t we settle here? There are not as many circuses now as there used to be, but there have been better than forty-five circuses.

If you want circus lore, I don’t know how much time you’ve got, but Dudley Hamilton, who lives across the street over there, he is a dyed-in-the-wool circus fan, and he can tell you almost anything you want to know about circuses back to the year one. Another one is Larry Moore. He lives up on Fifth Street. You’ll find him in the phone book, I’m sure. But they make a whole history for themselves out of studying the circus, and they could give you a lot of things you want to know. They might dress it up a little bit more than I do, but still. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn

Do you think circus people, circus folk, get a bad rap?

Rawls

Well, I’ll give you a little instance. When I first started going with Gerald, the farmer, he wanted us to go and visit his cousin in this town that we were showing. We were playing fair dates at that time. So my mother and I went to his cousin’s house. It was the mother, and there was an aunt, and there was a cousin, and Gerald came up there. We were sitting there. We were a little uncomfortable with ‘towners,’ anyhow. We didn’t ever know how they were going to act, and Momma asked the older lady, she said, “Can you tell me where the Catholic church is?” and so she told her. The younger girl, who was the cousin, said, “I didn’t know circus people went to church.” It made my mother furious! I mean she couldn’t get out of that house fast enough. I said, “Momma, they just don’t understand.” (Laughs)

That was the general idea. I mean, if you were not parked in a house, in a home, in a town, in one place, then you were vagabonds. Everybody thought that you were either a gypsy or a thief or a roustabout. It didn’t make any difference. So that’s one of the reasons that circus people became so clannish, because you couldn’t mingle with them. Now, that’s different here. You’d say circus down here and they’ll say, “Well, hello, which one are you with?” They’re nice people, just nice people. So that’s the reason we’re in Hugo.

Finchum

And where do carnivals fall into that?

Rawls

Well, how can I put it without being rude? They were a class lower than circus, let me put it that way. They had knockout joints on the midway,

I'm talking about the carnival midway, and they weren't always fair. I mean, that ring that you were going to toss is a little bit smaller than the one he showed you when he tossed it, and that sort of thing. Then there was the Three Card Monte kind of a deal, and he always had a hoochie coochie parlor. (Laughs)

Finchum *They didn't travel with your group, though, did they?*

Rawls Oh, no.

Nykolaiszyn *Well, you've seen many changes through the years with the circus, especially the smaller shows like Carson and Barnes and Kelly Miller.*

Rawls Well, Carson and Barnes is not exactly what I would call a small show anymore. It's a pretty good sized show. It has got a beautiful square top, and their performance is great. They've got a lot of great performers over there, but there are smaller shows. Now, we've got Culpepper and Merriweather down here and it's on the road already. I don't know a lot about them now, because I've been out of touch for so long, but that was a nice little show, and there were nice people on it. They did a good show, but they had a raggedy big top. If it rained, you were out of luck. (Laughter)

Nykolaiszyn *Where do you see the circus business going in the next ten to twenty years? Do you think people will still continue to go to circuses?*

Rawls If circuses can survive on the road. I mean, you take just the cost of gasoline. You know how many semis there are on Carson and Barnes? Filling those up with six and eight dollar gas? It all depends. Of course, they just came back from California, and they died out there. I shouldn't be saying that, but the business wasn't good out there, let me put it that way. But I don't know. There are fewer and fewer small shows anymore, but the big ones seem to be doing all right. It's not a question I could really give you an honest answer to, because I really don't know.

Finchum *Do you do a lot of crossover? Do a lot of the performers switch from circus to circus?*

Rawls Oh, yes. You'll hire an act for a season or two, but if you're playing the same route and doing the same act, you've really got to change your act, better it, or go off someplace else.

Finchum *Would you have more than one chore during the day to do? As a performer did you have other things that you had to do?*

Rawls Oh, no. The departments were highly separated. You've got the working

men. You've got the boss canvasman. He takes care of all the working men, seeing that things get up and get down. You've got the property crew, which is another one. You've got a head prop man and he's got his props, and he takes care of setting the rings up and getting the props ready for each particular performer as they come in. Then you've got the sideshow people, if the show still has a sideshow. Some shows don't have a sideshow anymore. You've got a separate boss canvasman for the sideshow. He makes sure that everything is set up and works right. They're just different departments and no, they don't really mingle much.

Finchum

When you decided that you weren't going to go on the high wire anymore, how did you come to that decision?

Rawls

Well, I'm trying to think back. I guess that maybe we weren't getting quite enough money. We went into concessions. As I got older and didn't look as pretty in the ring, I decided to have the novelties. Well, Harry and I were going to stay home one year and David wanted us to come out on the show. I said, "Honey, I haven't done anything on a wire for a long time." He says, "I don't want you to wire. I want you to take the novelty stand." I said, "Well, did you talk to Dad about it?" He said, "Well, I've got something I want Dad to do, too." I think Dad was the ringmaster. He was the ringmaster for a while. My son, Bill, my youngest son, was a ringmaster also, very good, too.

Dad and I were going to retire, and that's when we had finally sold the house on G Street that we had, the one that I thought was a castle. It really wasn't as much a castle. Harry was out on the road, and I had brought the kids home for school. I saw this lovely, lovely big two-story house on Lowery Street. I went up to talk about it and we were talking about it, and Dad was still out on the road. He was running concessions. That's a big deal on the Clyde Beatty Show. The money was good and he had a lot of good butchers and so forth, and he got them under control so they didn't misbehave. So I came home with the kids, I was running the pie car at that time, and put the kids in school, but we were living in our trailer out at the fairgrounds. That's different fairgrounds from what it is now, but we were living at the fairgrounds.

I saw this house and I asked the price of it and talked about it. Then I talked to Harry when he called on the phone. He used to call me every Sunday. I was telling him all about the house, and he says, "Well, I don't want you to do anything until I see it." I said, "Well, I don't know how long they can hold it, honey, at this price." He says, "I'll be in there to see it." So the kids and I were all hoping and hoping because, at last the girls are going to have a room to themselves, and the boys are going to have a room to themselves. We were going to have a bedroom to

ourselves, we had a kitchen, we had a nice dining room, we had a big living room. Finally, Harry came home. We were all trailing behind him, walking up the steps to this house and on the front porch and so forth and darn him! He wouldn't open his mouth to say nothing. We toured him through all the rooms, and he didn't say or make a remark about anything, just nothing! Finally, we were coming out the front door and I said, "Harry, say something!" He said, "It'll do." (Laughs) So we got a loan at the bank and paid it off.

Nykolaiszyn *You said you were working the pie car?*

Rawls Yes.

Nykolaiszyn *What is that?*

Rawls Well, it's usually in with the food stand on the midway, but it's where you get up in the morning and the cookhouse is not open yet and you want a cup of coffee, especially the working men. They'd come up there and they'll buy a piece of pie or some cookies. So the pie car is there for that purpose. I mean, you can serve them. You have a big refrigerator, because I ran the pie car. The cook we had in there, he got rich real quick and he blew the scene. He just took a powder in the night, and so we had nobody to put in there. Harry, he was running the concessions. He said, "Well, you think you could handle it, Mary?" And I said, "Well, sure, I can handle it. I feed you, don't I?"

I took over the pie car and of course, I had to sell the hamburgers and the hot dogs and the Coca-Cola and all that to the public. But the pie car was considered where you go, a working man will come up in between hammering stakes or something and say, "Give me a glass of milk and a couple of those cookies," or, "Give me one of those pies you've got over there," those pies that come in the little packages, or a cup of coffee. The boss would always come over and want some coffee, and that's the reason we call it the pie car, because about all they served was pie and coffee. (Laughs) They call it the pie car.

Finchum *And you mentioned the term, "butchers?"*

Rawls Yes, that's the salesmen in the big top that sell the popcorn and the cotton candy and the novelties and so forth. You just see them walking around the ring, pitching their product and so on.

Finchum *Do you know how that name came about? Why "butcher?"*

Rawls They originally did it on the early railroad trains. They made a movie about it. There were guys that had a tray and they had candies and things

like that, and they would go up and down the aisle ways of the train and sell people a snack or maybe a cigarette—well, there weren't any cigarettes, but cigars or something like that—and they were called butchers. They wore a white jacket, and they wore a little white cap like that, and they were called butchers. Well, that just transferred itself to the circus. I bet you don't know what a candy pitch is either, do you?

Nykolaiszyn

No, we're towners! (Laughs)

Rawls

Well, they always have a candy pitch. They used to, they don't have it anymore, at least they don't have it on Carson and Barnes. But you've got these boxes of candies. "Mrs. Merriam So and So made these best special honey-tasting candies," and so forth, "and in every box there is a prize, and one box, one box out there has got a ten dollar bill in it," and then they start pitching the candy. They keep on, the guy on the microphone keeps on going, and the butchers go out there and they sell all this stuff. You buy two, maybe three, boxes of candy and you might get a little whistle or something like that. Nobody ever got the ten dollar bill. (Laughs) But that's what they'd do. They were the candy butchers, anybody that was selling things walking around the seats. When you've got a bunch of little kids at a circus, they get bored. I mean, no matter how good the show is they'll eventually get bored so they want something. So you've got your candy butcher, you've got your novelty butcher, and they go around and work the seats. Then, if you don't sell anything, at least you're advertising your product, and they hit the novelty stand on the way out. They'll say, "Just be quiet now, watch the show. Momma will get you something on the way out," that sort of thing.

Everybody on the midway is friendly. There used to be some real rude people on the midway, but David, for the twenty years he had his show out, he would have that speech in his big top before opening day. Everybody'd be up there in the bleachers. He would introduce everybody to everybody else, "This is the prop man. This is the water man. He'll take care of your water. A little tip every week, a couple of dollars would help," and everybody had a job, "There's the electrician. He'll hook your trailer up to the electricity." Well, he gives this speech and then he says, "Now, you should be able to tip the water man and the electric man a little bit. It doesn't have to be much, but give them something. When the people are on the midway, I don't want to see anybody insulted. I don't want to see anybody pushed around, and you working men, I don't want any beer cans in those cabs and I don't want them on the midway. Now, if you want your beer, you have it after the show at night, and you be sober in the daytime."

He ran his show like that for twenty years, and after the first year, he

never had a losing day. And he always had people who were happy to be on his show. I remember before the color issue was delineated, as it is now, we had a couple on the show. She was a tiny, petite blond girl, and she was married to a black man. He was just the nicest guy, but he always approached everybody hesitant because he didn't know what kind of a reception he was going to get. Well, he was accepted there, but it was so funny. I'll never forget, we were all standing in the line at the pay office, waiting for our paycheck and it was Easter Sunday. David never showed [a circus performance] on Easter Sunday. Bill was standing behind his wife there and everybody was saying, "Well, what did you get your wife for Easter," and so forth and so forth, and Harry asked Bill what did he get for his wife for Easter, and he starts hopping up and down, he says, "A chocolate bunny." (Laughter) And it just knocked everybody cold out there! He got really accepted, because he came on in severe trepidation, because a mixed marriage like that was rather new at that time, but they were such a neat couple. They were really fond of each other. He was a gentleman, too.

Nykolaiszyn *Well, before we got started, you were telling me about the Human Fly? Who was the Human Fly?*

Rawls My father.

Nykolaiszyn *Your father. And how did he get that name?*

Rawls Well, because he could crawl up these buildings. I mean, these big brick buildings. Of course, it was easier in those days than it is now because how the bricks are put on buildings, they're like that (gesturing smooth) now, and he would climb all the way up to the top. If you read that story, the windows all opened in those big buildings in those days, not like it is now. You can't open a window in a tall building. The women would be sticking their head out, watching him climb up the building, and he wasn't a bad looking guy. He was tall and skinny, and he said, "Now, I'm going to kiss every pretty girl I see on the way up." Of course, the women have all got their heads out there looking to see him. (Laughter)

But he'd climb all the way up to the top, and he would usually have an advertising gimmick. He would be advertising the Chevrolet Company or the Ford Company or something like that. That's how he got paid. The streets below would be packed full of people. I think you'll see some pictures of that in there (gestures to a scrapbook). Then, when he got up to the top, he'd hang by his knees and hold the sign up that advertised the business that he was hired to do that for. He made his living that way during the Depression.

Finchum *And his name was?*

Rawls Jack Williams.

Finchum *That was his stage name. What was his real name?*

Rawls His real name? Frazier.

Finchum *Was it still Jack?*

Rawls Yes.

Nykolaiszyn *And your mother's name was?*

Rawls Lucille.

Nykolaiszyn *And her maiden name?*

Rawls I don't know her maiden name. I can't remember, because my mother was raised in an orphanage. Her mother died when she and her brother were young. They were put in an orphanage, but they were put in separate orphanages. The boy went to one and she went to another. When she was sixteen, they had trained her to be a nanny, and so she worked as a nanny for a while. Then finally, she got a job in the telephone company and that's where she was when Dad met her.

Nykolaiszyn *And did your husband have a stage name?*

Rawls No. He was always Gabe Rawls in the business. As he got older, he became Harry. A little bit more sedate. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *And did he just choose Harry or is that like his middle name.*

Rawls No, that's his real name.

Nykolaiszyn *Oh, okay.*

Rawls Yes. He went to school at a Catholic school in Arkansas—all right, what's the name of that town in Arkansas? Darn! It's a big town. I can't remember the name of the town, but there's a school there for boys and there were a lot of boys there. Some of them were boys that were misbehaving, and some were boys that their parents sent them there, because it was all Catholic brothers. Harry was very popular there, because when my daughter Margie got married, five of those brothers came all the way up here to attend Margie's wedding. I thought that was the coolest thing. They just made that trip all the way up here for the wedding.

All three of my girls were married in that—there's a little church downtown across the street from the Methodist Church, and that was always our church. Now, we moved down to this other place on the highway, but all three of my girls were married in that church, Margie and Susan and Kathy.

Finchum *What would be your favorite part of being in the circus or your favorite memory?*

Rawls Well, I'll have to be truthful with you. I loved the applause. I loved the entertainment and getting down and taking my bow and hearing applause. I loved it, every minute of it! (Laughs) Then I'd go back in the back yard and wash the diapers out in the bathtub. (Laughter) No kidding. I washed them out in the bathtub.

Finchum *What a contrast, huh?*

Rawls Yes.

Finchum *Well, when you were doing novelty, did someone show you those ropes? Did you place orders and decide what to order?*

Rawls The head of the concession department ordered for you. If you were short on something, you'd tell him that you needed it. Remember, what's that little yellow bird that used to be in the cartoons?

Nykolaiszyn *Tweety Bird?*

Rawls Yes. He was real popular and I kept running out of those. We had elephants, and we had tigers, and we had monkeys, and so forth. For a long time, we had those little furry monkeys on a cane and I sold a lot of those, but they quit making those. So I couldn't get them anymore. The modern day concession items are not as inviting or as intriguing as what they used to be, but I went into that business. I did the novelty business like I would do a performance, because here are people. They want to buy things. "Hi, how are you? What can I do for you? What about this one? Do you like Tweety Bird? Would you like a little elephant like that? I've got anything you want. What would you like? This one's two dollars, that one's a dollar and a half," putting on the charm in front of the novelty stand. (Laughs)

Finchum *And what would you do when you didn't have customers? Did you do anything in particular?*

Rawls Yes. I went home and made the beds and cleaned up the kids. (Laughs)

Finchum *When you were doing the novelty stand, when there was a slow part to the business. Did you crochet?*

Rawls Oh, yes. Well, I did a little of that. I made half a dozen rugs like that one down there, and I made a half a dozen afghans like that one over there and that over there. I've got so many of them put away. I did an awful lot. I did a beautiful picture of an Indian chief. It was embroidery. Took me a whole year to finish it, and I had it up in the house, but the church was having a sale out here at the fairgrounds, and everybody was supposed to donate something for them to sell. You buy a coupon and then when they had a drawing, well you got whatever it was that you chose. You'd have a whole counter full of things that people donated, and I donated that Indian chief. It was a picture about the size of that one over there, with a real nice frame on it.

Finchum *Always busy, then, no down time.*

Rawls Not for mommas.

Nykolaiszyn *Well, do you have any advice for people who are looking to get into the circus business, maybe as a performer?*

Rawls I don't really know. I couldn't say for sure, because if you're a newcomer, my area has kind of dried up and gone away. It's not like it used to be, but if you've got something that you can do and you can do well, you just go apply for a job. If you can't get on one show, try another show, and so forth and so on. A lot will depend on your personality and whether or not they can depend on you, because if you hire an act for a show, you've got to have it for the whole season. I really couldn't give you good advice for now, because I've been out of the business too long. I mean, we were fourteen years out there, Southern Estates. Harry insisted on retiring. Why, I don't know. I was bored out of my gourd! (Laughter) All I did was make beds and cook him his meals.

It seems to be different. I just haven't been in contact with them, and it's hard for me to do that. The Kelly Miller Circus is under different ownership now since David sold the show to John Ringling North. They've opened it. It didn't open here, but it showed here at the fairgrounds. I debated and debated about going out there or not, but it's hard for me. I finally decided not to go, because that was my world and my world is gone for me. There is no sense moping on it or going out there and feeling like an outsider so I didn't go. I wish I had though because one of the guys out there, they told me later, was one of the butchers I used to have when I had the concession stand. Mike Rice was

his name.

Nykolaiszyn *You'll always have your memories.*

Rawls Yes. I have my memories. The Kelly Miller show is still pretty much the same as what it was. It's a little bit more glossy. Everybody said it was a good show, and I'm sure that it is. It's just that I have drug my feet when it comes to the modern circus world.

Nykolaiszyn *Fair enough. Well, is there anything else you'd like to tell us today that we haven't [talked about]?*

Rawls Yes, I'm eighty three years old! (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *And you're looking great! Well, we really appreciate you talking with us about the circus and giving us a look into your world.*

Rawls Well, you have just given me a great day, too. I've gone back down memory lane and it was really nice. (Laughs)

Finchum *Thank you very much.*

----- End of interview -----