

Oral History Interview
with
David Rawls

Interview Conducted by
Tanya Finchum and Juliana Nykolaiszyn
June 15, 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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Interview History

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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 David Rawls is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on June 15, 2011.

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About David Rawls...

David Rawls, the oldest son of Harry and Mary Rawls, was born in 1948 in Lebanon, Missouri and lived in Macks Creek, Missouri until he was in elementary school. His parents worked in the circus industry first as performers then in various occupations within the circus. In 1955 the family moved to Hugo, Oklahoma where they joined the Famous Cole Circus owned by Herb Walters. During his youth, in addition to performing trampoline acts with his brother, David was interested in learning all aspects of the circus industry and sought out every opportunity to learn.

Following graduation from Hugo High School, David served in the military. After serving, he returned to the circus business. At the age of twenty-five David was hired by Frank McCloskey to be the concession manager for the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus. As David gained more experience, he moved closer to his childhood dream of having his own circus. D.R. Miller, owner of the Carson and Barnes Circus and well-known in the industry, saw something in David and together they formed a circus which they named the Kelly Miller Circus. This circus first went out on the road in 1984 and twenty-five years later, David sold it having completed twenty-five successful years as owner/manager.

After selling the Kelly Miller Circus, David served as City Manager of Hugo, Oklahoma. Previously he had also been Mayor of Hugo, Oklahoma. He now serves as a consultant to the Carson and Barnes Circus and continues to call Hugo, Oklahoma home.

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David Rawls

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Tanya Finchum
& Juliana Nykolaiszyn
June 15, 2011
Hugo, Oklahoma



Finchum *I’m Tanya Finchum along with Juliana Nykolaiszyn. We’re with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at the Oklahoma State University Library. Today is June 15, 2011 and we’re in Hugo, Oklahoma, speaking with David Rawls. Thank you for joining us today.*

Rawls Well, thank you for having me.

Finchum *Let’s get started by having you tell us a little bit about your youth, where you were born, your family, and that type of thing.*

Rawls Well, I was born in Lebanon, Missouri. At that time, we lived in a little town called Macks Creek. My grandfather had a one-room house there with outdoor plumbing, no indoor plumbing. I lived there off and on until my first year of school. I started the first grade in Camdenton, which was the nearest school to where I lived. It was quite a bus ride, I recall. I was the first one on the bus, the last one off. School was a wonderment to me. It was an association with other kids who I didn’t have a whole lot in common with, but I found it interesting and intriguing. It helped build my desires for a lot of things in life.

From Macks Creek, after the first grade, we moved here in 1955, to Hugo. I started school here. We came here to join the Famous Cole Circus owned by Herb Walters. My brother and I were learning, at that time, to do trampoline. I was trying to follow in my father’s footsteps. He was a cowboy, trick-rider, rope-spinner, whip-cracker, and every circus in that day had a Wild West concert or after show, a takeoff on the western days of our country. I’m sure you’re familiar with Buffalo Bill and Tom Mix and some of the western stars that we had. They had Wild West circuses, Wild West shows. That was incorporated into the entertainment of the tent circuses as an after show or a concert.

I really wanted to be a cowboy, like my father. I learned how to spin ropes and ride, whip-cracking. I learned all of that at an early age, and he was perfectly willing to teach me anything that I wanted to learn. That was my goal in life at seven, eight years old. And really, I got to perform at an early age in the ring, in the Wild West concert. My brother and I did a trampoline act at the time.

There were, at that time, six children in the family. They were, in their own way, each beginning to learn what they gravitated towards. I have a sister who was a wire-walker. My brother Bobby was an excellent clown that he developed later in life. In addition to the trampoline he juggled, did rolling globe, and was a good wire-walker, himself. My mother was a wire-walker so we had an opportunity to learn the various acts that our parents did or other people did. If we had a knack for it, we were given the freedom to try to learn it and practice. That's the way you develop your skills as a performer in the circus. It starts at an early age, and not everyone has the ability or the desire to do all of the acts. But you soon learn where you excel and where you don't, usually, you pursue that.

From there, we traveled with other circuses. Our family grew. There were two additional children, later. We all did acts. We did at least ten acts, ten different acts. My sisters were aerialists. We did wire-walking. They did ladder and web, rolling globe. My mother did an act called loop-de-loop and neck loop, which was where you hang by your neck and perform. You hang by your neck in a way that's not detrimental to you, but you do that and perform. So, in total, we did ten acts. We became usable on many circuses. There were a lot of people that would like to have our acts because we had done a great deal, and we were pretty cheap to hire. I mean, you hire the family and you get ten acts. In addition to that, we did a lot of other things in the show.

I had a lot of interest in circus. I wanted to learn how to put up the tents and the logistics and the engineering that went along with that. I learned how to drive at an early age. I was driving circus trucks at fifteen. I was very interested in the why's and the where for's of the circus industry, and I had my heroes and the people that I admired in the business that I'd heard their names many times before and followed their careers.

Finchum

And who were those, while you're on that?

Rawls

Oh, there was Floyd King, who was a circus owner in his own right. He had the King Brothers Circus many, many years ago. He was a general agent, at that time. I was fascinated by the routing of the shows; why they went, when they went, where they went. He was legendary in our industry. I heard a lot of stories about him and I tried to figure out what made him tick and what made him go where he went and why did he do

what he did. He was very successful at it. He was highly sought after to be the routing agent for various circuses because of his success.

I also followed closely the Millers, here in Hugo. At that time, Obert Miller was the owner of the show. He had two sons, Dory and Kelly, but he was the patriarch of the family. He had a unique niche that he had carved out, and had a large show, very successful. I was highly interested in why he went where he went and how he did it. That's kind of unusual at sixteen, and I would say at sixteen, I was highly motivated by the circus industry and wanted to pursue it. So much so, that my brothers and sisters took to calling me Mr. Circus, because my interests were not the same as theirs. I was pretty wrapped up. At night, if we had a truck break down or blow a motor, I would stay up with the mechanics and try to learn how to get the truck fixed and hand them their tools. I mean, they were glad to have me just as a gopher, a helper but all the while, I was learning. I did that in several instances in the business when I was growing up.

I was very curious about all aspects of the circus industry and gravitated toward concessions. I noticed early on that the guys that we called candy butchers, which are the vendors in the circus, always had money. They always seemed to be kind of carefree and independent. I admired that and started hanging around them. So when I wasn't doing my acts or putting up props or taking down props for the family, I would go up and help the concession vendors and try to learn what they did. I liked it so much that I eventually got into the concession end of the business. I learned all aspects, and I became a concession manager at twenty-five years old. I ran the concessions on the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus, which was the largest tent circus in the country at that time. Oh, you could say I thought I had died and went to heaven. It was a dream.

I was working for a man named Frank McCloskey, who was an icon in our industry. He owned three circuses and had been on the Ringling Brothers Circus many, many years ago. He came from that to the Beatty show, the Clyde Beatty Circus. He and a partner named Walter Kernan bought the Beatty show and took it off-rail and put it on trucks and became very successful in the circus industry. He expanded that to both the King Brothers Circus and the Sells and Gray Circus. They had three circuses out at one time, very, very successful. And the man hired me to run his concessions on the Beatty show. I was intrigued by that.

By that time, my father was managing the King Brothers Circus. My father had grown in stature and respect in the industry and became sought after as a manager for a multitude of reasons. He was very calm and efficient at what he did. He could handle people, had a way of commanding respect without being rough or demanding about it, and

was very successful as a manager in his own right. So it gave me opportunities to be looked at by other people in the industry. “Oh, you’re one of those Rawls?” We had a large family. We had been on a lot of shows. We were fairly well-known. We weren’t famous in any respect as to our acts. We did a multitude of acts when we were performing.

At eighteen, I knew that I wasn’t going to continue in the performing end of the industry. I was going to gravitate towards management. I did that through concessions, initially, but I always had the dream of having my own circus and running my own circus some day. I wanted to learn every aspect of the business. I bumped my nose a few times in that pursuit, but in the end, I was given the opportunity. The opportunity came my way to take out my own show. My father and I took out the Great American Chautauqua earlier. It was not successful. Great show. We combined theater and circus. It was a theatrical stage production under the big top.

Finchum

About what time period, year-wise?

Rawls

That was in the ’70s. Let’s see, we folded it in ’80—you’re going to make my memory go bad. I want to say that we folded the thing in ’81 or ’82. I can’t recall, but it was a great show. The people that did see it—I mean, we got standing ovations. We had a hard time making the public understand what a Chautauqua was. At one time it was very famous in the country. My father’s idea was to bring it back. There used to be Chautauquas that traveled all over the country. They were well-known and well respected. They combined theater and some circus entertainment. They didn’t combine a lot of circus, and his idea was to have a show that explained Chautauqua.

As he and his grandson, who were fishing along a riverbank, reminisced, the grandson would ask him questions about, “What was it? What would it do?” As the grandfather recalled a memory, what he remembered from the Chautauqua days, it would appear onstage. The lights would dim and then they would come up on stage and you would see it. We had singing and dancing in the show. We had circus acts. We had comedy. We had a wide variety of things. Quite a few people were involved in the endeavor, costuming, lighting, and like I say, it was well received. We just couldn’t market it well enough to get the crowds there to see it. After a lengthy run, we folded it and lost a lot of money and were disheartened by the effort.

But I hadn’t lost my desire to own my own circus. I went on from there and took an opportunity to work for D.R. Miller and ran his concessions. He and I became friends. He was my employer and my boss, but we also became friends. We had a lot of the same likes and dislikes, as far as the

circus is concerned. I never met a man more enthusiastic about circus in my life. That's all he cared about. He didn't have any other interests, outside interests. I mean, he was circus through and through, and very unique and an innovator. He'd done a lot of things, a lot of firsts in the industry. There was not much he hadn't tried, and I admired the man, and he and I got along well. He saw something in me that made him take a chance and together we bought a circus that folded in California. I took it out in 1984. It was Kelly Miller, his old title. That got me into ownership, and I learned a lot more about the circus industry after I owned one and ran one for twenty-five years.

Finchum

Twenty-five!

Nykolaiszyn

Well, you had an idea of what you wanted to present to the public when you started Kelly Miller. What were some of your goals for that circus?

Rawls

My goals were developed throughout my life. The circus business—of course, the times were different. You have to recall that right after the Depression, we came out into the '50s and we went through a huge recession in the country. A lot of things were changing quickly. Korea was over and all our men came home. We had a huge recession in the country at the time. Television was in its infancy, just being developed and habits and attitudes of the general population were just being developed. It was a terrible time for the American circus in the '50s. A lot of big shows folded in the '50s. It couldn't continue to compete with the changing entertainment market.

Neither one of you are probably old enough to recall that when television first came out and became on the air all the time, and it wasn't all the time. Even then, it went off at midnight and came on sometimes as late as ten-eleven o'clock. Before a program started on the air it would just have a symbol on the TV and it was all black and white. But there were westerns that people did not miss. On Wednesday night they watched *Gunsmoke* or *Maverick* or *Cheyenne*, or I can remember a program called *The Top Ten Show*, where they did the top ten musical hits for the week or for the month or whatever the case may be. But people were engrossed in it.

I can remember in our family when we finally got a television, wow! We just couldn't wait until Thursday night got here so we could watch "X" program. We all sat down together and watched it and everybody enjoyed it. It was something new and different. Well, it took away from people wanting to go out and see a circus or spend their money on other things. It was quite an expensive investment. I can remember we didn't have a television for many years, and I knew other kids that had them and couldn't understand why. My parents made me realize real quick it

was a large investment, and it wasn't something you spend your money on first. It was an extra. It was a luxury, and so it wasn't something you did first, but it did have a huge impact on the industry. It was in the '50s that the Ringling Show went out from under canvas, and several other shows folded and became part of our history instead of still alive, but the industry survived it.

One of the things that I wanted to have in the circus was I wanted to entertain families. I want to do it well. I wanted them to enjoy it and I wanted it to be eye-catching. Taking my children to Disneyworld when they were quite young, I remember taking a lesson from Disneyworld. Everything was squeaky clean. All their people were in uniform. You saw no distraction or detracting from your visit. Even the lines were scientifically done so they didn't seem as long as they actually were. (Laughs) They had a way of getting you into a line and then you would go inside the facility and you'd find out the line was twice as long inside as it was outside, but they did it well. And I took lessons from that. I noticed that they had people cleaning up debris and trash off of the grounds just instantly. All the negatives they tried to remove. I took good lessons from that.

When I took out my circus I wanted everyone in uniform. I had strict rules about long hair and beards, no [going without] shirts, no drinking, no cursing—of course, people curse, but not in front of our public. If I caught you doing that, it was a finable offense and you could be terminated. But we wanted to take care of our patrons. When they came to the circus I didn't want them to have an experience that was negative in any way, if I could help it. So we worked very hard at that on Kelly Miller. Over the years, we developed a reputation for being a show that was pleasing and did what it said, and the people enjoyed themselves when they were there.

A lot of contact, a lot of contact. I insisted my performers visit with the public and talk to them and not be strangers. I wanted that personal contact. It served us well. We had a lot of people who remembered us. They remembered us better than we remembered them. They would come up to us a year later or two years later and say, "I saw your show the other day. Yeah, you guys talked to me! So and so sold me the tickets, and I remember feeding the elephant," or whatever the case may be. And you try to encourage that and develop that, continue it.

We built a route and a territory that if they were going to have a circus that year, which we were always sponsored by some civic organization in the community so it becomes beneficial to the community as well as to us financially. If they were going to have a circus, they would call and ask you if Kelly Miller was coming or could come. Or we would call

and say, “Do you want us back?” and they would say, “Yes, we’d like to have you back. It was a good experience.” That was the goal and I think we achieved it.

Finchum *Well, when you were deciding on your routes to drum up business, did you go to particular areas, like southwest, every year?*

Rawls I had a particular direction. We would start out here in the spring. A lot of people think you jump all over the country with a circus, and that’s so far from the truth it’s not funny. In twenty-five years we averaged forty-eight miles a day and that’s playing two hundred and ten dates a year. It was well thought out, well planned, well plotted. Occasionally, we went farther, sometimes shorter, but we averaged, over the years, forty-eight miles a day. So you had an hour move, like an hour commute to go to work. You got up in the morning and you loaded and cleaned up. People left the grounds in an orderly fashion, early in the morning, and by 7:00, 7:30, you’re arriving in your new town when people are getting up and starting to move around.

Finchum *A.M.*

Rawls A.M., yes. And you do the setup. Our setup was—that’s another thing Kelly Miller was known for—it moved like a clock. Our setup took two and a half to three hours, maximum, and our teardown took an hour, hour and ten minutes, maximum. And then our performances were an hour and forty-five minutes long, two of them. So it wasn’t too demanding on our people. It was hard work, but it wasn’t too demanding on our people. We moved, usually, on a daily basis to a different community, would setup and teardown, and the next morning get up and move to the next community and develop that routine.

I wanted to be north in the summertime when the weather is cooler. A big top circus can’t be in Texas in July. It can be, but it’s a mistake (laughs) because it’s too hot for people to be sitting under a tent, and it’s too hot for your performers, and your people, and your animals. So it was something that you had to keep in mind. So we tried to be in the north country in June, July, and August. We would work our way up in the spring and work our way back in the fall. I had favorite territories that I expanded and tried to improve on.

My first year, Michigan was the target. The auto industry had been in bad shape. The economy was not real good and a lot of shows shied away from Michigan. It left a vacuum. Even in bad economic times, people still want entertainment, especially if it was local. You don’t have to drive to Nashville, or you don’t have to drive to the West Coast, East Coast, or Florida. If you get local entertainment, people will go if they

have a few bucks. And so we'd try to keep our prices within range of a family and still be able to make enough money to continue to do what we do.

We went to the communities. I think that is one of the big attractions. I don't think circus will ever go away because as long as there are parents who have children, they want them to experience the magic that they experienced with their parents and go on down the line. So I think that as long as there is someone willing to cater to that and try to achieve that, there will always be circus. It will change in its format. It will change in what you see. Today's generation is much harder to entertain than generations in the '50s, when I grew up. The electronic mediums that these kids have, their attention spans quickly disintegrate if you don't have something in front of them. So you see improved lighting, sound is important, fast-paced shows, better costuming, better lighting that keeps the children entertained. And you have to be geared toward the children, as well as the adults. If your kids have a good time, you're going to have a good time. So you have to be cognizant and aware of that.

It can't be strictly theater. As a matter of fact, Cirque du Soleil advertises on many of their shows that it is not intended for children. It's an adult theater. It's not that they do anything that's wrong, it's not X-rated or anything, but the presentation is not geared towards children, it's geared towards adults. And they're very successful at what they do, but what we did was for the family. We wanted everybody to be there. We wanted Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, and the kids. I always had a story that I told my sponsors, I said, "We are not a carnival," I said, "We lose teenagers. When kids get to be teenagers, they lose interest in the circus. They don't come back to us until they have children of their own, but they do come back." The carnival is more geared to the adult and to the young teenager. It's more active and there is nothing in a carnival where you go sit down for an hour and a half. So I try to impress on them the difference between the two forms of entertainment.

Finchum

How would you find your acts each year?

Rawls

Acts were fairly easy to come by. In the beginning, the first year, I had a hard time finding acts willing to commit a season to me because I was new and they didn't know if I'd make it. There were a lot of questions in everybody's mind. But after a couple of years, I had no problem getting acts. I would get, during the year, probably thirty, forty, fifty inquiries of acts wanting to perform on our show, for many reasons. They had heard it was a well-run show, it was stable, we had a good commissary or cookhouse, the management was good, the jumps were short, good solid season. So I would get inquiries from Eastern Europe, from South America, from here in the United States of acts of all kinds. I can readily

say that it was the least of the problems...

Finchum

Pick and choose.

Rawls

...putting together a show. My biggest problem was people I brought on my show I wanted to know something about. I didn't want to know just what they did. I wanted to know something about them, personally, because it's very close quarters, seventy people traveling together for two hundred and ten days. You have to get along. You have to be able to get along. I provided a school in my circus, an accredited school in my circus that I worked very diligently at, because I believe strongly in education. I wanted my people to be able to have it, especially my staff, who traveled with me year after year, who had family. I wanted them to be able to have their children with them. I didn't like the idea of the children staying home and the mom staying home until school was out, and then for a very brief ten weeks in the summer they were there, and then they're gone again in the fall. So I worked with the school here in Hugo.

And that's another great thing about Hugo, is the relationship between the circus and the community gave me the ability to do that. Mike Arms was the superintendent here in Hugo, at the time, and I went to him with the idea of providing an accredited teacher to teach our younger children. I wanted the same curriculum, the same lessons that they had in the system. I wanted them to get credit for it, and I wanted them to accredit my teacher. I would pay for the teacher but they had to give her, usually then it was a woman all the time that I had the show, the ability to give grades and those grades were recorded and they were counted present for all the days that they were with us. As long as we achieved the lessons and maintained the standard—and all my children were on the A-B Honor Roll. We took it very seriously, and they took their lessons in the commissary in the morning. It was off limits to anybody but the school.

I didn't charge for the school, but I did require every parent to pay fifteen dollars into a fund, per week. Then when we hit areas like around Washington D.C., I had a van on the circus, and they would take the children to the Smithsonian or to various places, Niagara Falls, places that are of great interest to kids, historical, educational. So they got to take field trips and that was what the money was used for, these field trips, for their entrance into the museums or their food when they went on these trips. It was very, very successful. Our kids did very, very well. I was very proud of the fact that we had the school there and could achieve that. It gave me the ability to attract the employees who were interested in that also. In other words, that was one of the big pluses, the benefits, of coming to Kelly Miller, was because they had the school and

they knew it was a good one.

Finchum

How often did the teacher rotate? Was it the same one several years in a row?

Rawls

Yes, generally. I only had like three teachers in the twenty-five years that I had the show. So it was very little rotation. I managed to attract young people who were interested in the traveling, in the circus-side of the atmosphere in the equation, and made it possible for them to come and be on the show, and paid them well enough that it was attractive to them. I think what attracted them more was the fact that we were so serious about education for our kids. Not just my kids, I'm talking about my employees' kids—but in providing education for the kids that they reveled in that. I think they kind of enjoyed the fact that they were a part of something unique and unusual. I would certainly say that would be a huge plus on someone's resume down the line. And the successes that we enjoyed were obvious. Mike Arms, who was the superintendent, he said, "I never have any trouble with your kids. Your kids are very serious about school, very good in school, and very well behaved." That was a big plus for us.

Nykolaiszyn

Well, how have the animal acts changed through the years?

Rawls

Oh, there has been a multitude of changes. Of course, it's not just us, its changes in the entire country and the attitude and the atmosphere. Television has been a blessing in many, many ways, very educational, but it's also very detrimental, I think, to our country and to our mindset. There's not a scrap of news that you can't hear instantly. We have twenty-four hour news channels. I can remember when there was no news and then they finally did develop news programs on CBS, NBC, and ABC, which were the only three networks there were. They were for a half hour a night so the serious things you got to hear about.

Today, you hear about anything, everything instantly. It makes people more worried, more concerned, or in a lot of ways, calloused. You see graphic violence on television—in the news reports. You can see a robbery instantaneously. It's on the news, what results, good or bad. Missing people, we've always had missing people, you just didn't hear about it before. It wasn't a part of your life. If it didn't impact you or next door or your state or your county, you probably weren't aware of it, but today you are. Today, we know about a young lady who's missing in Indiana, college student, and we know every minute of the chase and the hunt and what happened. We'll know everything that happened to her when they finally figure out what did happen to her. I don't know that that's a good thing, because not only do we see it, but our children see it. It impacts our lives and it impacts the lives of what we do in many cases.

The animals on the circuses were always there and they were a great part of the circus. That was one of the things that was really attractive about the circus, was that they brought animals that you never got the opportunity to see. And even today, in the smaller towns, rural America, there is a huge attraction and desire for that, and I think it's beneficial. I gave a tour last weekend at the elephant Endangered Ark Foundation. We had a hundred people, hundred very sophisticated people, retirees, who have three hundred thousand dollar motor homes so they are very successful. They had to be successful people, in a variety of walks of life.

Then we had people from the Presbyterian Church in Dallas, you can tell by the way they act they are affluent people and they brought a lot of their children with them. The first time they'd ever been close to an elephant, the first time they had the opportunity to see and ask questions. We just had a birth at the Endangered Ark. They saw the baby elephant. They were very amazed to learn that the elephant weighed three hundred and twenty-three pounds when it was born. The parents were amazed at twenty-two months of gestation, the care, the knowledge that they have about the facility, about the elephants; it's something you don't get to learn or see, even if you go to the zoo. It's very rare that you have the opportunity to learn that much about the elephants. Out here, it's very much up close and personal. You get to see what they do. You get to ask questions, "Why do they do that? How do they do that? What happens? What's the ball for? Why do they play with the tires? Why do they throw dirt on their backs?" All of those questions come out in the tours and are answered in the tours. That's what's changed. You used to do that one-on-one each day.

Then the people who are negative about that, which I'm sure you're very familiar with people who call themselves vegans. They don't think we should have any interaction with animals. They don't just have that mindset. They want everybody to have that mindset. That's what amazes me about the public today, "If I believe something, I'm right. Everybody ought to believe it." I find that so strange. I have no problem with them being vegans. I have no problem with them being animal activists. I have a problem with them thinking that everybody should think like they do. I have a huge problem, and that is starting to permeate our society to a great degree, and that's not how we got here. That's not how this country was formed. You think the way you want to think. You have every right to think it, but don't force me to think it. That's a danger. To me, that's more what got Hitler in business than what we're about as a country.

Those are some of the things that have changed. We have learned a lot

over the years about how to train and handle animals, transport animals, care for animals. We've been part of a million studies about our animals. The birth of elephants in the United States was started by circus people. The first birth was at the Portland Zoo. A circus elephant trainer was the one who went there. They wanted to try it. He said he knew how. They went there and did it and were successful. Morgan Berry was the first circus trainer to go to the Portland Zoo and successfully have a live birth in the United States. From that, we've learned over the years and now there have been several successful births at zoos, quite a few. I can name the Fort Worth Zoo, the Oklahoma City Zoo, the Indianapolis Zoo, the San Diego Zoo, they're having successes.

We have participated in studies with Dr. Dennis Schmitt, who is probably the foremost expert on breeding of elephants, both African and Asian. He's in demand all over the world for his expertise in that aspect. He's the one that we consult with on our herd and our breeding. He developed sonograms for the elephants so that they can do sonograms and tell you which females are breedable and which are not, how the fetus is doing. There are all kinds of things, blood tests to tell you when ovulation occurs in the female. It aides a great deal in the breeding. It used to be just the shotgun approach. You put the females with the male as many times as you can and hope something happens. Well, we found out that that's not the way to do it. It's not very successful. It also can be detrimental to the elephants, not the male, the females because it's a rough process.

You have to be careful and take care of your females. There is no sense in putting a female in that can't breed, number one, or is not ready to breed, number two. It doesn't stop the male, but it is detrimental to the elephant. So that is something we've learned and developed. That knowledge has come from the fact that this family, with their millions of dollars invested in these elephants, is interested in finding out. They spend their dollars and their time to find it out, which is beneficial to the animal. That would not happen if it weren't for people like the Millers and the Byrds. That's often lost on our society today, especially on our people who are anti. They only see negatives. There are negatives. There are negatives in everything. I don't care if you raise cattle or horses or sheep or dogs, there are a tremendous amount of negatives and you have to overcome those. You have to learn from them, avoid them, and change the way you do things. But it doesn't mean you should stop. If that was our attitude about everything, we'd be in the Dark Ages still.

Nykolaiszyn

Well, what were some must-have animals during your twenty-five years? You're planning for the next year, you have to have elephants, and you need to have "X," what would those be?

Rawls

You wanted as large a variety of animals as you could have and not be detrimental to the animal and not be detrimental to their health and welfare. You had to have elephants. I mean, it was absolutely mandatory. Elephants and circuses were not initially a part of the same sentence. You have to remember that the first elephants imported were imported into a permanent facility in Connecticut and then later on, to circuses.

Circuses, primarily, relied on the horse, back in the horse and wagon days. As a matter of fact, there was a gentleman in Missouri, just right outside of Hannibal, Missouri, at a facility called The Cellar. I assume because it's half underground, half above ground. He made his living trading horses. He traded to the military back in the cavalry days and traded to circuses, because there were a lot of horses around the circuses. My father grew up working a team. They pulled the tents into the air with teams. They pulled the wagons from the train to the lot with teams. Then that started changing.

When the cavalry, United States Army, stopped using horses, it changed a lot of things in a lot of places. People don't realize that, but he went from raising, and breeding, and selling, and trading horses to elephants. He had a lot of elephants at his facility, and so he began to trade with the circuses and buy and sell elephants. For many years, he did sell at that facility. I'm going back quite a ways in our history, but it became that the elephants pulled the wagons from the train to the lot. It became an attraction and they paraded. In other words, instead of just hauling the wagons from the lot to the train, they paraded and created a crowd, an enthusiasm, and a following. You have to remember that circuses didn't have sponsors back then. They would just come into town, rent the lot, or the grounds, and start setting up and sell tickets that day. There were no advanced sales. They did have free passes and things that they gave away, trade for press, or for arrangements for grain or water or whatever they needed at the commissary, or whatever they needed for that day, but there were no advanced sales.

They had to create an interest. Well, they did so with the parade. Instead of just pulling the wagons to the lot, they paraded and brought the elephants, brought the horses, brought the wagons, performers, and the band would play, start up the excitement. They'd usually do that around ten o'clock. The parade was at ten o'clock. Of course, there were already many wagons taken to the lot before ten o'clock because the setup had already started, but they took the majority of everything from the train at around ten o'clock. It created an interest—what became termed in the business as “the ten o'clock call,” because at ten o'clock, on the grounds, they would open the concessions. They would open the sideshows. They would open the snake show or the exhibits. Not the

circus itself, but all that was open and people could see things and do things on the grounds, buy their tickets. Then they would come back for the performances. You have to remember the Ringling Show, in its heyday under the big top, they could seat fourteen thousand people.

Finchum *For one show?*

Rawls One show. They had two thousand employees. They moved every day. They moved it every day.

Finchum *You'd have to be very organized and...*

Rawls Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, there is a book called *The Game of the Foxes*. It was written about pre-war, World War II Germany and the spying and the intelligence. It gives you a clue at how soon Hitler knew he was going to go to war, because he was preparing in the early- to mid-'30s for the war. He actually sent German spies over here to follow the Ringling Show, because he wanted to figure out how to move an army as efficiently as they moved that circus. They spied on the Ringling Show, found out how they loaded the trains, and how they fed the people, and how they moved the people, and housed the people on the trains. That's in a book called *The Game of the Foxes*. I'd stumbled on it. I'm a history buff and was reading the book and I was shocked. There was this story in the '30s of Hitler sending spies over here to follow the Ringling Show.

Finchum *You said you had seventy employees?*

Rawls I had seventy on the circus.

Finchum *Performers or total?*

Rawls Total, on the circus. The most employees I ever had was ninety.

Finchum *The ones that actually set up the lot? The ones that were not performing, where would you find those people?*

Rawls Initially, I started hiring local help. As things digressed in this country, drugs—it was not an element I wanted in my circus. I was very disgusted, disappointed in the quality of help, because I wouldn't tolerate drugs. I just abhor drugs. I didn't want them around my circus. Alcohol, you can't keep people away from alcohol. It's a legal thing, but I didn't want it around my circus either. So I was very strict about that. I had a hard time with my help, because people who'd been into drugs or in that culture just did not think the same way I did.

So I was very disgusted until I sought out help from Mexico. I learned how to apply for visas, and I applied for visas for what they called an H2B, which is temporary help. They could come for a period less than a year. They had to go home. So I solicited help and I had Mexican people I knew. I went to Mexico, and I hired all my people from a town called Pueblo, which is where the University of the Americas is. I've been there many times. I would go and interview and visit in the wintertime. It became very, very easy. They knew that I would hire. They knew that my people came, spent a season. I flew them home, paid them well, paid them bonuses at the end of the year, so it was no problem getting help the next year. I had most of my people return. They would come back year after year, as long as I could get the visas.

That's one thing that became difficult is the visas, extremely difficult. It seems like they made it more and more difficult, as the years went by, to obtain visas for these folks. But they were all background checked, they were all good people. I paid them, and fed them, and took care of them, and then sent them home, and then they returned the next season. I couldn't find people in the United States that wanted to do what we did. I developed a relationship with Pueblo, Mexico, a little town called Cholula is where I always went and stayed, which is right outside a suburb of Pueblo.

Finchum *Did you learn to speak the language?*

Rawls Yes, I did learn to speak the language. I felt it was imperative that I had to speak the language. I think we, as Americans, are extremely lazy to go to foreign countries and not try to speak their language. Not everyone is successful, not everyone has the same ability to learn languages. It's different from person to person, but if I'm going to have people who work for me—now, they want to learn English. And they all did. They learned English very, very well. They adapted very well. Of course, they were immersed in it. You have to remember, they come from Mexico. They come up here where almost everybody speaks English so they had to learn just to go to the store or buy groceries, or do whatever they wanted to do. They had to learn how to speak English. But I thought it was imperative that I learn how to speak Spanish so I worked very hard at it.

Finchum *About how many each year would you bring over?*

Rawls I usually brought around twenty-four, twenty-five. It would vary depending on the needs, but I would usually bring twenty-four, twenty-five up on visas. They would work for the season and then go home. The rest of my employees were all from the United States.

Nykolaiszyn

What were some of their job duties?

Rawls

Oh, they varied. Big top hand, they would work in the animal department as a groom. Some worked in the commissary. I would interview and find out what their skills were. I had mechanics, people who could fix trucks or work in the mechanics department, people who worked in the electrical department. I let them gravitate towards what they wanted to gravitate towards, within reason. I mean, you only need so many electricians. The circus is like a little town. You need a utility department, a water department, an electrical department. You've got cleanup with your trash every day, cleanup the trash, someone has to clean the bathrooms every day, the commissary has to operate, you have to serve food to all these people on a regular basis. There was plenty of work.

Finchum

Well, as you moved from town to town, would you get supplies along the way?

Rawls

Oh, absolutely. There were many things that we certainly couldn't carry. I had to buy hay and grain for the animals on an almost daily basis. We could haul a certain amount, probably a week's worth, at the most. We would resupply twice a week, make sure we never ran out or got close. Then food for the commissary; five days a week we would shop for the commissary. You didn't try to shop on weekends because it was too demanding, but we could stock up for the weekend. We always had, in the commissary, emergency meals, in case something happened, something broke down, you always had a meal or two set aside. But we would shop on a daily basis for food.

We had to buy fuel on a daily basis. There were a plethora of other things. Of course, everybody shopped. I paid on Sunday so Monday was a big day in the town we were in, because all of the performers would go to town. They would probably buy toys or clothes or gifts or hardware or whatever they needed. They did that on a regular basis, same thing with the working guys. They would all go to town, hit the stores, and resupply or get ready for the next week, or buy something that they had their eye on and saved their money for, and that took place quite often. We spent money in every town we went to.

Finchum

You'd have to plan ahead too, to know that there is food to get for the animals, from the town?

Rawls

Yes, and we had the home office, of course. If I had an extraordinary need I could call the home office and say, "See if you can arrange for hay and such and such." But we also had an advance man, twenty-four hour man. He would be in town a day ahead of us. When I arrived and

we got everything organized for the new day in the new town, he would leave and go to the next town. I would tell him if I needed fuel. I would tell him if I needed hay or grain. Of course, the commissary, they took care of themselves. He didn't have to arrange that, but yes, any of those needs were taken care of. Logistically—a lot of logistics to the circus.

Finchum

Yes.

Rawls

A lot of logistics. It's a lot of businesses rolled into one. You're in the trucking industry. You have to keep your trucks up and running, and not only up and running, but you have to comply with all the laws of each state that you travel through. You have to be tagged, pay your highway use tax, your fuel tax in all those states, your drivers all have to be certified. So you have to have a method for doing that, like a trucking company even though we were not. Our average season was ten to twelve thousand miles, but a lot of people think we were in the trucks all the time. I guess it was forty-eight miles a day, an hour a day. But you had to have good drivers, and you had to have all the correct paperwork. They all had to have health cards so you had to have a doctor give them a physical, and you had to have a certified health card in their file.

You had to have a logistical system for maintaining your equipment. You had to have a log book for your travels. When a state trooper stopped one of our trucks, we had a book in there that he could open up and see when was the last time we changed the oil, checked the brakes, if we had any problems with the truck, reported or unreported. He did an inspection of the truck to make sure it was up to snuff and in compliance. So you're in the trucking industry. In addition, you're in the circus business. Your building inspector comes out and he wants to check your tent for design and wind load and...

Finchum

How often would that happen?

Rawls

Oh, you were subject to it every day, every day.

Nykolaiszyn

The fire marshal?

Rawls

The fire marshal comes out and wants to make sure you have correct fire lanes and exits for the public so they can get in and out of the tent, wants to make sure that you're not going to set the world on fire when you put your big top up. You have the health department come out on a regular basis and check your concession stands and make sure you are in compliance with all the state health codes and health laws.

Nykolaiszyn

OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration], ever?

Rawls Oh, yes, OSHA. We've dealt with OSHA. Although, usually, you deal with OSHA when you begin to have a lot of problems. Department of Labor, OSHA is going to come out and check you out if you have injured workers or injured public. That was very, very rare, but you had to comply with OSHA standards, and you were subject to an inspection by OSHA anytime. We had hardhats. We had earplugs. There were a multitude of things that we had to provide, according to OSHA standards, for our employees. We had to see to it that they weren't injured or working too long, a lot of things. There were no different rules for us than there were for anybody else.

Finchum *You had to have insurance, various kinds?*

Rawls Absolutely. We had to have insurance on our trucks to be able to operate. You couldn't drive a mile without it. Liability insurance to protect our sponsors and our show grounds. Insurance was a huge part, a huge expense, with the circus. It's something that was absolutely mandatory.

Finchum *Does someone in the home office take care of that or would you, as the owner?*

Rawls I usually took care of insurance. I would negotiate the policy. Of course, it's what they call 'specialty insurance' so there are very few people that you deal with. Your average insurance agency on the street doesn't deal with that kind of insurance, but there are specialty companies around the country. They became familiar with us, and we became familiar with them. We would try to negotiate the best deal we possibly could. A lot of it was determined by your records, the same as your driving record if you want automobile insurance, it impacts your cost. It's the same thing with a circus. If our record was bad, we were going to pay through the nose for insurance, but if our record was good, we were going to be sought after. We would be able to negotiate a little fairer price than someone who didn't have a good record.

Finchum *And then health insurance for the employees?*

Rawls I delved into that—several issues, some of the laws. When I first started providing health insurance for my employees, they passed the law that if you provided for one you had to provide for all. So I couldn't pick and choose my staff. See, I had people that really weren't interested in it because they were only under a season contract, but I had staff who were there year after year and I wanted to provide it for them. I was informed I couldn't do that, it's illegal. So I turned it around and did it another way. I just paid them what my portion of the insurance would be into their salaries and then they got their own insurance. I got around it that

way, but it was something I wanted to provide. If I could afford it and provide it, I wanted too because it helped me attract staff.

Finchum *Let's talk a little bit more about logistics. Now there are three circuses in town.*

Rawls Yes.

Finchum *Do you all get together and decide who's going which way and when?*

Rawls Absolutely not. You don't do that! (Laughter) No, Mr. Miller and I always had a game. Once I had Kelly Miller and I took it out, we would never talk about where we were going or when we were opening. We played a little game, and so we would set our opening day and where we were going to open. After it was written in stone, and printed, and contracts were signed, then we became aware of it. So it was kind of a little game we played with each other. I knew where he was going to go, and I knew where I wanted to go. And he knew that too. He didn't want to be where I wanted to be. I wanted to be in Small Town, U.S.A., Small Town, America. However, I wanted to show that I could also play Chicago or Washington D.C., the suburbs around Maryland, Kansas City, and St. Louis. I could do that. I didn't enjoy doing that. I did it and had great success and great business.

We played Chicago for twenty-one days in the fall of the year, every year. I developed twenty-one days of route in Chicago in the suburbs. I did it very successfully. It was very lucrative and financially beneficial for the show. However, I didn't enjoy it. It was something I did because it was business and you had to do it. But I enjoyed playing in Small Town, America. I enjoyed playing in the towns where they are glad to have you, you're a great diversion from everyday life, and it was fun to be there. That was the thing I liked, to go to the little towns in upstate New York and upstate Michigan and play towns that were smaller. People were more friendly and open and tickled to see you. You had a good time and you got to know them.

City people are much, much different. Not bad, their lives are so busy and they just don't even think the same way as rural people. I like to call it the "growing up on concrete" aspect. If you grow up in the city, you tend to always be on concrete, everything you want is around you, all the entertainment you want is around you, you just pick and choose and do whatever your heart desires. Rural people tend to be much easier to visit with, talk to, and entertain. They are used to entertaining themselves. They don't have all the entertainment. It's a big trip to go to the city to see a basketball game or a football game. But if you grow up in Norman, Oklahoma, or Stillwater, you can see them anytime you want. It's a

whole different ballgame so I had much more of an affinity with rural people in Small Town, America. So that's where I liked to be. His [Mr. Miller's] show was larger and had to be in bigger towns anyway.

Finchum *So you didn't cross paths too many times when you were out doing your shows?*

Rawls No, we did cross paths and all shows are going to. They are what we call crossroad states. Ohio is a crossroad state. If you're going to go to the east and come back to the west or vice versa, you're going to cross Ohio if you're in the north, in the summertime. You're not going to dip all the way down into Kentucky and Tennessee and go around to get to Maryland or get to Pennsylvania, you're going to go across. That's a crossroad state. Indiana is a crossroad state. You're going to cross paths with other shows, but it tends to be quick. Usually, you're going in opposite directions. So you might be close to one another for a day, but that's it. And that's part of the business. That happens not only with shows out of Hugo, but it happens with shows all over the country.

I did not go west at all in the twenty-five years I had the circus. I have no desire to be in California. I never found California attractive. I was stationed there. I served time in the military there. You've got a little strip of land along the ocean and then you've got the desert. (Laughs) The only part of California that is really beautiful and attractive is Northern California. And it is beautiful. You get up in the High Sierras and the beautiful forest, north of Sacramento, that is a beautiful part of the country, but it's very unpopulated. There are not a whole lot of people that live up there. The majority of your people in California are in deserts, high desert, low desert, they're in the desert, and it's not my favorite place to play with a tent. The wind, the dust, the rules, the regulations, the traffic, the fact that you have to cross the mountains and the desert to get there, cross the mountains and the desert to get back, I never took my show west. I've toured in the west, I've toured California with other shows, but I never took my show west. I'm more of a northeast, central to northern United States, and east.

Finchum *Tennessee?*

Rawls Oh, yes. I played Tennessee, played Kentucky, played Ohio, played Maryland, New Hampshire, upstate New York. I did not like the far east coast, Massachusetts. Maine is a bad. Maine is a great state. I love Maine. It's beautiful, I like the people, but there is one way in and one way out. Maine has one main highway that goes up through it and so you've got to go over it and backtrack over it. If any other show goes, you're tripping over used territory. There's not a plethora of places to play in Maine so logistically it didn't make sense for me.

Finchum

You have to be a geographer.

Rawls

You have to know a little bit about geography, and you have to know a little bit about the right time to be at the right places. You asked me earlier about Midwest shows in the early days. At an early age, I said, “Why do we do what we do? We go south real quick into Texas, and then we turn around and we just go like crazy back all the way to the Canadian border.” It didn’t dawn on me that there was a method to this madness. We would open up in the spring of the year and go south into Texas, and you’d follow the wheat harvest. The wheat harvest would start down here and gravitate north all the way to the Canadian border. After that, it was time for the corn harvest, and so you would turn around and follow the corn harvest back. When you got down to this part of the country, you had the cotton crop or if you went to Louisiana, you had cane season, where they cut cane.

The reason for the shows following the crops is because that’s when people had money in their pocket. That’s when they had the ability to go to a circus or have a good time. So that was how the routes developed. Things changed dramatically as farming and agriculture changed. They don’t tassel corn anymore. They have machines that do it and no longer are a lot of people employed. They don’t pick cotton anywhere anymore. There are no cotton gins and that’s where the circus used to play, actually, on the gin lot because usually, cotton is grown in black dirt country, and so in the wet season it’s pretty muddy. They always had a gin lot that had been filled with gravel or shale and you could put the wagons, haul their cotton wagons down to the gin lot, waiting to be ginned. It made a great place for the circus to show, because it was a large lot and it would accommodate all the trucks and the tents and everything. And it wouldn’t be muddy. So I played on a lot of gin lots when I was a kid, but they don’t even exist anymore. You can’t find a gin lot. You can’t find a cotton gin anymore. (Laughs)

That was part of the thing I learned about the routing, is that there’s a reason for being where you want to be. Just like Michigan, upstate Michigan, you don’t want to get there too early. You have to wait until tourist season, because all those towns are waiting for the same thing you are, the tourists to come. When the tourists come, they’ve got dollars in their pockets. They have the opportunity—not only they, but the tourists themselves—are looking for something to do when they tend to be on vacation and acting as tourists, they are looking for things to do. The circus is a great entertainment for them and it’s available, but it also is accommodating for the people who live in the communities. Traditionally, in upstate Michigan, they hire high school kids, college kids for the summer to work in a multitude of venues.

I don't know if you're familiar with Traverse City, Michigan, or not but there is an influx of people, fifty thousand people a week travel in and out of Traverse City. Gorgeous beaches, amusement parks, the cherry festival, golf, great golf courses. It's geared for entertainment of the tourists, and there are fifty thousand migrant tourists every week that rotate in and out of Traverse City during the summer.

Finchum

Just keep the circus there, then.

Rawls

And believe me, I've thought about that. If it was something that I wanted to do, but believe me, there are fourteen different putt-putt golf courses in Traverse City, Michigan, at least. It's a perfect place for a summer entertainment venue, where you are there all summer. Utilize college kids or high school kids for your band, for your entertainers, for your ticket takers, for your ticket sellers, and it would work. It's something I studied quite a bit. I even looked into buying land or leasing land to put up a summer circus. It would have to be a combination. It would have to be fast-paced and entertaining, and you might combine it with something like putt-putt golf with an animal park-type atmosphere.

That's something that I've thought about a great deal. I just didn't think about it until I didn't have enough energy to do it anymore, but it would be something that, I think, would work. It would be a great entertainment venue, because when I went to the airport and looked at the flights, the number of flights—they come in from Detroit, Chicago, a multitude of other places, but a lot of flights from Detroit, Chicago. I got with the demographics and the Chamber of Commerce and I found out that fifty thousand people turn over in that town during the summer every week. Well, that is plenty of people to try to attract a portion of them to your venue.

Finchum

Sure.

Nykolaiszyn

Well, what was the perfect sized lot for Kelly Miller? What were you looking for?

Rawls

Oh, we wanted three hundred feet by three hundred feet. I had to have three hundred feet square. I didn't have to have it, but that was ideal and that was just for the show, not including parking. Quite often, we had lots larger than that. Many, many times we had lots smaller than that, and then you had to be a bit of a magician to get the show on the lot. But you had to have enough room for your tent, which is a hundred and twenty feet round. I had to have a hundred and twenty feet each way. Then you would like to have twenty feet for the fire lane for your fire marshal, and then you have to have enough room to park your

equipment. You had to park your equipment, many times, in a certain way. You had to have your concession stand near the entrance so that it wasn't [hard to find].

Nykolaiszyn

As an owner during the season, you're on the road. What is a typical day like when you arrive on the lot?

Rawls

Well, I can give you a typical day. My day started, I usually got up at five o'clock A.M. I'd put some coffee on, I got ready, and then went out and I'd start waking people up, making sure everybody was ready to go. Now, my routine was to leave early. However, I didn't leave early before anybody else was up and around. I wanted to make sure my staff, my key employees, were up and going and doing the things they wanted. Then I would get in my rig and go to the next town. I would arrive on the grounds and immediately visit with the twenty-four hour man, who was there ahead of me. He would tell me where he had the big top spotted, why he had it that way. There were a lot of things that went into it.

I would, first of all, look at the logistics for the next town the day before. I would go through my file, who was my sponsor, what was the lot, how was the ticket sales—a variety of things—what was the water source, what was the trash and manure source, things like that. I'd also look at the weather. I wanted to know what the weather was going to be. What it was going to do or what it could do that day. It might change the way I laid the lot out, where I put the tent, where I put my trucks. So all that went into consideration when you got there. If everything was normal and you had the lot in a decent place and it was a good access and aimed the right way so the public didn't get confused on how to approach the circus and how to get in and buy their tickets and all that, then I would park my rig and again, have another cup of coffee, probably my second of thirty that day, and begin to park the trucks as they came in, because they would start arriving probably fifteen-twenty-thirty minutes after I arrived. That transition took place.

We were all usually all on the grounds by oh, seven-thirty. Everybody had a place they would park, and I would park the trucks in the place that they went. He [twenty-four hour man] would handle the performers and the house trailers and I would handle the trucks. We'd get everything located where it went, and then the people would come out of the trucks and go to work. When the animals arrived, you immediately put up the awning, you put up the fencing, you unloaded the animals, and you started cleaning the animals' area up and feeding, watering, and things like that. It all had to be done.

The public usually would come out around nine o'clock. Almost every

day, people came out to watch the show go up, and we had a tour that we gave. We told them about the animals, we took them into the tent and they watched as the tent went through the air. If they had questions we would answer them. We told them about what the show times were and how much the tickets were and whatever their questions were. That usually went on, and by eleven o'clock we were usually done, ready to go. It was during that time that if we had a mechanical problem or we needed filters or needed a new tire or needed a drum of oil, or whatever the case may be, we would take care of those logistics during that time frame. Some of them would go off and do the commissary buying. We had a buyer, an assigned buyer. They would get a list from the cook and the cook would tell them what they needed for the next day's meals, and off to the grocery store they went to buy the food.

If I had a fuel truck coming that day, I would make sure we had enough cash in the office to pay for the fuel, usually around three thousand dollars that we had to have in cash to pay the fuel man. Someone was assigned to go around with the fuel man, in the mechanics department, and make sure every truck had fuel with the proper fuel and that the generators were fueled and ready to go. At nine o'clock in the morning the generators started, and that's when the personnel who ran the office and worked in the office and dealt with the sponsors and sold the tickets, they'd go to the office. Their computers would now work, and their lighting would now work, and their calculators would now work, and so they would begin their day. Concession stand was getting cleaned, would get cleaned from the day before and ready for that day's operation. The concession manager would see to it that he had the stock that he needed for the day. We bought ice, sugar, apples, and hot dogs on a daily basis so all that was taken care of during that time frame.

At eleven o'clock the cookhouse would serve lunch. I skipped a little part. At five o'clock in the morning, when I get up, the commissary has already got coffee and rolls and things on. So as everybody gets up, they go to the commissary and get a cup of coffee and something to eat in preparation for the day. Then at noon, they served another meal in the commissary. Then starting at the intermission of the first show, they started serving supper. They served that until after the show was over, well after the show was over so that everybody had an opportunity to eat dinner. Then they would close up, clean up, and tear down the commissary in preparation for the move to the next town.

At two-thirty we started preparing for the performance. We had a three-thirty midway call. Typically, our shows were at four-thirty during the week. Three-thirty is midway call, everybody has to be in place and ready at three-thirty. If you worked on the midway, if you did elephant rides or worked in the concession department or took tickets, you had to

be ready to go at three-thirty and in uniform. The ushers had to be in uniforms, and animal grooms had to be in uniform. So everything had to be ready to go at three-thirty. You started preparing for that at two-thirty. The elephants get a bath, horses are brushed, and everything is cleaned up, spiffed up and made ready to go. I typically would do a walk-through at three-thirty. I walked down the midway to make sure everybody was where they were supposed to be, which was an automatic. They knew me very well. They knew I'd be there so I really didn't have to do anything, it was just a walk.

I would also go into the big top to check and make sure that there were no obstructions, everything was where it was supposed to be, and the public could enter the big top and walk to their seating area in a good, safe manner, no side wall was left hanging up or down, all the lighting was like it was supposed to be, all the backdoor curtains were drawn so it looked like we were ready for a show when the public walked in. You didn't want it to look like half-done. It had to be ready to go. Then the people would come. They'd buy their tickets. They'd ride the elephants and do whatever. Then they would gravitate into the big top.

At four-thirty, the performance would begin. The performance went on for an hour and forty-five minutes, and then that show was over and those people would leave. Then they would ride the elephants or the pony ride or whatever, buy cotton candy or a souvenir, and then they would leave and get in their cars. Then at six-thirty, the crowd started coming for the next show, and you would do the second performance. On a normal day, when everything is going right, the second performance would be over and when that was over we would start the teardown and dismantling the entire operation. That took about an hour and ten minutes.

At the end, I would walk around and make sure the animals were like they were supposed to be and the tent was put away and all the stakes were picked up. I had good bosses, good staff, that took care of everything. Then I would go to my trailer and try to relax. I never was able to just lie down and go to sleep. I'd watch a movie or have a cocktail or whatever. Then I'd go to bed, and then the next morning start again.

Nykolaiszyn

Would you have a role during the performance or what were you doing?

Rawls

Typically, I did not. I had people who did those things. There is not much I hadn't done or couldn't do. At times on my circus I worked the elephants, I worked the horses, I did the announcing. I even performed my western act, brought it out of moth balls and performed my western act when I had a performer who was injured, had a broken ankle and was

out of the performance for a while. Typically, I did not do that. Typically, I was just there. When everything was running just right it was very, very boring for me because I had great staff, great bosses, and they took care of what they were supposed to take care of. There wasn't anything that much for me to do.

It was only when things went out of the norm that I became involved and entwined in the activity, and I was very entwined. People would tell you I was very hands-on. If we had a storm or if we had a muddy lot or if we had tough inspectors that gave us a problem of some kind, I was very involved. But when everything was normal and typical, which were the majority of the days on Kelly Miller Circus, it was a very boring—from the outside looking in—a very boring operation. My part was not that tough at all because like I say, I had good staff and everything moved like a clock. It was very good. It's what I worked towards and worked hard to achieve. Once I achieved it, there wasn't that much to do. People knew what to do. My staff, my bosses, even the employees, they knew what to do. They knew what we demanded and what our role was, and they certainly knew what I expected of them for the public, for our patrons. They were key.

Finchum

What was the most important job? What do you see as the most important job?

Rawls

Oh, gosh! I used to give a speech every spring on my circus. I did it for twenty-five years. "There is no one here more important than the other. There are no stars in the Kelly Miller Circus. We are all stars. You might think of your position as being the lowest on the ladder, I have no such fantasy. Everybody is important. Every job is important. We are all here to do one job and we must do it well. So we have to work together to do that." I said, "If you ever begin to think you're better than someone else, you're in trouble in my mind, because I just absolutely will not tolerate that kind of an attitude." One thing there used to be, years ago, they used to have in the commissary different tables for staff, performers, working men. They had different tables that they ate at.

Finchum

They didn't mingle.

Rawls

They didn't mingle. They didn't separate. I eliminated that the first year I had my show, and it became a question because people were used to it in the industry. I said, "No, you sit wherever you like to sit. Working men can sit with performers or staff. You sit next to who you want to. There's no assigned tables, no assigned place to eat." It's just not something that I condone, and it worked. I mean, it worked very, very well. People appreciated that. People are people. I don't care whether you clean the bathrooms or you're a groom with the elephants or you're

the best trapeze performer in the country. They appreciate it. They appreciate the fact that people are people. They all have problems. They all have issues. They all have little nagging issues outside of their daily work, and you have to be cognizant and aware of that.

You don't have to get involved in their business, but you certainly have to be smart enough to know that their focus is not 100 percent, three hundred and sixty five days a year of their job. They also have other issues, "Is my truck working? Do I have water today? Is my air conditioner out? Are my kids acting up? Do I have a sick child? Is my wife sick? Are my wife and I fighting?" Those are all issues that everybody deals with in their personal lives and you have to, as a boss and someone who looks after the entire show, you have to be well aware of that. You have to make allowances for it and make room for it and make tolerance for it. Now, we still have to do our jobs.

Quite often, I was father confessor and people would come and tell me their troubles, and I would have to deal with issues that I really didn't want to deal with, but it was part of my job, too. It's important to them so it's important to me. So you would try to resolve the issues if you could without inserting yourself into peoples' personal lives.

Nykolaiszyn

When your season's over, you're coming home to winter quarters, what activities now, from an owners perspective, are happening in the off season?

Rawls

Well, I'm in hyper mode. Now you go into a little depression— personally, this is just me. Not depression that everybody else knew about, but you've used up another season so now you have to begin from scratch to redo your route. Typically, it's already started. Usually, we started booking the next season at least by September 1. So you already know where you are going for the year, but logistically you have to, "Okay, what equipment needs to be refurbished? What equipment needs to be replaced? Do I need a new tent? Am I losing people, serious staff that I'm going to have to replace? How soon do I need to start? The elephant truck needs a new floor and a paint job. We are going to have to redo the inside of the interior of the elephant truck." So that's on your mind. You schedule that. "How much time is it going to take to redo the truck? It'll tie up the barn for so many days."

Mechanically, you go through. There's a routine on the mechanics. You check all the brakes, you change oil, and check the lighting on every truck. Your signal lights and all of that have to be working so it goes through the mechanic shop. Every vehicle goes through the mechanic shop, and you double check brakes and if you need to replace brake shoes and brake drums and all of that.

And you start to think about, “Okay, we came in with this X amount of dollars, and so how much am I going to spend on getting ready for the next season?” So you allocate a budget for your winter quarters, and you allocate a budget for refurbishing, and if you’re going to buy any new equipment for a new tent or a new truck or a new generator, all of that goes into that budget and planning. In addition, you have to take care of the staff that remains in the wintertime. And your office staff is year-around. We shut down for two weeks, and everybody takes their vacations between Christmas and New Year’s. I mean December 15 and January 1, that’s when everybody takes their vacations and we totally shut down, but other than that, we’re operating in the wintertime.

It becomes a labor. You don’t get what feeds you. There’s no public, there’s no shows, there’s no dollars. So the things that can energize you and keep you going, you have to push yourself through the winter, but you’re looking forward to the next spring and getting out in the next season and your hopes and aspirations for a good year, a healthy year. Success to me was not just dollars. You have to make enough money to keep the show going, keep it looking good, and keep it operating, absolutely. That’s business. But a successful year to me was a year that you had enough dollars to go to the next year, everybody was safe, everybody got through the year, the public was entertained, we made all our performances, all of our animals were okay and healthy. That was a successful year. That was the uppermost in my mind.

Finchum

Were most of yours successful, then?

Rawls

This may sound like I’m patting myself, but I have twenty-five winning seasons, very blessed, very blessed. The Good Lord smiles on fools and Irishmen, and I’m covered in both categories. (Laughs)

Finchum

What made you decide to get out of the business—that part of the business?

Rawls

You want me to be absolutely candid? Government. It seemed like every year, every season, there was a new rule, a new regulation that was aimed at putting us out of business, and it hasn’t gotten any better. It’s one of the things we’re learning as a country right now. We are in serious trouble as a country. We’re some fifteen trillion dollars in debt, and I don’t know how many millions of people are unemployed. We’re in trouble and yet we continue to grow our federal government, our state government, bureaucrats think of ways to tax or permit or fee every activity. I was in a town in Idaho, just the other day, I pulled up their permits. They have one, you have to have a permit to go out of business in a town in Idaho. Now, that’s the nth degree to me. And that’s what’s

happening in this country.

The immigration problem, if you look at it from the perspective of reality, there are sixty-six thousand H2B visas issued for Mexico every year. They're gone. They open the process twice a year, two six-month periods, July 1, January 1. They close by January the 3rd, it got down to. Three days after they opened, it was closed. They had far more than thirty-three thousand applications, so they would close the process. You couldn't put a permit application in for a visa. Then July, the same thing, another thirty-three thousand were issued. By July 3rd or 4th, it was gone. You couldn't put another application in. There is no problem with bringing people into this country who want to work. I have nothing against that.

Believe me, Mexican people are great people. I'm totally impressed by their work ethic. The old wives' tale that they are lazy is so far from true it's unbelievable. They work in all states in this country, Mexican people. They take the jobs that most people wouldn't take. They hang dry wall, they lay brick, they do work on road crews, and they mow yards. They do jobs no one else would really want. They do them enthusiastically, they do them well, they save their money. They don't give you any trouble, for the most part.

The issue is the government. If the government would give you three hundred thousand H2B visas you'd have a lot less illegals, because once those are gone, people are still going to come to try to work, to survive, to live. Issue more visas. With visas you have control, they pay taxes, they get a social security card, they're part of our fabric of our society, they contribute, and they also go home. H2B requires that they return to their country of origin within a year so they go back to Mexico. If they knew that they had an opportunity to come back in, they'd go back because they'd like to see their family, they'd like to see their homes, their moms or dads or children or wives, whatever the case may be. It's not as complicated as our politicians make it out to be. You wouldn't have all the illegals in this country if you had a system that allowed for them to come in.

I understand that you have to ensure that you are not taking jobs away from Americans, but after years of advertising and being in this industry and advertising for local help to travel with the circus, we never could supply our help needs. People didn't want to do what we did. However, the Mexicans were the answer for us. They readily did what we wanted to do, they did it well, they returned home, and believe me, it was a blessing on both sides. They were glad to have the work, and we were glad to have them. They didn't do drugs, they didn't get drunk, they did their job, they were there all the time, and they had a work ethic. The

people that would answer the ads for us were drunks or drug addicts or problems, and we didn't want that in our industry. So it became an issue.

If you go to most departments of transportation across the country you'll find a lot of Mexican crews that are contracted workers. The reason? They're there, they'll do the work, even though it's hard—hot, hard, and they're there, they do the work. They pay them the same so there, it's not an issue that way. I think there is a happy medium there where you can say, "Okay, we are going to open this up and have more temporary work visas," because those people do. With a visa, I had to get a social security card, I paid taxes on all the employees, they contributed social security even though they don't draw it. It's another helpful answer to our problems. You have to look at it realistically, from the perspective of the people involved. It can't be a "one size fits all."

I have the same philosophy about education. We were successful with our educational program on Kelly Miller, because it fit my people. When you try to make rules out of Washington D.C. of the education of our children who live all across this country in different atmospheres, grow up differently, you're making a huge mistake. Kids who grow up in Oklahoma are different than kids who grow up in San Francisco. I think the education needs to remain at the local level, as local as you can get it so that you can accommodate the needs of your children. We may need more technical education in rural America and gear ourselves a lot less towards college, because I don't care what you do, you need people. You need electricians, you need plumbers, you need ditch diggers, you need people who can work on road crews and operate heavy equipment, and those are technical skills. They're not taught in college. I don't know too many college people that can drive a pay loader (laughs) or do electric wiring or do plumbing. In a lot of ways they think it's beneath them. But, we need technical skills in this country.

We need to adapt ourselves in our educational process to the people instead of having an educator deem what is necessary for all of us from Washington D.C. We need to go to the local level and say, "What is necessary here? What do you need? What do we need to be able to keep our kids in Hugo and provide jobs for the future, so they can make a living, grow up here, and stay here instead of having to go away?" That's not in the equation today, but it needs to be.

And certainly, technical education has been the stepchild in our country. I've read about Russia, I've read about Eastern Europe, they separate them at an early age. If you have the aptitude and the desire to go on to college, you go one way in about junior high, over there. If you're more on the technical side of things you go a different way. The educational process starts dividing when they're young teens, and so they learn skills

that they want to learn and pursue careers that they want to pursue. The educational system is designed to accommodate that, and I think it's very wise. I think we have to stop saying, "You're not worth anything if you don't have a college education." That's an absolute travesty, in my opinion. Abraham Lincoln didn't have a college education.

Nykolaiszyn *Your regulations are becoming tighter, you're thinking about selling the show, how does one...*

Rawls Well, primarily there were two things, the regulations and my children.

Nykolaiszyn *Okay.*

Rawls My children grew up in the business and they kind of thought, "Well, we'd like to try something else." I wanted them to continue to run the show. As long as they had an interest in it and wanted to do it, I was enthusiastic about them doing it. And they even did it for two years. I stayed home, and they did it for the last two years, but they had children of their own. They were starting to think, "Okay, maybe there is another side to life that we'd like to try." I always raised my kids to, "Do whatever you want to do. I want you to be able to do whatever you wanted to do." I insist on education. Both of my kids went to college, but only to please me and to assure myself that if they didn't choose show business, if show business wasn't the way they wanted to go, they could do whatever they want. So they wanted to try something different.

I lost my enthusiasm for continuing if my children didn't want to continue in the business. I started thinking, and my wife and I—we're not spring chickens anymore, we're getting older. I didn't really think about selling the show, I just thought about stopping. I didn't know that there was a huge interest in my show. Well, it turns out a man in Ireland was interested in buying my show and contacted me. I said, "Well, yes, I'll sell it," and then we agreed, had to negotiate a price, and had to work through all the details, but we did that. So it went out the next season. I assisted him. My staff remained. Anybody that wanted to stay got to stay. The staff remained and most of my people weren't out of work and having to go other places to find jobs, which pleased me a great deal. That was one of the hardest things about stopping was, "What happens to my people?" Believe me, after twenty-five years, they become your people.

Nykolaiszyn *Yes. They're family.*

Rawls They're family, much like the animals. People don't understand. I had those elephants for twenty-five years. They are like part of my family. You miss them. I can readily identify with someone who has a dog or a

cat that they're in love with, a parakeet, or whatever the case may be. I can't understand why they can't identify with my association with an animal, even though the animal works. The animal earns its way too. There's no one on a circus that doesn't earn their way. I think that's the way life should be, you've got to earn your way.

Nykolaiszyn *Did you choose the location for the Kelly Miller winter quarters?*

Rawls Yes, I bought the property, built the buildings, put up the fences, built the barns. (Laughs)

Finchum *You could've done it anywhere, but you chose Hugo?*

Rawls Oh, yes. I have a great affinity for Hugo, Oklahoma. The town was good to us. When I came here as child, over the years, the relationship—I went to school here, got to know the people here, they treated my family well. There are so many people here that treated my family, my parents, very, very well. I know the bankers, I know the school system, I know the educational system. I owe the town a debt, and I've always felt that way. I have an affinity for this community. I like it. They've never treated show people as a pariah or strange or an oddity. There has always been a very cordial relationship. Now, not everybody in the town feels that way. There are many who don't know any of us in show business and are not too sure they want to know us, that kind of attitude. But I can tell you that we brush shoulders, whether it be in church, or at the banks, or at the schools, or at the Chamber of Commerce functions, or wherever. There's always been a willingness and a friendliness in this community. You'll not find a friendlier town in America. I'm not saying we're the friendliest, but you'll not find one any friendlier than this town. There are great people here.

Nykolaiszyn *After you sold the show, what did you do?*

Rawls Ah, that's another story. I really, actually, spent about two, two and a half months in retired mode. I didn't actually retire, but I just didn't have a job. I putted around the house, I did little chores, I drove my wife nuts, and finally, she said, "You're going to have to go do something!" (Laughs) And I had already served on the city council and had been mayor here some years back. At that time, the city council was at odds with the city manager and they needed somebody to step in while they hired another city manager. A friend of mine on the council talked to me and asked me if I'd be interested in doing that. I said, "Okay, I will." You know, I didn't have anything else to do, and I knew most of the people at City Hall, and so I said, "I'll step in and hold it down while you"—and at this time I still had the circus. My kids had it, but I was here. For six months I ran the city as the interim city manager, and then

they hired a new city manager, and I stepped aside. A year or so later, his health got bad and he had to leave the job. Now they come back and said, "Would you be interested?" Well, now, I've sold the circus and I'm free and they know it. They asked me if I would consider putting in an application as city manager. There were five or six other applications that they were considering. So I did and they hired me. I did that for four years and ran the city of Hugo.

Finchum

Was that much different than running a circus?

Rawls

In a lot of ways it's the same, a lot of it's the same. I'll be honest with you. On the circus, you never know what problems are going to hit you any minute. It's much the same at the City Hall. There's a multitude of problems at City Hall, a multitude of little things we're involved in. We're involved in parks and recreation, in sewer, in water, in roads, in streets, court, traffic court, police, fire, a lot of things. The atmosphere was a little the same. One minute you're dealing with a police problem, the next minute you are dealing with a sewer problem. You have to be flexible and that was something that I was used to.

I'll be honest with you. There was a learning curve, because I had to learn DEQ [Department of Environmental Quality] regulations, I had to learn government regulations, we had to follow the law, and our council meetings had to be in compliance with state statutes. The bookkeeping, the accounting and working up a budget, that was all fairly similar—different, but similar. If you know how to do a budget for the circus, you can do one for City Hall. Dealing with the people, that was something that I had gained an ability at when I ran the circus. I dealt with ninety people in my own company, and the City has about seventy employees so it was very similar in the number. Learning about the police department, the rules and regulations, learning about fire rules and regulations, learning about DEQ rules and regulations and how water plants operate, and sewer plants operate, there was a learning curve, but I enjoyed that. I enjoyed the learning.

I went to classes for certification so that I had the knowledge about city government and state statutes and the rules and regulations regarding that. Budget timing, public notice, and a multitude of things, public records, I learned all that. But I enjoyed that. I enjoyed the people and there are a lot of great people. I miss the people down there. But it was twenty-four hours a day. I didn't even have an assistant manager. You're city manager. You're on your own. Seven days a week I was on call. Quite often, there would be things that developed on the weekends or at night, and I felt it was in my responsibility to take care of them so I did. It was demanding, but I enjoyed it. I really did.

- Finchum** *And then after that?*
- Rawls** After that, I left the city, not long ago. Then in January, I took a consulting job for Carson and Barnes Circus so I'm still involved in the circus business.
- Finchum** *No retirement in sight, huh?*
- Rawls** Well, I'm of the age, but I can't see myself not doing anything. The [phone] call I just had was in relation to that consulting job. The owner of the show was having some logistical problems with an electrical permit out in Idaho so we had to hash that out and get it straightened out.
- Finchum** *What do you miss the most about being on the road and doing that sort of activity?*
- Rawls** I miss the traveling. I miss my friends. You have to realize that I've been in show business all my life—the friendships that I've developed across the country, in Maryland the state trooper captain that I had a great friendship with and don't see any more, but I would see him once a year. In Ohio I had friends that I would see once a year, Michigan, Chicago. The mayor of Naperville was a good friend of mine, and I enjoyed visiting with him each year when we played Naperville. Yes, I miss that part. I miss that part and just the diversity of our country. When you sit in one place all the time, you forget that this is a diverse country. There are so many different people, and different walks of life and aspects of the country, different agricultural aspects of the country, geographical, the topography of the country, it's a pleasure.
- I'm blessed. I'm blessed because I spent my life in show business and got to travel all over this country and got to know it well. I got to raise my children in that atmosphere and they got to know it well. It's something most people don't get to do. The vast majority of the people that live in this country live in one small part and occasionally visit someplace else, but they don't get to know it. It's a blessing and an honor to be able to have done all that in one short lifetime.
- Finchum** *Do you have a favorite venue?*
- Rawls** No, I have fond memories when you think about some of the places that I've been. I've been to southern Utah. There's an area there that we played years ago with the circus that I just thought was beautiful. Upstate New York, when you get into the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York and some of that area, it's just a great place to play. I like to be around the lakes and the water. I'm fascinated with boats and especially, our large fresh water lakes, Superior, Michigan, Erie.

Taking the circus across to a place called Kelleys Island on ferries was exhausting, because I worried about all the logistics involved and carrying it all, but I enjoyed it tremendously. The people were so enthusiastic about the show. They'd spend the entire day. They didn't just come for the performance. They spent the entire day at the circus grounds and visiting and having a good time. Those are things that I remember and remember well.

You also remember a lot of the tough times. You remember when it snows on you two days in a row and it's so miserable cold, you worry about the animals, and you worry about the people. Snow on a tent is very, very dangerous because it weighs so much. You're trying to make sure you can get the job done and not get anybody hurt—tornadoes or bad storms, when they threaten the tent and your people. But that's a challenge. You kind of enjoy it when it's over—if you win. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn

Well, as we're winding down, do you have some favorite circus memories that stick out in your mind?

Rawls

Some, but they're fairly private. When I was doing trampoline, I wanted to throw a triple somersault. I worked extremely hard at it, and I skinned my nose and failed thousands of times, but when I finally threw the triple successfully—I never incorporated it into the performance because I never had it down well enough—but when I threw the triple successfully, came out and landed on my feet, that was a great moment for me, personally. It didn't mean a whole lot to anybody else, but it meant something to me. It was something that I worked extremely hard at.

Watching my brother perform was a great treat. He was a natural clown. He was good. People loved him and it was so automatic for him. I mean, it was just a natural thing for him so, watching him perform. My father ascending to management in the circus was a personal thrill for me. My father was not educated. Neither one of my parents were educated, neither one had a high school education. They got their GEDs in their seventies but, self taught. My father—you would never know he wasn't educated—read voraciously. He instilled that in me, I love to read. When he attained management status and became the manager of the King Show and was well-respected by a man that I admired, Frank McCloskey, that was a personal moment for me.

I don't have a lot of gigantic moments, public moments, that I share with people, but I have a lot of private moments. My relationship with D.R. Miller was extraordinary. We had an understanding of each other. We were different kinds of people, but we had the love for this industry and

the job that we did. I admired the man, and he gave me the opportunity that I probably wouldn't have gotten from anyone else. He knew people, he could read people. He was a great innovator. He was uneducated, but he was a very wise man and very sharp and very, very integral to our industry over the years. He owned more elephants than anyone else, had a huge show, very successful, was welcomed anywhere. I never heard the man knock anyone. He just didn't knock other people. He had people he liked and people he didn't like, but he didn't talk about them. He wasn't one of those kinds of guys that said, "Oh, I don't like that so and so." It just wasn't in him.

And what's really funny is as I was a kid, growing up, I thought he was rough as a cob and didn't know he had this personal side to him. If he got to know you and you got to know him, which we did and became great friends. I think that's another proud moment. He asked me to help do something when he died. He wanted to be taken to the cemetery with a horse-drawn carriage and a circus parade and so we did that. We had his service under the big top. About three thousand people lined the streets of Hugo to watch him go to the cemetery with a horse-drawn carriage and a circus band playing and a circus wagon on the way.

Finchum

That's pretty neat.

Rawls

Yes, and it's on tape. I've got a tape of it. It was something that he had asked me to try to achieve, and we got it done. His daughter allowed me to do that, and so it was a great moment that I'll cherish.

Finchum

Anything else? We're out of questions unless there is something else you want to add.

Rawls

No.

Finchum

Well, thank you so much for talking with us today. We appreciate your time and have enjoyed learning about your circus experiences.

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