

Oral History Interview
with
Mary Rawls

Interview Conducted by
Juliana Nykolaiszyn and Tanya Finchum
June 30, 2011

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

Oklahoma Oral History Research Program
Edmon Low Library • Oklahoma State University
© 2011

The “Big Top” Show Goes On

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

Interview History

Interviewers: Juliana Nykolaiszyn, Tanya Finchum

Transcribers: Ashley Sarchet, Miranda Mackey

Editors: Miranda Mackey, Amy Graham, Tanya Finchum

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

Project Detail

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

Funding for this project was made possible by the Library of Congress American Folklife Center as part of a 2011 Archie Green Fellowship awarded to researchers Tanya Finchum and Juliana Nykolaiszyn with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at the OSU Library.

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on May 6, 2011.

Legal Status

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

The “Big Top” Show Goes On

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

About Mary Rawls...

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

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

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

The “Big Top” Show Goes On

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

Mary Rawls

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Juliana Nykolaiszyn
& Tanya Finchum
June 30, 2011
Hugo, Oklahoma



Finchum *Today is June 30, 2011. My name is Tanya Finchum, along with Juliana Nykolaiszyn. We’re in Hugo, Oklahoma, for a second afternoon with Mary Rawls. This is regarding the circus community of Hugo, Oklahoma. So thank you for having us again, today.*

Rawls Well, you’re more than welcome. Whatever I can remember, I’ll help. (Laughs)

Finchum *Well, when we were here before, you spoke about your father being a painter, painting windows.*

Rawls Yes.

Finchum *And then, at one point, you all decided to buy a house in Macks Creek?*

Rawls Yes, and we bought that house sight unseen. I think Dad was beginning to feel his age. He was trying to get a home for us that wasn’t on wheels before he passed. So he bought this house and all he bought it from was a picture. They had a picture of this house. Well, he put down fifty dollars on it. I think we paid six hundred and fifty dollars and it had, I think, five acres of land that went with it. When we got there to look at the house, it didn’t resemble that picture at all! There was no driveway, there were no windows, and the door was off of the hinge. (Laughs) So my dad pulled our vehicle over to the side of the road and we had a vote, because whenever there was a serious something to decide, we had to make a vote. Well, Momma didn’t want anything to do with it. She said, “I’m not going to live in there! I don’t want that!” Corky, my brother, Corky, the middle child, he was with Mom. Dad and I were the only ones that really wanted to stay there and do something with that place. Johnny hadn’t made up his mind yet, and we were all badgering Johnny to come on one side or the other. (Laughs) Finally, we got him on our

side.

Then Dad and the boys got out with a shovel and they made a driveway, because it didn't even have a driveway. It was a ditch like that (gesturing steep slope) and you had to have a driveway to get up in there. We drove up there with our truck and trailer, and we went inside the house and half the floor was gone. There was practically no floor. I swear it looked like pigs had been living in it—I mean real pigs! (Laughs) So my mom was just—it blew her mind away, but he had said, “Well, this is it. We better do the best we can with it.” Well, we had some furniture stored in Indianapolis, Indiana, where we had been living before in a house we rented. So Dad and Corky took off to go and get our furniture, and Mom and Johnny and I were left there. It's out in the country, it's all dark woods, and the nights are black as coal. We were working in the house, a little repair, a little hammer and nails, here and there. Then we would get ready to go up to our trailer, to go to bed. (Laughs) Some way or other my brother, Johnny, had a BB gun. So Momma's carrying the lantern, I'm in the middle, and Johnny's bringing up the rear with the BB gun, in case any of the bad guys or the spooks come out of the woods to get us! (Laughs) The nights in Missouri at that time of the year, are just as black as coal. You can't see ten feet ahead of you so, that's the way we did.

Well, the next thing we had to do, of course, was build an outhouse. That outhouse, I swear, it wasn't any wider than that (gestures about two feet)! (Laughs) It just looked like a telephone booth. We finally started hammering nails on that. If you've ever tried to drive a nail into a green oak board, you have really picked yourself a chore. We were all out there. Momma's inside, trying to do things inside. All the rest of us were out there trying to nail up boards on this place, and Dad bought raw lumber. It wasn't cured, and you really have to drive hard to get those nails into that thing. Then, you have to cover that with tar paper and then those tarry things that are supposed to look like bricks, I think you've seen them before, cover it with that. Well, we managed to do that.

The house had, let's see, there was a kitchen stove that was a wood burning stove. My mother hated that stove. She could not get a fire going in that stove! I never had any problem with it at all. She would always call me, “Mary, it's time to start the stove.” I learned how to chop wood out there and bring the wood in, put it in the stove and get the fire going, and then we started cutting down trees. Have you ever cut down a tree with a two-man saw? Well, it is no fun! (Laughs) My brother's on one side, I'm on the other, and we're going like this (gestures going back and forth). I was a natural. By this time, I was dressing like a boy. We about had the house just about livable.

I was out there one time, chopping wood. I guess I was about fifteen or sixteen years old, maybe a little older, and this old man comes up out of the woods. He lived way down in the gully and he came up there, and he started talking to my dad. He saw me chopping wood and building it up for the fireplace. He said to my dad, "If you'd like to get shed of that girl, I'll take her." (Laughs) My dad laughed and said, "No, I don't think I can let her go just yet." He talked in the same kind of lingo that the man did. We got real acquainted with some people up on the hill, who ran a gas station. The big deal was to get to go up to Lilly's place. We'd walk up there sometimes, and there was a man two houses down from us. He had a cow and he milked the cow and made his own butter. My father was regressing, because what time he had at a home, he was raised on a farm and his grandmother raised him. He says he's going to get a churn so my mother can churn butter. Well, that didn't go over very well with my mother because she's out here with this thing (imitates churning motion) churning, churning, churning. We never did get any butter out of that thing! (Laughs)

Finally, he said, "Well, we're going to have to have a horse in order to bring these logs up from the backwoods," where we were cutting down these trees and so forth. He went where they had a flea market kind of a sale that wasn't quite the same as it is nowadays, but he bought an old nag, a blind-eyed, old horse. (Laughs) We're trying to play farmer and not one of us knew anything about playing farmer. My mother was more and more disgusted all the time. We stayed there until spring, and then we got a date to go play fairs.

We hit the road and went playing fairs. They used to have the big, circle race track and then they had the infield, and then there was this huge grandstand on the other side. Well, they had performers there and in between races they would have an act. At seven o'clock in the evening they'd have an entire program, but it was a pain in the neck, because a lot of these were sulky races. Have you ever seen a sulky race? Oh, boy! (Laughs) They are fun, but they are a pain because they've got these little horses all aligned with their sulky's. There's a big, tall house up on blocks, up here, and they're watching it down and the horses all have to start at the same time. If one of them starts out ahead, "That's a failure! That's a failure! Bring them back! Bring them back!" and you're waiting in your costume and wardrobe out in the boiling sun for them to go ahead and do their thing around there so you can get your act on and over with. (Laughs) That's part of playing fairs.

Well, we went out to Nebraska and Kansas with the fair dates. There were a lot of fairs out there. I'm doing a tight wire act with an umbrella and here comes that western wind and it blows your umbrella all the way off into the infield, and you're out of luck with your umbrella. So I was

glad when the fair season was over. We spent a number of years on the fair season, and in between times of course, we showed in vaudeville, we showed in night clubs, and then circuses. We weren't too much on a circus when we were small, but Dad got us a job with the Buck Owens Show and we went down there [Florida]—that's where I met Harry. But before that, we were out in Kansas and we were with Bud Anderson's All American Wild West. I think I showed you that picture of Big Chief Keys and his old battle axe. (Laughs) That's where we met them, and I met this Chuck Fuller and his mother played the organ. His father was a clown and he was a clown and we dated a little bit, but it didn't amount to anything. Every time they got too serious I said, "I'm sorry, I'm not into it just yet." (Laughs)

So from there, we came back here. We finally came back to Hugo. We pulled into the trailer park. We had gotten a job with Herb Walters, with his Cole and Walters Circus, and we stayed there for several years. But that's after Harry and I met. We got married and we had a kid or two by that time. We spent, I guess, about three years with Herb Walters. That's when we parked out here at the fairgrounds, and all the other show people parked out there, too. We had a sad thing out there. The tents were all canvas and when it rained they would leak, terrible. So they would take and coat them with paraffin before the season started. This man that was doing that—it wasn't Herb's show. It was another show. He was out there, and they heat the paraffin up over a camp fire until it's pouring hot. Then, they sweep it onto the canvas with a broom. Well, this guy somehow managed to tip that paraffin over and it killed him. Nowadays, you don't have to do that. You've got your plastic tents and you don't have to do that.

Another thing that happened on Herb's show—he had a son-in-law. We had the tent spread and it was raining like a son of a gun and they [the tents] will belly out and hold the water in the tent. If you don't get rid of that water, it'll pull the stakes up and knock it down. (Laughs) So Harry goes in and he gets his gun. It's a powerful weapon, evidently, and he pulls it up there and shoots! He put, you know, just like a little bullet hole in it. He blew the whole tent over and it came down, the big top! (Laughs) He never did live that down. (Laughs) I think I've got that cover, but I can't get it into sequence, because I have these pictures like movies in my mind, but to put dates on them or times and so forth, it eludes me. It's so long ago. Since I had my heart operation, I don't remember as well. They just had me so sedated. It took me three months to get over the sedation.

Finchum

Did your parents keep the house at Macks Creek for very long?

Rawls

No, when Dad passed away—Momma never did like the place anyway.

We just held onto it for a long time and finally, somebody was willing to buy it. We put it up for sale and the real estate man that we traded there with the first place, well, he sold it. It was divided out in parts. My dad did some for Johnny and some for Corky and some for myself and so on, but we all just agreed to go ahead and sell it.

Finchum

Why had he picked there to begin with? Why there?

Rawls

The Lord only knows. I think he wanted to hide from the public, hide from the world, and everything else. He wanted to have his family right there and didn't want to be bothered by anybody. (Laughs) He was the only one that felt that way. (Laughs) When I got pregnant with David, we went back there. We had just gotten back off of a fair route, and I started having labor pains. Harry was out with my dad painting signs. It hadn't been a good season. We needed every dime we could get, and we were pretty well broke. So Momma took me to the hospital and David was born there. Of course, we couldn't pay the bill. We didn't have the money to pay the bill. You could have a baby for fifty bucks in those days, but we didn't have fifty bucks. So Harry was raised in this school down here in Searcy, Arkansas, a boy's school run by Catholic priests. So he wrote to one of them, and he got the fifty dollars to pay the bill at the hospital so I could come home.

A bad thing happened to me in that hospital, because I had stitches. I had torn up pretty good at the birth. So they have a heat lamp that they were supposed to put on you to bake those stitches. Well, the nurse didn't have access to the heat lamp so she took off my bed lamp that was hooked to the back of the table, and it got really, really hot and it fell on my stitches. So I was really kind of incapacitated for quite a little while, while that all mended. Well, Momma came and got me and brought me home. We were sitting there and all the boys wanted to see what the baby looks like and this, that, and the other. Just about the time I'm ready to unwrap the baby and show it off, we get a telephone call. The hospital has called us. We brought home the wrong baby. They gave us the wrong baby. Of course, I was breast feeding. I had already fed the baby, and it was a bottle baby! I thought, "Jiminy Christmas!" If I ever had a chance to sue anybody that was wide open! You didn't think about suing people for something like that in those days. In fact, it takes a lot of money to sue somebody anyway.

So the nurse from the hospital made a mad dash over with that baby and traded me for the baby I had. And, you know, they never told the mother what happened, the mother of the other baby—they never told her. I heard later, by the time that little boy was six or seven years old, she heard it somehow or another and she was suing the hospital. I never did find out how that went, but David was almost something else.

(Laughter) Her baby's name was David, too. My David had reddish-blond hair, not very much of it, but some. The other baby had dark hair. So when they called me and they said, "You've got the wrong baby," I started unwrapping the baby, because all I did was uncover its face so the boys could see what their nephew looked like and said, "This baby has got dark hair!" (Laughs) That's after the phone call. So that was quite an experience. In fact, our telephone was on—there were eight people, what do you call it?

Nykolaiszyn

A party line.

Rawls

Party line, right. And there were eight people on there, and because we were circus people and the phenomenon of the whole neighborhood, every time our phone rang, everybody on the line would click, click, click, click, click! (Laughs) They all knew about the change of the baby and so forth. We had two shows call up, two hires; one up in New York, the Jimmy Cole, and one down in Florida. We were answering the phone so when we went up to Lilly's house, that's at the gas station the person says, "Well, which one are you going to? Are you going to Florida or New York?" (Laughs) We were all just dumbfounded, because we didn't realize that everybody was listening in. So that was our period there. We were going to be farmers—ha, ha, ha! (Laughs)

Finchum

Did they even have time to put in a garden?

Rawls

My dad went and bought a whole bunch of stuff. (Laughs) He was going to have strawberries up there. He was going to get this whole field cleared out, and he was going to plant strawberries. Well, that didn't turn out very well because we got a date to go on the road. Well, who's going to watch the strawberries? (Laughs) No, we didn't get anything, but years later, Harry and I went through there to visit, because we were showing in another town just beyond Macks Creek. We stopped there and some guy had bought the property, he built a really nice house, he had a nice garden, he was planting trees and everything, and we just asked him if we could come up and look around. We told him we used to live there and so forth, and he was very friendly and nice. He had done a lot more with that property than what we were able to do. (Laughs)

Finchum

Once you had David, how soon did you go back to performing? What month was David born in? Was he a winter baby?

Rawls

Yes, he must've been, because we were off the road.

Finchum

If he was a winter baby, then you would be performing again by the time the show came out in the spring?

Rawls

Oh, yes, yes. By the time I had three kids—I had David, Bobby, and Margie had just been born, and we got down to Florida. We had been telling Bobby, who was just a little guy then just barely able to talk, as we drove our truck into the end of our winter quarters, all about the elephants. Of course, we call them bulls. I said we were going to see the bulls. We drove up in there and Bobby's all big-eyed, "Bulls! Bulls!" that's about all he could say was "bulls!" (Laughs)

Harry had gone in to see the boss and then he came back to the truck, very sober faced, very stern looking. I said, "Oh, boy, we didn't get the job." I said, "What's the matter? We didn't get the job?" He said, "Just be quiet. Just be quiet." He drove us up to the city park and he parked there, and he told the kids to go out and play in the park. He told me that my dad had died. I didn't have the money to go home, but he borrowed money for me to take the train and go home to my dad's funeral. At that time, it snowed something terrible! You couldn't get through to Macks Creek, to the area we lived in, and my brother Johnny came and drove me to the house. They weren't going to let him through because the roads were blocked off with the ice and the snow and everything, and he told them, he said, "I've got to get through. My dad just died. We've got to go there for the funeral." So they let us through. They took the road block down and let us go by.

My brother, Corky, who at that time was still in uniform, he got a hold of the Catholic priest that was in there at Camdenton and said, "Now look, we have to bury my dad. I don't want a long speech or anything like that. Just keep it brief." So the poor priest was terrified, because Corky was a big, husky guy. So the poor priest, he did the best he could with the limited amount of what he could do and that was right at the gravesite. It wasn't in the church. My father wasn't Catholic but my mother was. So that's how he got buried. There is such a wealth of memories and they all get mingled in your mind sometimes.

Finchum

You're doing fine.

Rawls

Well, what's the next question?

Finchum

While you were up on the wire performing, would you be thinking about anything in particular, or were you just focusing on keeping the next step on the wire?

Rawls

Oh, I wasn't focusing on the step, but I was focusing on the audience. Here I am! Like me! Smile! (Laughter) I was a princess! I was on the tight wire! Everybody's looking at me! That's part of it. (Laughs) No, you're not thinking about where you are stepping because that all

becomes just automatic habit. Like driving a car, you know exactly what to do because you drive all the time. You don't think about it, you just do it. And that's the way it was with that.

Finchum *Would you focus on anyone in particular in the crowd?*

Rawls I focused one time on the whole crowd because part of my act I have a beautiful, white evening gown with a flowing skirt and all that. I always made my entrance in that kind of an outfit. Well, we were playing a school, up in New York for Jimmy Cole. They announced me, and I step out there and I've got a tiara on and all these girls in the audience—most of them are high school students, "Ooohhh!" like that, and it froze me for a second. For a split second I was just frozen because, "Hey, they mean me!" (Laughs) Then I get up on the wire and I do the waltz in the gown and so forth. Then I would come back and the gown had special snaps so you could just yank it this way and it'd all fall off of you, and you were in your short costume that you could actually do your work in. But I've never forgotten that moment. That was a great moment! (Laughs)

Finchum *I wondered if every crowd was the same.*

Rawls Well, yes, for the most part because in those days, TV wasn't as popular as it is now. They didn't have the movies, the CDs, or anything like that, so that kind of live entertainment was really appreciated. You'd get good crowds. We would play a series of schools up in New York for Jimmy Cole in the wintertime, and then we'd go on the road with the show or fairs in the summertime. The audience enjoyed what you were doing so much and that gives you a good feeling. They're really happy. They like this. You've got a clown that goes out there, he's a tramp clown, he goes out there, and he stumbles over his foot and he falls on his nose and everybody laughs like, "He's happy! He's happy! He's making people happy!" That comedy sounds a little phony, but for me, that's the way it was. I did my Spanish web and I came out in a black velvet cape, and I would take and swirl around and put my feathers out and take the cape off, and then I'd climb the web up and come down. I'd get a big hand. Everybody's giving me a big hand. It's a great feeling. You just can't believe the feeling you get. I don't know. They're happy. They're happy and that makes me happy, too. (Laughs)

Finchum *Was there much difference between the afternoon performance and the evening performance? Would you do the same thing?*

Rawls No, it was the same. There wasn't a change. If somebody got sick or something like that, there was no change. It went on ding, ding, ding, ding—just like that. So you knew when your time came. You knew by

the music. If it was the liberty act, why, you know, “Okay, I’ve got two acts to go. I can change a diaper before I go.” (Laughs) You’ve got the liberty act, you’ve got the bull act, by the music, when the *Roman Rings* come on—you know whatever act is on in the big top from your trailer because of the music. Everybody has their own particular type of music. If it’s a speed up kind of event or a waltzy thing, you know what it is.

Finchum *So you didn’t have to stay within the tent itself while the show was going on?*

Rawls Oh, no. It was a bad thing to hang around by that back door in your wardrobe, I mean, unless the back doors were closed. They closed the back doors, or big curtain. You’ve got to have room for the elephants to go in. You can stand around there and talk, but you better not be right in that back door. You’ll be in trouble. That’s a no, no! (Laughs) The act that is in there deserves that courtesy too, because the audience is supposed to be watching the act that’s going on. They don’t want to watch people standing, running around in costumes in the back door. No, you had your rules, but everybody just seemed to automatically know what the rules were so you didn’t worry about it.

Finchum *Would you ever stop and watch the whole performance yourself? If your kids were well taken care of somewhere else, would you just stay in and watch the whole thing?*

Rawls No, because I was always in most of them, one way or the other. I did the swinging ladder. I did web. I did loop-de-loop. I did cloud swing. So I would be in and out of there several times. You’ve got to change costumes for each one so you don’t really have time for that.

Finchum *And you change in your trailer or was there a changing tent?*

Rawls Oh, no, in your own trailer, because I’m talking about small shows. I’m not talking about the Ringling Brothers or anything like that. I never was on any of those, thank goodness! (Laughs) The circus life was—it’s hard to describe and it must seem weird to town people, but you become a whole family. It’s like living in a real small town where you know all of your neighbors. You’re almost cloistered, in a way. Of course, your performers all gather in the back yard, and I think I explained that to you before. There were different groups, the working men and the front door people and the sideshow people, and then there are the performers in the big top. The matinee was always at two o’clock, and the night show was always at eight o’clock. They changed that drastically, later on. After the night show was over, everybody would take turns, having kind of a little picnic at their trailer. You would take turns. Somebody would have the food, this one, then the next one, the next one, and so forth, and you just

sit there and chew the rag and talk about old times and what for and so on.

Finchum

Relax a little bit.

Rawls

Yes, just laugh it up. (Laughs)

Finchum

Were most of your friends associated with the circus or were they town people or a little bit of both?

Rawls

Well, in the earlier years, it was the circus people, because you were an oddity to town people. They viewed you with a little bit of either fear or skepticism or sometimes just despise you altogether. When most people had a house in a town or in a city and they lived there all the time and they knew all their neighbors and here come all these gypsy-like people, following a tent, and performing. So you get cloistered. You get cloistered. That's one of the things I like so much about Hugo.

When we came to Hugo, we were welcomed. I mean, this was a great town for all of us, all the show people altogether. At one time or another, there have been over forty-five circuses wintered here, because they were welcome. They found out that we weren't going to steal them blind. We weren't going to ignore them, and so forth. We managed to circulate, and they found out we went to church and ate off of plates like they did and that sort of thing. (Laughs) Anybody who was footloose and fancy free was a vagabond and not trustworthy. They were afraid of you. They didn't mind coming to watch you circus, but they didn't want anything to do with you personally. If you look back you can understand that, because there are people that had bad people on a circus, just like there are bad people in a town. They go in and they may steal something and that sort of thing, and the people were afraid of us because we were vagabonds. And actually, we were vagabonds, but not the kind that they thought.

Finchum

Since you've retired, do you consider yourself a townner? How do you refer to yourself?

Rawls

I have found it rather difficult—I'll have to admit—more so after my husband passed away. We were rather active in the town. We used to have a Kiwanis Club here, and I worked at the Kiwanis Club. I was in the ladies' church societies, and Harry became president of the Lion's Club. I became president of the Kiwanis Club, but I had to resign because coming out on the road in the summertime, there was nobody there to be in the Kiwanis Club. So I said, "You need to get a president that can be here all the time." Well, they accepted that just fine so I could come and be in the Kiwanis Club when I was home in the

wintertime. The whole town accepted us. The first guy, I think, that had a circus here, used to run a grocery store. He had money and he bankrolled the circus. There was another one and he was a dentist here. I think his son's still a dentist. He had an office uptown and he liked the circus. So he was a backer. You know, provided some money to get you over and so on. It just went from one thing to the other. The circus has generally found that this was a good town that would accept them. No, if I could turn the clock back, I'd do it all over again with joy, but time marches on.

Finchum

Let's talk a little bit about when you moved from the trailer into the first house here in Hugo, as a married couple with children. What that was like?

Rawls

Well, our first house was over on North G Street, and we paid \$3,500 for it. It took us a year or two to pay it off, because we had to pay it in payments. As I look back now, it really wasn't much of a house, but I thought it was a castle—a house with running water, because we carried water in a milk can. The kids had to go to the water wagon and fill up our milk can to have water in the house. I just thought it was great, because we had a living room and we had a bedroom for all the kids. They had to be stacked high, but there were all the kids—and a bedroom for us and it had a dining room and it had a kitchen. You have no idea how much that kind of space means! (Laughs) The kids were only a few blocks from the school that they had to attend. That's when the Fourth Ward school was there. So it was nice for us and of course, we would still be on the road and go out in the summertime. There was a real nice lady that lived over on the corner and she would look after our house—not go in it, she'd just call us if anything bad was going on about the house. It took us a long time to pay for that house and we lived there—gosh! How long? Quite awhile. Let's see, who was born there? I think I had the last two kids from that house, yes.

Finchum

I would imagine that it felt like you had a whole lot more space.

Rawls

Oh, yes, yes. And you had privacy, too. In a trailer up at the front end over the hitch, you'll have a sofa and you'll have the door. If it's big enough, you may have a little table that comes out, but other than that, the next place you've got your kitchen, stove, and your sink. And you've got your breakfast nook over here. Then, in the back of the trailer, you've got the double bed. Well, sometimes, the double bed has got to be made into a bed big enough for all the kids so, you're sleeping in the little kitchen area. It turns around and makes a bed. As you get more kids, then you get the back room to yourself and you put the kids in the breakfast nook because it will all collapse down. You put mattresses in there and then you put a big board in between so that they're like in a

bassinette, or a big bedroom. That Bobby John, you put him to bed, and he didn't like to be touched so he'd start (imitates baby crying) and I'd say, "What's the matter? What's the matter, Bobby?" "He's touching me!" Well, naturally, when there are four of them in there, somebody's going to be touching somebody! He'd have a fit about that!

But as time went on, there were twenty-eight foot trailers. I can remember one, the roofs used to be plastic. The sides were vinyl and the roof was canvas. We got into a windstorm one time, and it blew the roof off of the thing, and you can't stop and get it fixed. In the first place, you can't afford it, so you've got to fix it yourself. So Harry and I were repairing the roof. We rolled the canvas and we'd do a little bit each day, roll up the canvas, patch the roof, and go on to the next town. Roll up a little more canvas and patch the roof and go on to the next town. Then, we'd have to coat it with stuff to make it waterproof. Well, that was no easy thing to do either because you didn't have time enough on a show to get the whole job done so you do part of it, and you do part the next time and the next time. That trailer was a Zimmer. It was the first trailer we had. It took us forever to pay for it!

Lilly up at the grocery store loaned us the money to get the trailer. We had to have a down payment of two hundred dollars, and Dad went to the bank at Macks Creek and then he went to the bank in Camdenton. Turned him down, no luck, we had nothing. You didn't have any kind of property that you owned or anything like that. So Lilly said, "I'll tell you what,"—because we got to be real good friends with her and she said, "I'll give you the two hundred dollars," because we had a date on a show and we were headed out there and we didn't have a place to live. When we got that Zimmer trailer that was another case that I was really thrilled, moving from a cracker box on wheels to a Zimmer trailer. Zimmer was a nice trailer in those days.

I thought it was just great. Of course, when Willy came to live with us too, it wasn't quite so great because he talked and he talked and he talked—all the time! If you didn't listen, he'd poke you and say, "Did you hear that? Did you hear what I said?" He had this tale that he was telling you that you could care less about. He would ramble on and on and on and on. He had diabetes and he was a drinker. I told Harry, I said, "This isn't going to work." I said, "He's drinking too much." So finally, I put him on a diet. He worked the novelty stand at that time while I was still a performer. He'd come to the trailer after the tear down, when the show was tearing down, and I'd stop him at the door of the trailer and I would grab all of his money away from him, because if I didn't, he'd drink. One night he came in and I had to search his hat, his hat band, his pockets, and everything to make sure I got the money. Well, he came in this one night and I said, "Is this it? Is that all?" (Imitates Willy

mumbling) I said, “Do you have any more money any place?” (Imitates mumbling) He had three silver dollars stuck underneath his tongue in his mouth! There’s always some guy on the show that will sell whiskey, and so I took that out of his mouth and put it away for him. I didn’t keep it myself, but I put it away for him.

Then, I drove the car and Harry drove the truck and trailer. Willy was getting in the car with me and I had the kids in the back seat. I was looking for a map, and I went for a map and he had a bottle hidden in the glove compartment. I took the bottle and I poured it all out the window, like that. (Gestures) He said, “Mrs. Smart. You think you’re Mrs. Smart! That was a smart thing to do! You’re Mrs. Smart!” And he kept mumbling that all the way to the next town. (Laughs) I ditched his whiskey. He wore size fifty-eight trousers, and I took him down to size thirty-four by keeping him on a diet. He didn’t have near as much trouble with his asthma or anything and his diabetes. So one way or another, I won that battle. (Laughs)

- Finchum** *Willy was your father-in-law?*
- Rawls** He is my husband’s step-father.
- Finchum** *Step-father, okay.*
- Rawls** Of course, he had no place to go. He and Harry were always together, and so after we’d been married awhile, I fell heir to him. Willy was a good soul. He was a good soul. He just had this problem. He was nuts about the kids. He just loved the kids so you put up with it.
- Finchum** *As you traveled from city to city, did you remember much about the town you were just in?*
- Rawls** Well, no, not really because you follow the arrows to the lot, you’re on the lot, you set up. You may have gone to the grocery store or you may have gone to the Laundromat, but other than that, you don’t see much of the town. You get up and do your stuff, tear down the next day, and you go on to the next town so you don’t really get that acquainted in the town. Occasionally, somebody will come along that is not afraid to death of you and will start a visit and become kind of a friend, but it wasn’t much letter writing or that sort of thing. I mean, you’re here today and gone tomorrow so what’s the use? (Laughs)
- Finchum** *I just wondered if you got used to the geography. Like, which cities were where and whatnot.*
- Rawls** Well, in a fashion you do, but like I say, with me, my memory is so bad.

We used to go to New York every winter, because Jimmy Cole was a wintertime show and he booked all these high schools where they did performances there. Other than that, why, you didn't really pay attention. One town was just like another after awhile. A lot of it had to do with how nice the people were. Some were good and some were not so good, but it didn't really stick in your head very much.

Finchum *So you didn't really have a favorite venue that you played for, then?*

Rawls You mean a route?

Finchum *Yes.*

Rawls Well, you don't want to repeat the same towns over and over again. Now, you may play a series of towns this year and then maybe two years down the road, you might play those same towns again, but it's a might. It all depends on what your agents can book.

Finchum *When it comes to picking a partner to be married to, was it easier if they come from a circus family too?*

Rawls Well, that's a strange story, too, because we were showing in fairs and I met this farmer. I think I told you about him before. I was sort of engaged to him when we went down to Sebring, Florida to join the Buck Owens Show. That's where I met Harry. Well, I didn't think too much of it because I was still kind of enamored with the guy in Nebraska. He finally came around. Evidently, he liked me, but he was very bashful. Oh, he was so bashful! He'd finally come over and asked if I would go to church with him. Well, I found out he was a Catholic. I said, "Well, yes, I'll go to church with you." So we went to midnight mass. That was our first date. Then, I think I told you also, about the date at the soda-pop night club. They didn't sell whiskey, but if you brought your own, that was no problem of theirs. We got out there and got the Coca-Cola sitting down, sitting down in the chair, the music is going, and I'm ready—boy, I'm ready to go dancing! He said, "I forgot to tell you I don't know how to dance." So I danced the whole evening with his friend instead of him. (Laughs)

We just became friends. I mean, there wasn't any sweetheart thing about it, we just became friends. Then, he came and asked my dad if I could work in his whip act, holding the papers. Dad looked at him and kind of studied him. Harry was afraid of Dad. (Laughs) He said, "Well, if you promise not to hit her, I'll let her try it." So I began holding papers for him. The Buck Owens Show was half circus and half Wild West, and he worked in Wild West. He was a rope spinner, and he was a whip cracker, and he did the trick riding and so forth, and so he let me work in

his act.

Well, he took me out to breakfast one time and we walked downtown and had breakfast. Of course, we were all stone broke. My folks were broke, the whole show was broke, and I didn't think he had any money so I ordered real cheap. He orders ham and eggs and everything else like that and I thought, "Hmm, I made a mistake here. I should've ordered what I wanted!" (Laughs) But anyhow...he was cute. (Laughs) There's a picture of him up there. (Gestures to the opposite wall) That's when he was older, of course.

Finchum *I would think it would be easier for a marriage to work if both came from a circus background.*

Rawls Yes, and then another clincher was we were both of the same church belief.

Finchum *That's true. Did you ever have to help in the cookhouse?*

Rawls I was the cook. One time, the cook blew the scene or he got fired and I had to do the cooking. This was on the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers show. I cooked for two weeks. I did all right. They seemed to like the food okay. (Laughter) They said I was a lot cleaner than the previous cook. (Laughs)

Finchum *Did you get to pick the menu or was it chosen for you?*

Rawls Well, it's pretty much chosen for you, because it has got to be the kind of food that's available in the town you're in. It has to be something that you can cook ahead and keep hot and so on. So it's not like fried chicken or anything like that. It's a big pot of this or a big pot of that and so on. You've got things that you need. There's somebody that does the buying for the cookhouse. The cook doesn't do it. The cook makes the list and somebody else does the buying. I did that for a couple of weeks there, and I also did that for a short while on another show. I've also run the hot dog stand and the pie car. After I got to the point where I wasn't in the show itself, I ran the novelty stand.

I just learned how to get on Facebook. I'm not real thrilled with my ability on the computer, but I had two guys on there; one was Dave Donahue and he came on this Facebook. Well, I didn't know him because when he was on the show with me, his name was Kilowatt. He was the electricity man. He was the one who plugged all the trailers into electricity, and he set the electricity all up from the generator and so forth. If somebody hadn't told me it was Kilowatt, I would have never known who it was. He put a picture up there and he didn't look anything

like he used to. (Laughs)

There was another one I had on my novelty stand. Oh, I used to get so mad at him! He was tall and he was skinny. He had long, black hair. He thought he was God's gift to women, and he had absolutely no qualms about anything. We would hit the lot and he'd go to a house across the street or near the lot and ask them if he could come in and take a bath. He'd go in and take a shower. And surprisingly, he was often invited in to where he could take a shower! When it came time to put that darn novelty stand up, which I had to do by myself, I drove the stakes and put the tent up, he was supposed to be there to help me. Well, he never showed up until the last stake was driven. You have to get it all ready in the morning and come show time, you've got to be out there when the crowd starts coming in if you're going to do any business, because you've got to pitch all your stuff ahead of time. They don't buy it then, but you've got to pitch it then. They go into the big top and the kid's momma says, "That's all right. I'll get you one when we come out." You've got to build that up. Ricky was never there! He was never there! He was always late! He was my inside butcher. He had to carry the toys into the big top and wave them around underneath the kids' nose and so forth, but he was always late.

I just got him on Facebook and he put his picture up there, and I didn't recognize the picture at all. His tagline was, "Monkeys on a Stick." Well, now, nobody but somebody like Ricky would remember that. We had the little fur monkey on a bamboo cane and so forth. Well, you can't even get those anymore. They don't make them anymore. They don't ship them anymore. When he said, "Monkeys on a Stick," I said, "Oh, for crying out loud! That's Ricky!" (Laughs) He was tall, skinny, and this long, black hair. He looked like one of those—what did they call them in those days? The ones that were all protesting against everything in the United States, what do you call them?

Nykolaiszyn

A hippie.

Rawls

Hippie, exactly! Hippie! (Laughs) Now, he's round faced, moon faced, little heavier weight and so forth, and he wants to be my friend. (Laughs) Dave Donahue, the Kilowatt, he's going to be here in August. He got married. He sent a picture of him and his bride, and he wanted to know if he could come and visit. I said, "Sure. C'mon over. I'd be glad to see you!" (Laughs) But I'm not very good on the computer at all. I get lost on it sometimes and can't get out of it and get back.

Finchum

Sounds like you're doing pretty good. (Laughter)

Rawls

Well, and all my kids are on it and I used to just email. Then they kept

saying, “Why don’t you get on Facebook?” Well, I’m a private person and I’m not too sure about getting my face out there on that computer, and so I hesitated a long time, but they finally got me on Facebook. I’ve got Margie and Bobby and Chris and Mike all live over in Durant. So I kept in contact with them that way. I’ve got all the kids.

It is funny because when Harry and I were married, I didn’t really have the freedom and the opportunity to make too many close friends in town. I have some from my church now. We have a meeting that goes on in the basement of that church down there on the corner of Second Street. Anyway, it’s called a support group and it’s for widows and widowers to come and be a part of where somebody else knows what they’re going through and so on. Anyway, I became a part of that and I have made many friends from the Catholic Church. Of course, our church used to be full and now it’s about half empty. There are not many people there. I’ve gotten very closed in since my husband passed, because we went everywhere together. When we did anything, we did it together. It’s kind of hard for me to kind of go out and do things by myself. I just feel sort of lost. It was hard at first. David made me this little house, and I’m very happy with the house, and I know he’s right next door if I really need him or something. So I’m content. I’m content.

Finchum

[If there’s nothing more you want to add at this time we’ll say thank you, again, for sharing your circus memories with us.]

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