

**Oral History Interview**  
**with**  
**Charles Baggett**

Interview Conducted by  
Juliana Nykolaiszyn and Tanya Finchum  
July 1, 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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# *The “Big Top” Show Goes On*

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

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## **Interview History**

Interviewers: Juliana Nykolaiszyn, Tanya Finchum

Transcriber: Ashley Sarchet

Editors: Miranda Mackey, 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 Charles Baggett is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on July 1, 2011.

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## **About Charles Baggett...**

Charles Baggett was born in Hugo, Oklahoma in 1941 and graduated from Hugo High School in 1959. His father, Hermon Baggett, had several car dealerships in Hugo, and eventually Charles would join him in the business. At one time they had franchises for Buick, Pontiac, GMC, Rambler, American Motors, and Dodge-Chrysler, and later added Chevrolet and Oldsmobile.

Before going into the car business himself, Charles served in the army. In 1965 he graduated from Oklahoma State University (OSU) with a bachelor’s degree in marketing. He is proud of his OSU connections and served as president of the Alumni Association 1992-1993, and during the same period his sons, Greg and Joel, were attending OSU.

Throughout his life, both personal and professional, Charles has maintained close ties to the circus community in Hugo, following in his father’s footsteps.

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## **Charles Baggett**

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Juliana Nykolaiszyn  
& Tanya Finchum  
July 1, 2011  
Hugo, Oklahoma



**Nykolaiszyn** *My name is Juliana Nykolaiszyn and with me is Tanya Finchum. We’re with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at the OSU Library. Today is Friday, July 1, 2011, and we’re in Hugo, Oklahoma, interviewing Charles Baggett. Thank you for joining us today.*

**Baggett** My pleasure.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, let’s begin by learning a little bit about you. Could you tell us the year you were born and where you were born and give us a little bit of background on your family?*

**Baggett** Sure. I was born in Hugo, Oklahoma, in 1941, May 27, above a bank. It was right downtown at the intersection of Highway 70 and 271. It was upstairs, just an old bank. The one doctor, primarily, brought everybody into this world. If you weren’t born at home, you were born at that hospital, at that time. There were two hospitals, but he was Dr. Johnson, E.A. Johnson. My father was in the car business. It was during the war, right before the war, World War II, but he had been a little bit in the car business before that.

My father grew up somewhat poor, I should say. His dad had no education whatsoever. They were sharecropper-type people and worked hard all their lives. Then my dad was born. I guess it was his freshman year in high school he had to drop out of school. Not necessarily he had to drop out, I don’t think as much, he told me later, but he wasn’t enjoying it. He had been teased for the clothes he had and everything and so, unfortunately, he did drop out in the ninth grade. He went to work, did numerous things. He was born in 1915. After experiencing this, he had the desire then, of course, for his son to graduate from college because no one had. I do have a photo in front of the Edmon Low Library of the three of us standing there at one time. I was probably

the third proudest Baggett in the photo that day when I graduated.

A gentleman by the name of Presley B. Cole, who had some Indian blood, he had worked for him a short time before the war, and he told Dad, he said—and I didn't know my dad ever sold Fords for several years. We were GM and had a Buick in our driveway from the time I remembered cars. So he told him, he said, "Hermon, you don't have a lot of money, I know, and I do." He says, "I don't like to work, but you do." And it was true. I mean, you'd think of how it is and things, but he just didn't want to be out selling the cars and doing the hard work of it. So they went in fifty-fifty. He said, "I think after the war"—and it was such a problem at that time, but—"I think I can get the Buick-GMC franchise." So, true enough, this came through. They got the franchise and, of course, you couldn't get vehicles at that time. I'm telling the story from what he has told me, of course. So it was most difficult and then when the cars did come and the rationing got through, primarily, it really turned into a tremendous business for them. That little shop, incidentally, was about down the stairs from where the dealership was, and we were right behind it at the time.

Then Dad—I guess it was 1952, perhaps, that he bought Mr. Cole out. Well, actually, they bought a dealership in Durant for a short time and Mr. Cole went over there, but he bought him out, but great, great people. I kept in touch with them—both of them have died, too. They were certainly good to us, and got Dad his break. Then I guess I joined the dealership. I grew up in the dealership washing cars, changing oil, and loved every part of it. The parts department, I didn't like that much. I didn't like the service department as much. (Laughs) It's a wonderful business to be in and particularly, later on, I was able to work with my father side by side and that was a thrill. But I grew up in it, graduated from high school here. Went through grade school, high school here, played sports, played in the band, and just things like you do in high school. I had probably the best classmates you could ever hope for. We still are together, close, close friends. We have several that made big time good. One of them was at OSU when he basically had to leave because of funds and became a calligrapher, and he's internationally known, Ken Brown, in our class.

I grew up in a great environment in Hugo, Oklahoma. It has always been home to me. I could call it the one-horse town, but I didn't want anybody else to, you know. But it's been great. It's a long ways from Stillwater, I know, when you're driving back and forth, but I did grow up there. After college, I served some time in the army. I did go through the Reserves because I couldn't pass an ear test for the ROTC Air Force when I was at Stillwater. I came back and I guess I've been here, basically, ever since, in Hugo, and supported the community in what

ways I could. I worked at the dealership. We moved to several different locations as our business expanded, but truly a wonderful, wonderful place to raise your children.

I have two sons and in the days when they could walk down the street and they were friends with some of the circus people, of course, their age. It was the greatest thing in the world for them to go out and get to ride an elephant today, if they want to, or whatever, if that was the case. It's a unique experience to grow up in a small town. I wouldn't trade for it. You're involved in everything, so to speak. Once you build friendships, they last forever, and they'll come to your aid. I'm very fond of Hugo, very fond of everything that goes on here. We've got a real fine city, and we're proud of our circus industry. I couldn't ask for better people.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Well, what's your earliest circus memory?*

**Baggett**

Oh, I was probably seven years old, maybe. D.R. [Miller] and Dad had been friends for years. The circus came here in around '41 or '42. Dad immediately became friends with several of them, Kelly Miller and Mr. Obert Miller, the father of the two. So I really don't know. I've been to circuses all my life. I'd have to go in the backdoor sometimes, because if they were out of town, we just never paid. We were their guests, and you didn't realize it as a child, I guess, but you were beating some civic organization that was sponsoring them out of a ticket. They insisted that we came, and we could see the backside of the circus, also and just had free reign to go where we wanted to. It'd have to be maybe before I went to grade school is the first experience I can recall.

Years ago, they would show here as they go out. It's kind of a dress rehearsal somewhat, because it was the first show and bringing all the acts in. This is a monstrous circus, the large one. Of course, there are several that have wintered here in Hugo. But, later, they started opening in Paris, Texas, and that was very successful for many, many years. We would, of course, go over there. But it had to be the late-'40s or mid-'40s when I had my first experience with them.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Well, tell me a little bit about the relationship between D.R. Miller and your father.*

**Baggett**

Very, very close. They were a lot alike in so many ways, yet different. D.R., an amazing individual, could remember anything whatsoever. When I built a new facility, he came in one day and he just asked, "About what does it cost you every morning when you open the door?" And he didn't write anything down like that. I told him. Two or three years later, he came in and says, "Well, are you still making that much,

that particular figure, everyday?” I said, “Well, so far, doing it. We’re making it and exceeding it.” He was so remarkable in that he could remember these different towns he played in throughout the United States. How many people were there, if they had to have an extra show, how many tickets they sold, where they set up. He and Dad just—in fact, my mom always had to lock Dad up when they left, because he wanted to go out with the show each year. He just really loved it.

People came to town and D.R. was just a good customer. He’d call us from anywhere he was at, and, “Have you got this? I need one brought to me. We’ve had a truck break down” or whatever. And if it couldn’t wait till we got it there, if they were halfway across the country, it couldn’t happen. One year, I recall, he wanted three two-ton trucks, basically, or they were pulling a lot of two and three-ton trucks, which we could not handle at our dealership. I was in high school and Dad said, “Hey, you want to fly up to Michigan and piggyback two big trucks out to Washington, Walla Walla, Washington?” He said, “The show’s out there and they need them. I found them and located them, and so if you want to”—and that’s when they stack them up two behind the third, the one on the end. We did a little research and there was one of the states at that time, and I think it was Oregon, perhaps—I don’t recall—but one of the states had a law against it. Dad came in and said, “Well, son, that deal’s off. You’re not old enough to drive that truck through those states. Even though you have the license to do it, you can’t do it.” And so I didn’t get to fly up there and do it and go out to the show. We shipped them on out by someone else.

But they were just good friends. He would call and if he needed something then he’d come in and say, “How much do I owe you for getting that little mess squared up?” And he’d say, “You don’t owe me anything.” He’d say, “Oh, it had to cost you something.” They didn’t do a lot of things together other than D.R. flew some, and Dad would go up every now and then in the plane or something. They were only here like three months out of the year, and they don’t golf in the wintertime. They don’t do any of those things because they’re too busy getting ready for the next year. As far as a friend, you could count on D.R. Miller and Barbara, and all of them, Kelly Miller. Kelly died—I was probably in high school maybe when Kelly died. He’d gotten cancer, the brother of D.R. We’ve just known them all of our lives.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Well, tell me a little bit about the relationship between the circus and the business community in Hugo.*

**Baggett**

It’s a very good relationship. Circuses have a somewhat bad image, traditionally, wherever they go. People don’t see behind the scenes, don’t see what they do. They would try to make it back to Hugo if they

needed certain things for equipment, so they could buy them locally. First of all, they liked it because they knew who they were dealing with and they could go back in. There was an Ed Edinger, who had a hardware store here, great friends of theirs, Ed and Lucy Edinger. Wayne Sanguin had a welding shop, worked with them all the time. He would go out on the show if they needed him. Now, of course, they have their own welders and things to go with them, but Wayne developed a canvas roll, to roll the tent up on a big spool, he and D.R. D.R., lots of times, would come up with these ideas and tell Wayne what he wanted and they'd get together and do it. They had the seating deal so he got to thinking, "If we put those on those trucks and fold them where they'll fold down flat, then we can put some other things on top of that." They were always thinking of how to save them money, because it's expensive when you start rolling that many big trucks across the country.

The feed stores loved them. They knew to stock up more feed when they came in. Back in the old days, they didn't have their own feed mixers at the circus and a lot of the livestock has to have that. The hay industry loved them because elephants eat an awful lot of hay, plus they use a lot of hay for their bedding and things like that, and cleaning it out. One time, I knew some figures that they spent each day for hay and for fuel. So, of course, they always spent their money here. They've made donations, numerous donations in this community that people don't know about. They started the Hugo High School foundation with a lump sum of a hundred thousand dollars, and then they've added to that some since then, I know. The Masonic Lodge, at one time D.R. was a Mason, he was a big Shriner. They started it. They had some damage, wind damage that pulled part of the roof off and they started a fundraiser. One day, it was coming into the rainy season, and he went down on his own and he says, "How much do you lack towards the goal?" He said, "Well, we're..." I think it was twenty-eight hundred dollars or something, or maybe thirty-two hundred dollars short, to do it. He wrote them a check for it. He didn't want anyone to know it, just, "Let's get it fixed." A lot of things like that.

If you needed something, they were there for you. By the same token, we knew if something happened, one of them were even at the hospital, we went there. Dad loved to travel and they made numerous trips, and one of his goals was to be in all fifty states. Back then, you could drop ship, so to speak, or we actually would pick it up at the factory or drop ship a new car in Bangor, Maine, and my mom and dad and her sister and my uncle from Hot Springs would fly to Bangor, Maine. The dealer would have the car there, and it was our car, of course, and then they'd drive it back from Bangor, Maine. But they always managed to work it somehow that we'd go by where the show was. Of course, we would

drive up on the lot and never tell them that they were coming. He loved to surprise D.R., but he would go out of his way several miles to make sure. And I did the same thing. I was in St. Louis one time and drove probably an extra three hours driving time or four, just to make a route. I knew where the show was at that time and stopped by and visited for a couple of hours, had dinner, and then I headed on to Hugo. They've always been a part of our family, so to speak. Good friends.

**Finchum**

*Did you ever want to be part of the circus?*

**Baggett**

I didn't, my dad did. Like I said, he would've been a clown. He said he couldn't do anything else. We all had that infatuation with it, though. I heard this coronet player they had, a trumpet player, and he could just get up and, of course, when I was a kid, and I thought, "Wow! That would be something." So when I did get a little interest in music, I picked the coronet and did it. One of my true heroes, and he was about four or five years older than I, but he was really a tremendous trumpet player for the band. One year, he went out on the show with them for the summer. That's what he wanted to do and they needed him. He took off and worked two or three months just as part of the band, the live band.

Later on, of course, they came to music with kind of a tape-type deal, because those people in the band didn't really want to get out. You do several things when you go out with the circus. You're not just a band member. You have to do setting up and everything. But yes, you had that desire. I think I marveled more at what they did and to see the show set up, to go out there of a morning and watch them put that big top up, that huge big top. Then, of course, David Rawls' family has all been circus. His show was outstanding also. There are several circuses that wintered here, but we're probably closer to the Miller's and Byrd family than the others. I don't know that I'd want to go. I don't know that I'd want to work that hard. (Laughter)

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Well, as a business owner, could you tell when they came home for the winter?*

**Baggett**

Sure.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Was there a definite traffic increase, business increase, or did it just feel the same?*

**Baggett**

Oh, it was different for us because our friends came home. We were eager to see them. A lot of the people that traveled, particularly the entertainers and the performers, they would probably go to Vegas and work for three months or something, or they'd go to another show, or they'd go home to their homes or their families. We didn't sell to many

of those. In fact, Kirby Grant, who was the original Sky King, you probably don't remember anything about Sky King, but he had an airplane and I forget now, the young lady. It was a Saturday morning deal, a series on TV when it first came out. He came out with them for a while. Nice guy, we sold him cars.

As far as impact, again, the hay industry, of course, they come in, in November, they're needing hay and they buy it. They're sharp buyers, they have to be. Wherever they go, they kind of book in advance and maybe pay in advance on that, but they bought some cars, more trucks. At that time, they pulled travel trailers a lot. They didn't have the gigantic motor homes or gooseneck trailers. Of course, later on they did, but when they first came home, they weren't bad about just going out and spending all their money when they came in. They knew they had to get by for another three months, because they were basically unemployed for three months, some of them. The roustabouts, and those people, were out on the show and had a place to stay.

A lot of them have homes here, beautiful homes. They've stayed here. I could name names. I don't want to name too many, I'll forget somebody. But with all the different shows over the years and even some of the local people here—a local dentist got involved with one of the shows, financially, at one time. We're just all good friends, good fellowship we've enjoyed through the years. Probably our service department would have a little business, but they had mechanics, too, that worked on their equipment, particularly after they got into the diesel trucks and the bigger trucks.

They always bought cars. When Barbara was going to school, she came in one day. She wanted a certain car, I remember, and she came in. She was going to Oklahoma University, and she drove in one day to pick up her new car, and just made sure that they bought it from us. A Buick Riviera is what she wanted. I recall the day she pulled in up there, "I think you've got a car around here for me somewhere." (Laughs) I said, "Yes, we do, Barbara, just exactly what you wanted." They were loyal to you. If they could buy from you, they wanted to buy from you because you may help them sometime in life, and they don't forget that.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Would you ever employ circus workers?*

**Baggett**

We had a couple of them that came in. We didn't have a lot of turnover. I think the most employees I ever had was like twenty-nine, and we didn't hire anyone in the sales [department]. They were too busy, the ones that had any kind of a job, so to speak, with the circus. The roustabouts were out looking for work somewhat, but they still hung around the show because they needed to take care of the animals here

more so and get ready. Of course, you cannot believe what goes on that three short months they were here, as far as repainting equipment and redoing equipment and welding things that they'd hobbled in on. Probably about a week is the maximum vacation they get. Even when they're here, they're just busy all the time. I had one guy that married a lady here and he'd been out with the show awhile. He just kind of changed oil in vehicles for us and things like that. He stayed with us quite a while, but he was a good employee. I didn't ever hire a lot of them. I didn't want them to think I was trying to steal their employees. (Laughter)

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, during your father's time or your time, did you ever engage in any cross-promotional type of things?*

**Baggett** I had a couple of things. We had one guy that was a dear friend too, and he didn't own the circus, but his name was Frank Ellis. He and Dad were close. Frank was a promoter deluxe and people seeing this will know, of course, if they knew Frank. (Laughs) He was quite a character. He had a little gambling problem at times. He called me one time when Dad was out of the country and wanted me to send him some money to Las Vegas because he was coming home. I managed to get some together to send him, and then about four hours later, he called again for some, and I said, "This is going to be the last bunch. I don't have any money Frank." But you had to know Frank.

He was a promotion deal, more or less. When the Pontiac Judge came out, they had a little orange-colored, they called it, "Here Comes the Judge," and it was a promotion that Pontiac had. When I got one in, Frank happened to be by, and he said, "Hey, we need to bring that out." They were going out and they were showing here in Hugo, and he said, "We need it, a hundred dollars. We'll just take it in there and advertise and tell them to go down there and see the Judge at Baggett Motor Company." So we went for the deal, or I did, just to help him out, I guess. He pulled the car in and out just like that! (Laughs) We were his friends so to speak, but we knew it going in, that Frank was just that way. He was always promoting something, but as far as any of the other, I don't think we were involved in anything. They were more involved with Chevrolet with the elephant deal with the big company at times. They made that agreement, but we're friends with the local Chevrolet dealer, too. He was a great friend, Joe Finley, that had several Chevrolet dealers. Eventually, we took a franchise, but by that time they weren't doing the Chevrolet deal. It was quite impressive when you opened. It was a good deal with Chevrolet, and it was a good deal for the circus.

**Finchum** *Did you sponsor any ads, like in their route books and programs?*

**Baggett**

Every year, we always had an ad, just whatever we could do. I'll say this, whatever monies I've spent in my life, whatever I've done as far as with the circus and going and everything, I'm still indebted probably about three to one. They've been that much better to me than I've been to them. Whatever you needed at anytime, they were there for you. We did. We advertised with them and didn't hesitate at all. It wasn't one of those hard sells when they came to our place, because they were good friends. They didn't buy every car from us, but they bought an awful lot of them.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Well, after your father passed on, you also maintained close ties with the Miller family.*

**Baggett**

Yes, Barbara is more close to my age, of course. D.R. and I got closer after Dad died, possibly. He'd stroll by because he was in Hugo more after that. His wife was having some health problems and he came back and he was just going bananas. He'd call several times a day to make sure what was going on. He and I got close. Sometimes we'd meet for breakfast and he'd just want to talk and sometimes it was just by happenstance. We'd see each other at breakfast at a local restaurant or something, but we'd talk. He'd get a napkin out and he was telling me about the Endangered Ark. It was just going to be a place where you could come and kids could have fun, they could ride elephants, they could do things. If anyone wanted to learn to be a circus performer, they could. There wasn't any contract to sign up with them. He just wanted to promote the circus. That was his life, and all his life. He wanted to promote it.

He'd get that napkin and draw on it. Sometimes we'd have to go out to the house and he'd show me some other scheme he had. I mean, he said, "I think I can put this over here and still have room for this." Well, I didn't know how much room it takes and what all goes on, but he shared that with me. We became friends. I don't know if he was maybe missing Dad as his friend, and he was relating to me somewhat because we'd been friends. I don't know if he saw in me a little bit of Dad that he wanted to share, but we became closer friends probably in the last five years than we did, he and I, that is. There was remarkable, remarkable memory on this guy. Some of the stories—I forgot how many truck wrecks he'd been in. I believe he crashed two airplanes, one boat sinking, and survived. He was a survivor and he loved to tell about it. He loved to tell about it.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Well, tell us a little bit about D.R.'s funeral.*

**Baggett**

Spectacular. That's the way he wanted it, I'm sure. When he died, I think it was a month and a half, two months maybe, they froze the body

because the show was not here and they wanted to be here and he would want them to. Then they had the deal, everybody was talking about it in town, of course. Here's the circus icon, to the circus world. They didn't realize so much at that time, but everybody in the circus business knew D.R. Miller. If they didn't, they'd know him tomorrow because he'd be at the door if a circus was for sell or whatever. He kept up with everything. He knew more than anybody knew. How he found out things, I don't know. The day of the services, they asked me if I would give the eulogy from the local people here, the city of Hugo people, and I was honored to do so—tough job, tough job. We set it up in a circus tent and it was under the big top. I don't know how many hundreds of people came. I told people, I said, "Boy, he'd have loved to see this crowd today, if they were paying people." (Laughs) Several circus names from all over the country came, flowers everywhere, and several small speeches were given and everything, tributes.

You didn't realize probably until that day, really how well known he was in the circus field. We just knew him as D.R. Miller. It was quite a deal, a production, and some of the people called me, and said, "Boy, I'd love for my kids to see that, but we hate to go out on street." I said, "Hey, they perform. This is just another show. This is just his last show." They had some busses that they told people, they said, "If you want to park your car at the Agriplex, where the service was, where they set up the tent, and you want to park it there, we have some busses that will take you to the cemetery. You can get back on them and we'll take you back to your car after the service, because there's not a lot of room out there to park hundreds of cars." There literally would have been hundreds of cars going out.

The streets were lined with little kids watching all this and, of course, they had the horse and the carriage that carried him. I believe I'm right, it came from Peru. I'd have to double check. But there were several ornate wagons coming in to carry the deal, and they had the head elephant, of course, walking along. They had llamas, whatever, several of the animals made the trip to the cemetery, probably a mile or mile and a half away from where the circus grounds were. People were lining the streets just like when the circus comes to town or any other parade comes to town. Many of them wanted to pay tribute. Many of them wanted to just see it, because they'd never seen a funeral like that. I know he would have been proud.

**Finchum**

*Can you talk a little bit about Showmen's Rest?*

**Baggett**

Showmen's Rest, you've got to see it. I think it's now on the Historical Society's list, and there are busloads come in. It is unique in every way, a lot of unique headstones. It came about by funding from one of the

elephant trainers and handlers that had been there for years, he had saved some of his money. His name was John Carroll. John was not an educated person, but D.R. bought the land and John, with some of the money, they started a special foundation and bought land for Showmen's Rest. It's nearly a whole section of the cemetery there. It's probably not over about ten people that were previously buried there or bought lots there that are not circus people, but the rest of them in some way were. Some of them want to come back. There was this one big deal there that the guy had never been in the circus business in his life, just a retired marine. He and his wife came back. He had done well, I think, in California or Arizona or someplace. He came back, got involved with it, and managed some of the business for them for a while. He's in Showmen's Rest there, and then in fact his wife later, was part owner of one of the circuses. But, it's a beautiful place to see. It's indescribable. You just have to have some of the pictures and then once you see those, you want to make sure you do come to see Showmen's Rest.

Our cemetery is well kept and just kind of a treasure itself. It was built in the WPA [Works Progress Administration] days, like our school stadium and several things, the armories in those days. They did the cemetery and there was a guy by the name of Bill Darrow that came into some money, had never married, lived up above one of the drugstores in town and dealt with the stock markets and hit it well. He was a member of our church also and spent a lot of money on the cemetery and his relationship with the circus. In fact, his mother named Hugo, Mrs. Darrow, and it was named after Victor Hugo. There's a tribute out there not far from where my dad's site is and also from—Dad is probably a couple sections away from there and would probably want me to move him if he knew that D.R. was over there now. (Laughs)

It's a unique cemetery in itself with not only circus people, but Freckles Brown and Lane Frost and some of the world champion cowboys that are there, very unique. Eddy Ansley, the little guy with Buster Brown shoes, very, very unique cemetery. I don't know how you can describe it without seeing it. You see these tombstones shaped like a circus tent, calliope wagon wheel, numerous different ones, elephants around on little stands all the way around. It's not huge, but it's beautiful and they're all together.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*I'd like you to take me a little bit through town, from what you remember, specifically with a focus on the early locations of the company, your father's business.*

**Baggett**

Okay, he started out in '45, as I said, and it was a shanty little deal. No showroom. Had a parts department and we had a used car lot on East Jackson. It stayed there from 1945 till 1986, we had that car lot. We

expanded it a couple of times by buying property and did some work on it, but then he moved. In '52, he needed more room and he moved down on North A, down by the Frisco Depot. There's a nice circus display in the Frisco Depot Museum. We moved there, I know it was like '53, because that's when Buick came out with a valve-in-head engine, which I'm sure relates to both of you real well. (Laughs) I was so proud of showing off to people that we had a V8 engine in a Buick. They were straight eights at that time. I was still a youngster, but loved the car business.

We didn't stay there long because it was off the beaten track and we got the opportunity to move where the old Studebaker dealer had been. This was a franchise that had gone out and there were two people in town. Ironically, the Ford dealer's daughter was in my class, the then-Chevrolet dealer's daughter was in my class, and the Studebaker daughter was in my class. They were not there when I graduated in '59 because it was no longer a division and we were in that building. So we pretty well had the car industry sized up in our class, a class of eighty-six people. We moved there and it had a service station involved. I don't think if I had known that myself, I would have made that decision because it was my job then, a lot more tire changing and pumping gas. A quarter's worth of gas would go a long way. For a dollar's worth, four quarters, you could get four gallons of gas. It was good to meet the people and learn how to deal with the public, and there are people that are hard to deal with in any business. It taught me an awful lot. It taught me the manual labor that I didn't want to do the rest of my life. It was a unique experience.

I later went to work in the summer. The superintendent of schools here decided that one summer, he says, "I got you a job at the oil company." I said, "Well, I'm going to work down at this place with Dad." He said, "No, you don't need to work for your dad all your life. You need to get out and work for somebody else, see if you can." Wisdom, great wisdom. I said, "Well, I'll have to check with Dad." He said, "No, just tell him I said you were going to work for this other guy this summer." (Laughs) So I did, and I worked for him, unique experience, super nice guy, great experience. I got out of pumping gas for a little while, I guess. It was probably around '69, perhaps, we moved to another facility, again in downtown Hugo. We had lots scattered. By this time, I had my eye on getting Chevrolet and we had Buick, Pontiac, and GM. Dad got the Pontiac dealership in 1959, and so at that point we had three franchises and, too, he had a Rambler franchise, American Motors at one time, franchise here and Dodge-Chrysler in a separate deal he was part interest in.

We moved around to East Duke, and it's 121 East Duke. It was right

across from the City Drug Store, and it's a gift shop there now, but we thought that was outstanding. We had a car lot right across the street for our new car displays, which we'd never had before. We used to have to keep them in a warehouse about a block away just to show the cars. There wasn't as much emphasis on showing a fancy car at that time. Pickups mostly were standard shifts when I first started selling, and you could buy a new pickup for seventeen hundred and seventy-six dollars from us, and that didn't include a radio, but that was what the selling price was. We'd sell within a bumper and some pickups didn't come with heaters even at that time.

Dad had a little trouble. I was young and thought, "Well, we need to doll some of the pickups up a little bit. Some people just buy them for cars." "Oh, you can't sell an automatic transmission in a pickup around here." I'll never forget one day, I said, "Well, I'm going to order one of these," two-tone, and I kind of tricked it up, so to speak, and boy, we sold them like hotcakes, and he couldn't believe it. (Laughs) You could make about seventy-five dollars profit. Of course, at that time, that was bigger bucks than it is today, but if you got a seventy-five dollar profit deal, you really had a deal. Selling them the bumper they needed and putting it on and things like that and maybe a radio if they wanted it. Of course, in Hugo there was no FM in this area at that time so FM didn't mean a thing to us. It was just AM radios.

The prices have changed considerably since then. I came back out of college in '64 or '65, I guess, and joined Dad and spent a little time in the military right after that. I've been here ever since. I had a wonderful relationship with my dad. We've only had one disagreement in our life and it was when I was in high school. He won that one. (Laughs) I found out real quick that smart worked better with the word brain than it did with mouth. We never did have a disagreement and fight. When I got in the business, even in advertising or something, someone would come around saying, "Hey, you need to be doing this. You need more advertising," and I'd go for it. The next month, he'd say, "Well how'd that go?" He knew already. I said, "Well, it didn't—we sold two more new cars," which we could've done that without it probably. He said, "Well, now you know." That's the way he taught me. It wasn't anything like, "I told you that wouldn't work." Occasionally, we would have a deal that I'd say, "Dad, no wonder they traded with you as much as you put in their trade-in." He'd say, "Hey, I'll be all right." Then he'd go sell it just to show me that he was right—and he could, he could sell circles around me.

We had such a unique relationship, Dad and I. Just more like brothers at times, had to share everything with each other, whatever it was. One time I—you kind of hear what you want to hear at times. My desire was

to be able to outsell him and I knew I never could because he just had that ability. He grew up when you had to sell to people that came in. Later on, you wanted to sell them more what they wanted, I guess, and he told me one time, he said, “Son,”—he was listening in on a conversation I was having with one of my classmates and I was trying to sell him a car. After they left, he walked out at my desk and I said, “They couldn’t afford the new car.” He said, “Son, I’m proud of your financial wisdom you gave them and that’s right.” He said, “They want a new car and they’re not going to wait on you.” He said, “When they go around”—and he named the salesman at the Chevrolet place—“when he gets through with them, they’ll have a new Chevrolet in their drive tonight.” I said, “Oh, no. They’ll wait for me, Dad. It’s a classmate of mine, we’ll be all right.”

I was living at home at the time. I just hadn’t been out of school long and I wasn’t married and I was living there. He said, “Well, are you about ready to go home?” It was about 6:30 at night and we stayed open until the last person showed at that time. We went to work about 6:30 or 7:00 in the morning. I said, “No, I think I’ll just stick around in case somebody else drops in.” I didn’t have anything to do. Just as soon as he left—I told him, I said, “They’ll wait.” He said, “I’ll bet you a steak dinner they’ll get a new Chevrolet.” I said, “You’re on.” So I go home—or just as soon as he leaves, I take off and I drive straight to their house, and I can still see that new Chevrolet sitting there. (Laughter) I drive home and he walks in and he says, “What color was it?” I said, “White.” (Laughter) He said, “When you want to go get that steak?” I said, “Let’s go get this over with,” and so we did. We had that relation and it was a fun relation all the time.

I’d stroll by his office and say, “How many have you sold today?” “Well, I sold two.” I’d say, “Well, I’ve sold three.” After awhile, he’d come back by and he’d sold three. He just couldn’t stand it. But he came in one time and he said, “Son”—back then, the girls in the office had to type contracts and they had to be perfect. Sometimes if they made a mistake you couldn’t sign them. They had to be signed, GMAC contracts. I really enjoyed it somewhat because you had a customer and you’d close the deal and then you would get to visit with them. So much of our business came out of Texas and places. Hugo, Oklahoma, wasn’t big enough to have the volume that we were selling, and we had to pull people everywhere. You get to meet a lot of people and know people.

They would come in and my boys, later, were doing the advertising on TV. They were a year and seventeen days apart. People would come to see the Baggett boys. Everybody thought they were twins. We dressed them a lot alike and they were about the same size. You’d get to know your customers somewhat, and I’d visit with them while the girls were

doing the—you know, just social, what they do. We would get the paperwork done, whether it was a financed deal or not. Well, I looked up one day and he was out there and he was motioning for me. “Come here, come here.” (Gesturing) So I go outside and I’d sold them a Buick Le Sabre—a blue, light blue Le Sabre Buick, and so I went in and he says, “I’ve sold that car that these people are buying.” I said, “Well, they’re doing the paperwork on it, Dad.” He says, “Well, why don’t you see if you can sell them something else. You’re a lot better salesman than I am.” All I ever heard was, “You’re a lot better salesman than I am.” (Laughs)

I start back in the office and he goes on and sells the car to his people. I get to thinking, “He sold me!” (Laughter) So I have to go in and tell my people that he’s already sold it and then I have to find them one. Well, back then, you just didn’t get on the computer and find it. I finally located one. It took three days to salvage my deal out. I had to cut a little of it for expense and everything. I got back, sold my people, but I’ll never forget walking back to his office that day after both parties left. I just stood at the door and he was sitting there and had a little smirk on his face. I said, “How could you do your own son that way?” He said, “What way?” I said, “You know what way. You sold me! That will not happen again.” (Laughs) But we just had that good relation, and he and D.R. were like that, too. They liked to play jokes on each other. They liked to kid each other about this and that. They were just a treasure, both of them, both of them.

Then later, in ’86, I guess it was, I built the new facility east of town. We acquired Chevrolet-Oldsmobile and had a large facility. I actually promised them I’d do it in about ’82, but interest rates went so high and I said, “If you want to come take those franchises back right now, I’m not going to go in debt at 20 percent interest. I can’t do that.” They said, “No, we don’t want anyone building right now.” When it dropped down to around 15 percent interest rates at that time, I guess, well, I went ahead and locked up the deal and built the new facility. I already had the property, and so I built the new facility. He didn’t want an office built out there. I’d bought him out by that time and he said, “I’m not really into it and I can’t do you much good.” I said, “Well, yes, you can.” I had to kind of misrepresent a little bit when they were building it. He said, “What’s this going to be?” I had two nice offices side by side. I said, “We’ll probably use this as a conference room or something.” He said, “Well, all right.”

When we put carpet in, orange carpet by the way, but when we put the carpet in the offices, he said, “You probably shouldn’t have put carpet. They’ll spill coffee and drinks in here if you’re going to make it for a conference room.” Then I moved a big desk in and big sofas that he

could go and sleep if he wanted to and everything, and he was pretty touched. He had the nicest office in town. He lived about five years, I guess, after we built. He fished all the time. That's not related to the story, but sometimes he would have to take an employee fishing with him, because I wouldn't let him go by himself. (Laughs) If he couldn't find one of his buddies or they were busy or something and he was going to the dock or whatever, he'd say, "I'll be ok." I'd say, "No, you take Chief with you," or something. Chief didn't mind going, of course, being paid to go fishing with him. He caught a lot of crappie and just enjoyed life a lot. We moved there in '86.

Then I sold the dealership in '93 to a sales manager of mine. I had the opportunity to sell it and get out and enjoy life a little bit. My boys were in college about to graduate and they really didn't want to come back to Hugo. They'd seen the bright lights of the big city, and we didn't really have many people in information technology in Hugo, Oklahoma, at that time when they graduated. I'm proud. They're both in Tulsa and doing well there.

**Finchum** *OSU graduates?*

**Baggett** OSU graduates, married OSU girls, met their wives there, and graduated there. I just got back from attending my second Grandparent's University there with my grandson Garrett. The little girls are not quite old enough yet to go, but I'm looking forward to taking them.

**Finchum** *Well, how did you come to choose OSU?*

**Baggett** Actually, I went to Southeastern the very first year. At that time, I wasn't sure about the automobile industry for me. I thought, "An optometrist, that's what I want to be." I found out that I could get into Houston optometry school. You had to have two years of college and then you could apply, and a local optometrist was encouraging me. I thought, "Well, that sounds like a pretty good deal." Five days a week and my dad would work six days a week and long hours and I loved it. When I got to Southeastern, I took a chemistry course that I found out I wasn't qualified to take, probably, and didn't do well in it. You had to have it, of course. I wasn't enjoying that portion of it. My sister had gone up to A&M at the time. She's four years older than I am and after the second year, or in her second year, she got married and they decided that they were going to go out and start their life. Her husband didn't finish at that time either. They got married and moved to Dallas, had jobs, did well, but just never did finish college.

Dad so wanted a college graduate in the family, because he didn't get to finish high school. I thought, "Well,"—and I was going to go to another

school that always had a pretty good football team because they won football games. I thought, “Well,”—in high school and then I went to Southeastern and I thought, “This is not for me.” I was selling cars on the side at Southeastern and driving them the fifty-two miles to Hugo to pick up their car or whatever and take a car over, and I spent more time doing that. Then I go on to OSU and, of course, loved it. I went up one time and the key word when I was in high school—and I visited another major university in this state and they were somewhat snobbish, I would say, in atmosphere toward high school students at that time. I’m not trying to say it was all the time at all. I thought, “I don’t think I want to go there to school.” This is the one that had a good football team most of the time. It just wasn’t me.

I went over to see my sister there, and I had been up once or twice before for high school deals. Everybody was wearing blue jeans, and the key word was “howdy” when you walked across campus and everybody spoke to you. It didn’t matter that you were a high school junior or senior or whatever, they spoke to you. I remember I was so excited when I came home and told my folks. I said, “That’s where I want to go to school. That’s it.” And so I selected it, after I decided not to go on with the optometry deal, in the School of Business. I have not regretted it whatsoever. I got involved with a lot of people, a lot of dear friends still today. I lived in Bennett Hall. I knew a lot of the football players there and wrestlers, and loved it. Every minute of OSU, I guess, I loved. Good experiences, bad experiences, they’re all great. I still have many good friends I see. Jerry Gill, a dear, dear friend. Murl Rogers, [Jerry] preceded Murl.

Peggy, my sister, worked for Murl when she was there. She was quite a student. She made the Dean’s Honor Roll and things. Of course, I had followed her through high school. I knew it was going to be tough to match up, which I wasn’t going to do. (Laughs) I came back one time and Dad said, “Well, did you make the Dean’s Honor Roll?” I said, “No, Dad, but I’m on the Dean’s List.” I said, “He knows who I am.” (Laughter) I wasn’t, but I told him, “When I walk in there, they know who I am, Dad.” He thought that was good, but it wasn’t the Dean’s Honor Roll. (Laughter) We had fun over that too, but I enjoyed every moment on campus. I got involved a little bit in several organizations, more in my marketing group in the School of Business. I would live up there.

**Nykolaiszyn**      *What was your major?*

**Baggett**            Business marketing.

**Nykolaiszyn**      *And what year did you graduate?*

**Baggett**

I graduated actually in '65. In Southeastern, I'd gotten shingles to be perfectly honest, and had to drop some hours. In January of '65, I guess, is when I graduated. I should have been out actually a year or so before, but I had to take a short load a semester over there and get special permission to be under twelve hours. The military would draft you if you weren't. Then I lost some hours that didn't transfer. When I went in up there, I was actually still a freshman the next year by several hours. It took a little longer for me to graduate. Four and a half years, I guess, but it was tremendous. Like I say, I got involved and still the people that in the dorms that I met at that time are still good friends, some of the football players that played, Leland Slack. He would come down and buy a car from me until I sold out, come here from Tulsa. I still see him occasionally.

I got involved. Murl Rogers, as I said, was alumni [director]. He encouraged my involvement somewhat. Just numerous, numerous people. I served on the alumni board for several years representing this area. Then Jerry [Gill] asked me to serve on the executive committee so I did that. Then I eventually became national president, in working with Jerry. I worked primarily with Dr. John Campbell at the time. I grew to be great, great friends with John and Eunice Campbell. He was there a short time, but it was my tenure as president. One of the most disappointing things that I had as far as president was, my son Greg was president of the SAE [Sigma Alpha Epsilon] fraternity. They were so excited for Homecoming and they were going to win this deal. They always had good house decorations, they always do up there. That's a story that you could go on and on about, Homecoming at OSU and it's an alumni function, as you know.

Greg told me, he said, "Dad, you're going to be president, I'm going to be president. There's nothing I'd love more than to walk out on that field and you present us with that first place prize." I said, "Well, you're the only one that can do that." He said, "We're going to work for it," and oh, they did! He learned a good lesson. One of the requirements was for you to have some place on your display, "Welcome home alums," or "Welcome OSU alums," or something. They left that part off, and that's—they would have won the deal. They placed real high, but they got knocked down. It just really made him sick that he didn't get to do that. I said, "Well, the good news is the fact that if you'd come out there, they'd said, 'Hey, that was a fixed deal. The father is the president of the Alumni Association.'" Yes, it has been a good ride. I've enjoyed all my associations.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*You could have lived anywhere, you know. Why did you choose to make your home here in Hugo?*

## Baggett

The business. I wanted to come back. My dad, he encouraged me. I had the opportunity to go to work for Phillip's Petroleum at the time when I graduated. He wanted me to interview with some people and they offered me a nice salary and everything. In fact, it was quite a bit nicer than what I got when I came. (Laughs) He said, "Well, you ought to try it." I came home one weekend and told him, I said, "Well, I've been offered a job with Phillip's Petroleum." The Phillip's distributor was who I worked for here at the time. Of course, he had no connection with the interview or anything like that. We had a Phillip's 66 station and that was kind of in the back of my mind. So when they came to campus, I interviewed. I can't recall that guy's name. I did until a few years ago, but he's long gone I'm sure by now, because he was an older gentleman. He just kind of took a liking to me and he offered me this position at Bartlesville.

I thought, "Hmm, it's not a bad deal." I came home one weekend and I was telling Dad about it, and I think schoolteachers were getting paid around thirty-nine hundred dollars a year at this particular time, recent graduates, and they offered me ten thousand dollars a year. I thought, "Wow!" He said, "Why don't you just try it?" I said, "Well, Dad, I hate to do that because I really want to be in the car business." He said, "Well, you can do that later if you don't like this." So he pretty well had me convinced in going back to school to make that decision. I got to school that night and I called home. I said, "I'm not going to take that job. I don't want to do that. I wouldn't do a good job. I'm coming back to Hugo and I'm going to get in the car business." He said, "Boy, you don't learn too well." (Laughs) I came back and it was great, because it relieved a lot of pressure off him. I was able to reach people he could not reach. I didn't reach all of them, that one guy I didn't reach, but I gave him good financial advice. (Laughter)

He told me, he said, "Son, we're not in the financial advice business, we're in the car business. Sometimes you have to sell them when they come whether it's what they need or not." It was a good lesson other than the fact that I lost a steak dinner on that deal, but I never regretted not taking a job with someone else. I think I found my niche in life. I think I found what I wanted to do. It has been good to me, winning numerous trips all over the nation and the world, to see the world first-class, so to speak. I've met so many people in the automobile industry that I treasure, also. I used to furnish a car for the Wagon Wheel Club, the sports deal. I furnished then, when Jerry moved over to the [Alumni Association] that's where I met Jerry. He was driving a car when he was raising the funds, the fundraiser more or less for the athletic department. Then when he took the job at the OSU Alumni, he says, "You want to move over there? I can't give you all the privileges that you get." I said,

“Sure, I’ll furnish a car to you over there, too,” and he drove several of my cars over the years.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Well, as we kind of come towards the end of our interview, is there anything you’d like to say about how you see the relationship between the circus and the Hugo community today?*

**Baggett**

I think it’s still good for, particularly, the people that know the circus people that know what all they mean to this area. David Rawls was mayor here. You just can’t walk into a position like that. It’s a hard position to be a mayor of a small community. We were all in favor, those that knew David and how brilliant he is, were in favor of him taking that position and he served us well. There can be other people that didn’t like him, because they didn’t get certain things or something, you know how it is in politics and things like that, but all in all, he did an outstanding job. He couldn’t have received it without support of the community, to have somebody that’s not been here but three months out of the year all of his life, but he was always here and doing things—and always whatever it was civic-wise.

Several of them have served as president of the chambers and things like that or have been involved in chamber work, but when they come back and retire, the ones that retire here, stay involved here. So many of the people, the young people—and I’m talking about my age people that know them—so many of the younger people they are related to. My boys were friends of the Byrd girls, of course. They’re in the same age group. They’re still true friends, and they communicate all the time and just treasure that deal. So, in general, John Q. Public here and the people that have moved in here with various companies and things do not know what the circus has done for Hugo, Oklahoma—a lot more than we’ve done for the circus.

**Finchum**

*With your connections with the circus, and you’ve traveled to see it various places, as a member of the audience, do you have a favorite part?*

**Baggett**

Oh, I’ve always—of course, everybody loves the clowns because you like to see the children laugh, and they do. I watch the little children probably more than the show, because I’ve seen it so much. I love the elephants. I cannot understand how you can take a huge animal like that and train it to walk out on a beam and do a headstand with its feet up in the air and balancing on his two front feet on an eight-inch beam, steel beam. How do you ever get it to know what you want it to do? (Laughs) And an elephant, how do they communicate? I never was big on the cat acts that they’ve had. I’m always scared I will see someone get maimed or something, but those people love their animals. My favorite part is

just watching the crowd.

The film industry today is so trashy and even when you watch these shows about who's going with who and all this—and I'm not going to name any names of some of these stars that think that because they're a star, they can get by with everything—you don't see that in the circus. These are people that love what they do, they work hard hours, they're just genuine, hardworking, good people that have had kind of a bad image whenever they go someplace. It's not a carnival. Carnivals, they've got the game shows and all these things and they try to trick you. We have those come in with the country fairs and things like that, but circus, they're performers. They're professional people, they're good people.

I don't know. I just get so upset when people kind of downgrade them and particularly, the elephants, the treatment that the circus has given these elephants. I did write the letter into PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals]—or to *The Daily Oklahoman* one time because PETA had caught one act after two years of, they said, “traveling with the circus secretly,” that they found one item of abuse, and it was. He'd kind of cursed the elephant and did use the gaft a little bit harder than possible, but they love those animals. They name the elephants after their family members and they don't mistreat them. They live better than most horses in these stables that you see in these fancy places. They have their own playground to go out and dig in the mud.

I love the elephant acts. They used to bring the show in and they'd stack them up at the end of the show, one on top of the other, where they rear up on top of the other one and they'd be like fifteen or twenty in a row, and it was very impressive to do that, but to see the little kids...Hollywood needs to clean up their act. This is the only place you can take a child today and see good, clean entertainment. Even the clown acts are good. They may put on a little skit or something where the clown lady has got bloomers or whatever on and something pulls the top dress off, but it's nothing like you see in Hollywood or in some of those other things. I think it's a good deal for the kids to be able to go and laugh. Even kids that have had a tough time and today, we have so many more kids without two parents, even though they're both living but they're not living together. I see the little kids out there enjoying it.

I work a lot with the shelter workshop and we always make sure they get to go to the circus when it sets up. Truly, too, without the show itself, probably the setting up in the morning is just worth watching. If you've not seen them bring that big top up and set the show up, it's something. They use the elephants and of course, they use a lot of machinery now. One other thing I need to mention real quick, and talking about things

that they've done, one year or two or three or several, Hugo made the final playoffs in football, and we were expecting a bigger crowd than our stadium could handle. I thought, "D.R. has got those trucks," and there's a track, a running track, around the stadium. So I mentioned to him, I said, "Hey, we need extra seating. What would it cost us to bring your trucks in?" Nothing! They brought the trucks in, set up the bleachers. They just wheeled those big trucks in and left the tractors hooked up to them. They set up probably five or six of them on the north side where we just have one side of stands, and the other side had bleachers—like that. [Snaps] No charge. Just, "Hey, we want to see the people come and enjoy." No one ever knew there was no charge. Everybody probably thought, "Well, they got rich off this," or something, but they're like that. They really are. They're good, good people.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, is there anything else you'd like to mention before we close out today?*

**Baggett** Oh, I've probably talked too much now, but I've thoroughly enjoyed it. I invite you to come back, and I invite everyone who might see this to come and visit the circus. It's kind of like part of American heritage in a sense, because ever since it has been going, there has been a medicine man or somebody coming by over the years. When you see these people, just appreciate what they do every day to bring entertainment to your town. They're the largest tent circus in the world, this one [Carson and Barns] is. All of our circuses here have been tent circuses, primarily, where Ringling Brothers now travel only by train and rail. It's a wonderful circus too, but this one is the second largest in the world.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, thank you so much for your time.*

**Baggett** Thank you.

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