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

Interview History

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

Project Detail

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

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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 Dudley Hamilton is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on June 30, 2011.
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About Dudley Hamilton…

Dudley Hamilton, born in 1929 in Texas, ‘joined’ the circus in 1982 and continues to be involved with the circus as superintendent of the Kelly Miller Circus winter quarters in Hugo, Oklahoma. He truly has circus in his blood.

Prior to coming to the circus industry, Dudley was involved in various careers. For a time he was a Texas highway patrolman and he also raised and showed collies. Following a few life changes, Dudley made a trip to Sarasota, Florida where he toured the Circus Hall of Fame and the Ringling mansion. The experience fed his interest in the circus.

As luck, or fate, would have it, while he was in his seventeenth year working a bread route for Mrs. Baird’s Bakery in Texas, he was presented with the opportunity to begin working for Carson and Barnes Circus based in Hugo, Oklahoma. Mr. D.R. Miller hired Dudley to be a booking agent for the circus and Mr. Jesse Jessen, a well-known circus booking agent, trained him. Dudley would go on to train approximately twenty-five to thirty booking agents.

After working as a booking agent for several years, Dudley moved over into the position of press agent, yet continued to train booking agents. Then following some health issues, rather than being on the road as press agent, he was offered the opportunity to manage the pie car. When the need for someone to watch over the winter quarters for the Kelly Miller Circus came about, Dudley accepted the position and continues to serve in this role today.

Dudley is very well-versed in circus history, especially as it relates to the town of Hugo. Like a true showman, he enthusiastically shares what he knows with those who ask.
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Dudley Hamilton

Oral History Interview

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

Nykolaiszyn My name is Juliana Nykolaiszyn and also with me is Tanya Finchum. We’re with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at the OSU Library. Today is Thursday, June 30, 2011, and we’re in Hugo, Oklahoma, interviewing Dudley Hamilton. Dudley, thank you for joining us today.

Hamilton You’re quite welcome.

Nykolaiszyn Well, we’d like to begin by learning a little bit more about you. Could you tell us what year you were born and where, and a little bit about your early life.

Hamilton All right. I’m old. I was born in 1929, the same year as the Great Depression got here. We both hit the earth about the same time. My parents were farmers in northwest Texas, and my daddy was killed about two months before I was born so I never saw my daddy. But, I had a good upbringing. Our mother had five children (cat meows) and I was the baby, of course, since Papa got killed. There’s my wife (referring to the cat), my constant companion. I went to high school. I never did go to college. Back in those days, if you went to college, you laid down cash money. There weren’t all the student loans and opportunities like there is now. I never really wanted to. I never did like school. I have done an assortment of different kinds of work. I’m a hard worker, I love to work. I work hard, diligently. I’m a good employee always, I’ll brag on myself a little. I never have been interested in making a lot of money. I just always wanted to do what excited me.

I’ll tell you two or three things that did excite me and I did all of them. I never have gotten all the way through the list yet, but I’m too old now. When I was in high school, I fell in love with collie dogs. That was about the time the Lassie book came out, and they made a movie and I
just went nuts over that. There was another man, and I have three or four of his books down there, he wrote books. He was a collie breeder and he lived up in New Jersey, Albert Payson Terhune. He was kind of a gentlemanly New Englander. Over a period of time, I read all those books. He was such a booster for the collie breed of dogs. I’m not talking about Border Collies. Get that picture of that dog right there. That’s one of my dogs.

I was married. I decided, when I was a kid, I was going to raise collie dogs—and good ones, really good ones. You can tell there (gestures to a photograph), I had them. That was one of my firsts. My wife and I showed dogs, showed our dogs. We put championships on several dogs. I studied from the time I’d get home from work until we’d go to bed at night. I was reading about dogs and how to take care of them and how to groom them. We worked hard at it and we were very successful. We finished championships on several dogs. We used to show dogs from New Mexico to the east coast. We were very successful so that satisfied that wish.

When I was young, we lived in Texas. I’m a native born Texan. I always admired the highway patrolmen down there. I always wanted to do that. When I was a little kid, they’d come through our little town, and I just thought they looked so sharp, clean, and neat, and they had those pretty uniforms on. Everybody was respectful towards them and I thought, “I want to do that.” Well, I saw a little article in the Abilene Reporter-News, a newspaper. They were going to give examinations for the highway patrol so I went down and took that examination. They tested something over eight hundred men. That was before women were accepted. They tested over eight hundred men and they chose fifty out of that eight hundred and something, to go to the academy and fortunately, I was one of the fifty. I don’t know if you know anything about that kind of work or not, but boot camp in the military is a breeze after going to the highway patrol academy in any state, particularly in Texas. It’s hard, it is really hard, and unless you want to do that so very badly—you can go home anytime you want to with, “I give up, this is it.”

We’d wake up every morning. It’s like a big, old open bay dormitory. Every morning there would be another empty bed. You have to take an examination every Saturday on what you studied all that week, and if you flunked that exam on Saturday morning, you’re out. It keeps you sharp. Several guys got busted out that way. Most of them just quit, just went home. We ended up, out of fifty people that started the academy, we ended up graduating twenty-four, and I was one of them. I’ve always told my friends, “Unless you absolutely wanted, very badly, to be a Texas highway patrolman, you wouldn’t do it.” If you ever see those guys, you can just tell yourself, “There is a man that wanted that job so
bad,” because you go through all kinds of misery.

They used to put boxing gloves on us. We’d have a physical ed class every day, an hour or two hours, and they’d match up by weight. I was a big, old, dumb kid. I think I was twenty-one, maybe twenty-two years old then. There was a Mexican boy from El Paso who was deputy sheriff out there. He had applied and got accepted. Unfortunately, we weighed the same, and they’d put the boxing gloves on me and him and put us out there. That old kid nearly beat me to death before I got out of that school. (Laughs) But he had been working as deputy sheriff in El Paso. He was used to fighting the drunks. Well, I’d never had a fight in my life and he beat me unmercifully, but like a good trooper, I kept trooping.

Later on, I always wanted to learn to fly an airplane so I started taking flying lessons, and did that. (Laughs) I’ve got five or six, maybe seven hours of solo time. The guy that owned the airplane quit, he left the country so that ended my airplane [flying], but I got to do it. There were a few other little things I wanted to do and did, that aren’t too important.

I was always fascinated by circus, and I was fifty-two, maybe fifty-four years old, working hard. I was running bread routes down there, in Texas, and that was hard work—nine, ten hours a day out in the weather, six days a week. I was single, living by myself. I was divorced. My children were gone. I decided to go down to Sarasota, Florida. That’s where the Ringling brothers had their winter quarters. That is the circus city. We call ourselves “Circus City” here and we are sort of, but in Sarasota, there have been countless circuses down there.

I took vacation and went down there and that just did it. They had the Circus Hall of Fame down there and I went through that and went through the old Ringling mansion and all of that kind of stuff. It wasn’t long after that when that young lady came through San Angelo and she called me, trying to get me to go to work for the circus so I did. That was the best move I ever made in my life. I was working for Mrs. Baird’s Bakery. It had been seventeen years. I had moved up in the company. They offer a lot of perks; free health insurance, free vacation, free retirement plan, everything is paid for, and I was getting three weeks of vacation every year, as long as you were working. I was only about two years away from getting four weeks of vacation. I really was sort of scared to quit that job, but I did. And I’m so proud I did. I started working for the circus and of course, [Jesse] Jessen said, “I’m going to send you to California”—he was in California. They were short on booking agents. That’s one of the hardest jobs on the circus there is to fill, because you’re always out there by yourself. You can take your wife or girlfriend with you if you want to, but who wants to sit in a hotel room all day while I’m out working?
What was the name of the circus, your first circus?

Carson and Barnes.

Oh, okay.

And they winter right up the street.

Okay.

At that time, they were the largest tent circus in the world; five rings, twenty-three elephants every day, and on and on and on. It’s a little bit frightening to know. They’ve got about two hundred people on that show—or did then. I don’t know what it was valued at, probably five million dollars. We had to stay in motels booking the circus, but sometimes I’d lie in bed at night and get scared thinking about it. Mr. Miller and his family have got four or five million dollars tied up in that thing, depending on me and the other agents to put them in good spots out there. Two hundred people and their families depended on me for the same thing. That’s a pretty big responsibility. That was part of an adrenaline rush and the fright that I experienced. (Laughs)

I worked hard at that, and Mr. Jessen was a general agent. He’s the man that I met in Little Rock and fortunately, for me, Jesse liked me. He spent a lot time working with me. He taught me a lot about the circus business. Jesse was an interesting person himself. He retired from the Marine Corps as a captain. After he retired, he started working for the state of California, in the sales tax department. He moved way up in that job and retired from the state of California. He and his wife had a little travel trailer and they were just knocking around the country fulltime, the RV people they call them. He got started working for Carson and Barnes, himself. He moved straight to the top, though. He was executive vice president of that company. He not only handled a lot of the circus business, but he handled a lot of Mr. Miller’s private investments. I was very fortunate.

Booking agents go from town to town. They usually suggest what town they want you to go to, the general agent. It works a number of different ways with different shows. But for most circuses, the agent will go into a town and explore the possibility to bring their circus there. We always play under the auspices of some of what we call the “knife and fork” clubs, the Lion’s Club, the Kiwanis, all of those and numerous others, for a share of the money. You get on the telephone, you call them and you ask if you can come by this afternoon. You explain to him what we’re doing and how it works. Usually, you’re talking to the president. I
always went to the chamber of commerce when I first got into a town. The chambers all have a list of the clubs and organizations in the town—you guys are familiar with it, I can see. So, usually, those lists are a year or two or three out of date, but at least that’s a starting place.

You’re calling people and what I learned to do is don’t tell them anymore on the telephone than you have to. I want to sit down with them, like we are here. If you talk to them on the telephone, you don’t know how stressed out they are or how busy they are at their desk. You may not have their full attention, that’s the reason I liked to ask them if I could come by in the morning and visit with them briefly about the circus. They’re always interested in their club, wanting to make a little money. So I’d go back. And what you’d do, or what a smart agent does, is try to sell that person on the idea. They’re always going to tell you, “Well, I can’t make that decision myself. I’m going to have to get most of the members or the board of directors.” Two things happen when you’re a booking agent on a circus. You are always trying to rush this deal through so you can get your commission check and get on to the next town. They, the prospects, are always trying to slow you up and put you off. Used to, when I’d train new agents, I’d tell them, “It’s kind of a game between you and those prospects. You’re going to be trying to speed them up. They’re going to be trying to slow you up.” And that’s the way it works.

Mr. Jessen trained me and I think I was the last agent that he ever trained. After he trained me, he would send all the trainees to me and I had to do that at no extra pay. I’d be on the road, no telling where, but he’d send them to me and we’d get them a motel room. We’d do classroom work during most of the day, and I would be setting appointments to go to the club meetings. When I’d go to the Lion’s Club meeting or wherever to do a presentation, I’d take the trainee with me and let them sit there and see how I did it, what I told them, what I didn’t tell them. I had a nephew, a real smart kid. We hired him. He told me one time, he said, “Uncle, when you do this job, there is a time to talk and there is a time to shut up and listen,” and he is so right. What a good agent’s got to do is recognize that time when it rolls around. Anyway, I’d keep those trainees about a week or ten days and I would call Jesse and say, “I believe this old boy is ready, or this girl is ready.”

I loved to train women. They make such good agents. I think one reason they do is because they run a little bit scared. They know they’re competing with the men out there and they will leave no stone unturned, and it pays off. One of the best people that I ever trained was a young, single girl. She had a college degree. I don’t know what they call that, but what she learned to do in college was design women’s clothing. The kid was smart. She worked at a western wear store for a while and ended
up booking circuses, but she was good. We were down in Louisiana when Jesse sent her to me. We had gone through some little town getting to our target town. I always liked to take a little nap after lunch every day, back in those days. We did her classroom work early and I told her—what I was trying to do was just get her out of there, where I could go to sleep. I said, “Why don’t you get in your car and go over there to that little town,”—it was just twenty miles away—“drive over there and see if you can find a vacant lot big enough to put the circus on. See how prosperous the town was”—we always liked to go to the schoolhouse. You’d learn a lot going to schools sometimes, looking at them, especially when parents come to pick the kids up. Little old Honey Grove, tiny little town over here, I was over there one day. The parents were bringing school kids out and I never saw so many new cars in my life as there is down at old Honey Grove. That says good prosperity so you learn to look for things like that. Anyway, I lost the thread of my story.

Nykolaiszyn  Well, you send her down to that town...

Hamilton  Oh, yes. I said, “Go over there and just look around and see what you think.” It was about this time of day (about four o’clock) when I sent that kid over there and it started getting close to night and I started getting scared. I thought, “Oh, my.” In Louisiana, I’m kind of scared down there anyway, in some of those little towns. It was pitch dark before that kid knocked on my door, and she came in waving a contract in her hand. I had that happen to me twice. She had went over there and went in and talked to somebody and sold them the circus—good agent. She just did a good job.

I got another deal like that one time. We hired my nephew, I mentioned. Mr. Jessen sent him to me. The old boy’s smart as he could be, but he’s lazy. He came in and I was trying to make a deal with the mall. We were going to put the circus on their parking lot and the guy put me off, then I sort of had him on hold. The same situation—we did our classroom work in the morning. Come my naptime, I said, “Joe, why don’t you”—there were two or three ladies that had some kind of little club. It was some little off the wall thing you’d never heard of before. They expressed a little bit of interest. I said, “Why don’t you go out there and talk to those girls. See what they say.” Well, he did the same thing. While he was gone, my phone rang and it was the mall manager. He said, “I decided to go with you on that deal.” I rushed down there right quick, and he and I signed a contract. About an hour later, my nephew walked in. He was waving a contract and had booked the same day in the same town and we were in deep dookie. Oh, man!

So I called the boss and I said, “Jesse, you’re not going to like what I’m
going to tell you.” That old man blew up. He said, “What in the world?!” I said, “Well, you always told me”—we used to get, I think, three hundred and ninety dollars front money when we signed the agreement with them. Jesse always told me, he said, “Whoever signs that contract and gives you a check for three hundred and ninety dollars is the person that gets the circus. I don’t care if you talk to half a dozen people.” And that’s what I did. I said, “Jesse, you know what you always told me.” He said, “Yeah.” I said, “Well, that man just handed me a check and signed a contract.” Now we had to go back and explain to the ladies. I knew, that mall, in the first place, that was our lot. If we booked a show with those girls, we’d have to find a lot and that show’s big. It takes seven acres to put that thing up. That’s always a problem with the big show.

I just love circus and I’ve done several jobs with the circus since then. They started this little show, Kelly Miller, I think, the first year I worked at Carson and Barnes. David Rawls came down here. It was a three-way partnership, the show was. He was the manager and made all the decisions. Mr. Jessen, the man that was my boss up there, was one of the partners in this show, and Mr. Miller, the old gentleman that owned Carson and Barnes Circus. But a lot of the good people at Carson and Barnes come down here. Just like David Rawls, he had the concessions on that show up there and that was big, big income. He was probably making fifty or maybe close to a hundred thousand dollars a year on concessions on that show, but he quit. Of course, he owned part of this one, but a lot of good people come down here. One that wasn’t so good, that was me.

On circus, everybody always wants to be on the show. There are a lot of jobs that you do where you’re not on that show. Like in this office up here, we’ve got probably six or seven, maybe nine people working in that office and I work here. There are all kinds of people, like booking agents, they’re not on that show every day. We’ve got press agents out there, that aren’t on the show. The school clown is not on the show, twenty-four hour man’s not on the show. What we call the paper-hangers, the people who put up the posters, they’re not on the show. Circuses have a lot of employees that are invisible. You never see them. Those are the jobs that are hard to fill, because everybody wants to be on the show. Those jobs that I mentioned are what, on circus, we call the front-end jobs. They all are involved in marketing, and it’s a lonely job. You’re out there by yourself.

I used to go several months at a time and never see a person that I knew where you could sit down and just kick back and visit. It’s pretty tough. If you’re just a fair booking agent, there’s always a job out there for you. You can work for just about any circus you want to work for. But that’s the way I got into this racket and I love it. It’s different. You don’t have
all that talk and hooey to put up with. You don’t have a whole string of superiors. If you have problems, you can go straight to the owner or the manager. If they say, “Yes,” or “No,” that’s it, it’s over with, instead of all this climbing the ladder and backstabbing. I like it.

People that work for a circus are there because they love it. Circus work is not at all big pay. There are no perks to speak of, no insurance, there’s no vacation time, there are no sick days, there’s no nothing. You just get paid every Sunday morning and that’s it. This little, old job I’ve got here—and what I do now is mow the grass and trim the trees, keep the street fixed—this is about as close to retirement on a circus as you’ll ever get. Most of these old shows have some old man about like me. They always usually call him “Uncle.” Pretty decent old guys, a lot of them are pretty crusty, stubborn, hateful old men. (Phone rings) I’ll just let it ring. That’ll be some circus fan and they’ll talk forever. (Laughter) Just excuse me.

Nykolaiszyn

That’s fine.

Hamilton

That’s an old girl I used to work with on the circus. She used to be our schoolteacher on the show…And she was good, the kids loved her. But we always had a schoolteacher on this show [Kelly Miller]. Carson and Barnes had a schoolteacher. She’s a college graduate and has her teaching certificate and all that. She was born and raised on a circus lot. We usually have four or five, maybe six or eight kids. They have school in the cookhouse. The way our circus is, the kitchen for the cookhouse is in a semi-trailer. We’d have a complete kitchen in there, freezers and everything. Then they’ll hang canvas in the top of that thing and slant it out like that (gestures at an angle). They’ll put about five picnic tables in there for the circus people to sit down and eat. It’s got a sidewall around it, to give you some privacy. The kids gather in there about ten o’clock every morning and have school.

It’s good for the kids. They’ve got some kind of program with the Hugo school system. We close every year about Halloween and the show comes in and all the kids enroll in the local school, and they are always right up even with the other kids with their work. A lot of them go on to college and do well so it’s good. One good thing about it, when we get into an interesting town, like we did this in Niagara Falls, and we used to every year we’d play around Washington, D.C. for about two or three weeks. When we get in a spot like that, Grand Canyon or wherever, and there’s something interesting, we have a van on the show and the teacher would load those kids on the van and take them out there to see whatever. Instead of studying about it in a book, they’d go look at it. They usually take them to the Smithsonian every year and that’s good. Those little kids come back and tell their friends about it.
I have two grandkids. My son used to work for the circus. He was the head mechanic on this show [Kelly Miller] and he had two little kids that went to the circus school. When they moved back to our little town, down home, and told the other kids that they used to go to circus school, the kids wouldn’t believe it. They’d say, “Yeah, right, you sure did!” (Laughs) But they did. One of them, my little grandson, he was crazy about this little girl [school teacher] here. He’d go over to her house and just hang around.

Nykolaiszyn

Now, I want to actually go back to your booking days.

Hamilton

Okay.

Nykolaiszyn

How did your season run? I mean, are you a couple of weeks ahead or behind?

Hamilton

Oh, no.

Nykolaiszyn

How was your time frame?

Hamilton

The time frame is if you’re not further away, more than two months, you’re in trouble. When you start running out of time and go into town and try to get it put together real quick, it can be done easily, if you can convince your sponsors to do it. They always want to have time and have little meetings, and blah, blah. But if you just jump in with all four feet, you could do it in two or three days’ time. But clubs don’t work that way. Those club members, they usually go to some restaurant on club meeting days. They eat and have a little program. They go back in their stores or job or whatever, and forget all about that circus that they’re supposed to be getting ready for.

We’ll run anywhere from two months to a full year ahead of the circus. We have a fantastic reputation in this industry. There are three circuses in Hugo. All three of them have excellent reputations so once you play in a town, they’ll usually want you back again. Now, Carson and Barnes would wait about three or four years, sometimes five years, before they’d go back into a town again. When you do that, it’s just like a whole new deal because that president that hired you has already been out for three or four terms. It’s a whole new set of people. This little show [Kelly Miller] comes back about every other year. If a town is successful, we go back about every other year and play for them. They’re always glad to have us back. Sometimes, I have seen some that wouldn’t make any money, but they’d be so happy with the circus.

All three of the Hugo shows, the two smaller ones particularly, play in
small towns, and small towns don’t get any live entertainment, zero, none. You go into some little town, where there hasn’t been a circus—occasionally, you’ll put that thing in a town that has never had a circus, and everybody in there, might not be but a thousand people in town, but all thousand of them, pretty well, show up to see the circus. It just thrills them to death. It’s rewarding that way. What breaks your heart, our contract—I always taught my trainees, “Don’t call this a contract to your prospect. Call it the agreement that we signed with you.” It’s the same thing, but when you start talking contract and all that legal hooey, people get scared, a lot of them do. I just always tell them, “Now, this agreement that we’re going to sign with you says that you people should do blah, blah…”

But, I forgot what I was going to tell you. Oh! What breaks your heart, we ask them to put up posters, try to get some of the street signs—these sign boards with the yellow backgrounds—good advertisement. If you can get two or three of those in a small town, that’s great advertisement. It’ll not cost you a penny, it doesn’t cost the show. But some sponsors do those things, some of them do nothing. I used to be a Jaycee in my youth. They are the worst sponsors out there. Those people are young and they’re making job changes, and changing girlfriends, boyfriends. You go to their meeting, and oh, they get enthusiastic. Just all fired up, “Yes, yes, yes, you bet!” but when you leave, so many of them just don’t do anything. Occasionally, you’ll get a good Jaycee group.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*Do you remember the first town you booked?*

**Hamilton**  
Yes, it was in California and I was scared to death. Fortunately, I booked the first club that I ever went in to talk to. I guess I worked so hard, I probably looked so pitiful. I don’t remember what kind of group it was. The best date that I ever booked was in Missouri and it was near—I forget. What’s the capital city of Missouri? Anyway, it’s about thirty or forty miles from there, and we played three or four spots around the capital, the city, and there was a little TV station. We advertised that thing on TV. We gave the dates where we were going to be in different towns. But I went in and it was a small town—any other time I could tell you the name of it, but anyway, there’s a college there.

There’s an old building, an old church building that was in London and it was bombed during World War II. They dismantled that thing stone by stone and every piece of wood, marked it, cataloged it, and sent it to that little town in Missouri and rebuilt that thing on that college campus there. When they dedicated that thing, they invited Winston Churchill to come over and speak at that dedication program. You girls may be too young to remember, but during the war years, they had what they called the Iron Curtain. Those were the communist countries. You couldn’t
find out anything about was going on behind the Iron Curtain. That’s the first time that term, the Iron Curtain, was ever used. Mr. Churchill made some reference to the Iron Curtain in his speech there at that dedication program.

But anyway, I got into that little town. The first thing we always looked for was a lot big enough to put that thing on. A sponsor won’t do you any good if you can’t get a lot. The only place there big enough was the fairgrounds, which was owned by the Jaycee club. The Jaycee’s were usually one of the last ones that I always talked to. They’re easy to get them to agree to do it, but nothing much happens afterwards. I got plum to the bottom of the list. I just talked to everybody there and struck out—band boosters, high school band boosters. I called the man, I called a number, and the contact person for the band boosters was one of the professors down at that little college. I guess he had children in high school. I talked with him, a real nice man, and he liked the idea. I said, “Well, we’re going to have to try to deal with the Jaycees.” He called down and called the Jaycees.

I had a meeting set. I have given up on everybody and the Jaycees wanted it. I was going to their meeting that night. I know, within reason, they were going to sign a contract. That man called me up at the hotel and he said, “I’ve got a place I want you to go look at and see if it’s big enough to put the circus on.” He come by and picked me up and we went out on the edge of town to a farm out there of some elderly couple, old man and a little old lady. It was a big, slow-rise hill out behind their barns and pens. The man I’d been talking to, he said, “Could we put that thing up there on top of that hill?” I said, “Yes, it’s beautiful. You can see it from all over town from there.” I thought, “Boy, that’s going to look good.” But to get up there on top of that hill, you had to drive through their driveway and then among all their barns and henhouses and stuff, twist and turn. With all those big, old semi-trucks, I knew it would be hard to do, but it was doable. It just thrilled that old man and lady to death. They thought that was the neatest thing in the world, to have that big, old, huge circus out, virtually, in their backyard. Those sponsors, the band booster group, worked hard. They did everything that we suggested to them. This was thirty years ago, probably, and we made, for their part, something over seven thousand dollars on that thing. That was the best date I ever booked.

Nykolaiszyn  Well, you look for a big enough lot, you look for a sponsor, you’re looking for key things—you mentioned the schools. What else are you looking for? What are you trying to key in to see if this would be a good place?

Hamilton  Well, I always liked to drive by and look at the schools, I mentioned that
earlier. Just a little town that looked like it had some life in it instead of just—sometimes, you’re desperate and you have to do things you don’t really want to do. That gets to be habit forming. Some agents say, “Well, at least I found a place to put it.” You’ve got to put it somewhere because daylight, they’re going to the highway, going to wherever it is you’re going to put it. Too many agents will do that and feel satisfaction because they got it spotted for the day, but that’s not good enough. We’ve got to make some money with that thing. A sponsor expects to make something out of it. The people that own the show darn sure expect to make some money out of it, because they’ve got to pay payroll.

You wouldn’t believe the regulations that circuses have. You pull into town and pretty much every day, here come the inspectors. They’re all government workers and, I guess, feel like they’ve got to do something to earn their keep. “Well, the circus is in town. We’ll go out and inspect all their electrical stuff.” And it’s every day. If you play Hugo today, here they come. Tomorrow, we play in Durant, they have their inspectors that do it all over again. Some of them want to inspect your cookhouse and the food items that you’re selling. Some of them electric, some of them fire inspection, then the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] people come along, they want to look at the animals. It is constant—constant, every day.

**Nykolaiszyn**  
*When is the booking agent’s season over? Do you have off time after?*

**Hamilton**

For a real booking agent, there aren’t. I don’t know but one real, sure enough, bonafide booking agent—I’ll tell you what happened in a minute—the season never ends for a booking agent. They just keep working year around. Opening day and closing day means nothing to them. They just keep working right through the winter. That gives them four months in there where they can be gaining ground, getting some contracts. That booking, I already explained it to you, it’s difficult. It’s a straight commission job. Most people are scared of that, most people want a salary. It’s hard to do and there are fewer and fewer people that do that fulltime. We had four fulltime booking agents, but I only know one, now. This little Culpepper and Merriweather Circus, they have one man that books their entire season and he is a wiz. He is the most effective agent I have ever seen, but there aren’t any more.

What they do now, in the wintertime, there will be a few people on the show who want to go out and book and make a little extra money. A lot of circus fans that live all over the U.S. will want to book around in their area, but none of that, really, is good. Those people don’t have the expertise or the interest, really. They’re not that concerned. A lot of agents, the ones that aren’t so good, all they want to do is get the signature on a contract and they feel like their work is done. Well, it
isn’t. Again, we’ve got to make some money at that thing. Those kind of people don’t know really—I’m not putting them down, they’re good people—but they will invariably say the wrong things when you get up to talk to those groups. They don’t really understand it that well.

Circus fans, when they want to book, sometimes they’ll work on a town a full year, from this year to next year, to write one contract. They’ll just worry with it and go to countless meetings with those people. Well, an agent can’t do that. You’ve got to get in there and get that thing zipped up and move on—to make a living, you do. But they’re always trying to put you off. They’ll say, “Well, we’ll meet a week from tonight and we’ll give you an answer then.” Mr. Jessen would not let us—he was strict. A lot of circuses will get a deal like that and they’ll let those agents move on up and start setting other dates. Then a week from now, you go back and meet with that club. If they tell you no, then you have created a hole in that route and that’s the hardest thing in the world to do is to fill a hole in the route. Mr. Jessen would not let us do that.

We’d get into a town, we’d milk it dry or get a contract. After you did everything you could think of—like the little town in Missouri that I was telling you about—then he’d let you move on. But that show is so big, another problem was skipping up ahead like that. Sometimes you have to back track your circus. That Carson and Barnes is a huge show. It was two hundred, approximately, then. See, it’s not that big now, they’re down to one ring now, but had approximately two hundred employees. We gave each one of them a vehicle to pull their trailer and gave them a gas allowance every day. Then we had probably twelve or fifteen big, old semi-trucks and countless smaller, one-ton trucks. I figured up one time, and this was thirty years ago, I figured it up and it cost us fifty dollars a mile to move that circus down the highway, with gas and all of it, whatever, flats and tires.

If we go, say, in the morning we play in Hugo today, and tomorrow we’re going to Durant so we go to Durant and play that day. If you’ve got some agent that’s created that hole, it might be that the next town he books after Durant is back over here. So you’ve got to come right back down that same fifty miles between here and Durant again, right back through Hugo, again. Now, you’ve driven a hundred miles, times fifty a mile, which is five thousand dollars that you’ve spent on fuel and new tires and what have you. Jesse would not let us double up, except one time he let me double back like that about twelve miles, and I thought I had really accomplished something. Work, work, work—it was up in Colorado. Worked, worked with the sponsor and just never could get the deal finished. I gave up and went on and booked another little town and sure enough, that guy back here called and he was ready. I knew we were going to have to double back. I called Jessen and he said, “Well, go
ahead and do it.” That’s the only time that old fellow ever let me double back on our route. A lot of those small shows do it all the time, constantly. And those circus fans, we call them forty-milers because they don’t like to get more than forty miles away from where they live to do their booking, that doesn’t mean anything to them. They don’t worry about it. They don’t even give it a thought, whether you’re going to have to double back through there.

There are all sorts of things out there for you to compete with, like county fairs and these once a year things that villages do, I forget what they’re called—festivals, they’ll kill you, kill you dead. A carnival in town will kill you. People will go to a carnival before they will a circus, because they can get out there and walk around and eat their popcorn and watch the rides and everything, and they’re moving around. Well, that’s more enjoyable than just sitting down there for an hour and a half. You sure have to be careful about those kinds of things. A smart agent will never put his show in a town where there’s going to be a carnival. Those festivals will try to do that. They usually have a little carnival, but they would love it if they could get a circus to come in there, too. They’ll try to get you to do it, but there won’t be too many people that come to see the circus except the carnival people and we let them in free. What else would you like to talk about?

Nykolaiszyn  
Well, we’ve learned about your life as an advance man, a booking agent, what was your next job?

Hamilton  
On the circus?

Nykolaiszyn  
On the circus.

Hamilton  
Press agent. Press agent is the person that can be very valuable to a circus, if you’re a good one. You can still be good for the show, even if you’re not that good. What they do is go about two weeks before the circus gets into a town and they go into that town to see how the sponsor is doing, or is that sponsor doing the things they’re supposed to be doing and if not, why not. We always get up with the circus chairman and try to get them motivated and excited about the thing. There’s sometimes you can put together the promotions that are really advantageous to the circus. For instance, somewhere in Arkansas I think it was, a little town that we were going to have a circus in, I found out one of the local car dealers. I don’t remember, Ford or Chevrolet, or who had the deal. It used to be, when a new model of car was coming out everybody would go down to look at those new cars. There wouldn’t be that anymore. They all look just alike [now].

He was going to have kind of a blowout that same day we had the circus
in town. He was going to show his new model cars so I went by there and worked out a deal with him. In his newspaper and radio advertisements, he was going to put in a word about the circus going to be there, to encourage people to make a day of it, go to the circus and come down and look at the new Fords, blah, blah, blah. We gave him a few free passes to hand out and stuff like that. On the circus morning, I made arrangements to have some of the performers go down and they were doing live radio, remote they called it. I took one of the clowns down and maybe one of the aerialists, maybe the elephant, I don’t remember, two or three of them down there for radio interviews. The clowns, they’d always go down in their wardrobe and grease paint. It made a good day for the car dealer and the circus. You can work out little old deals like that.

The press agent’s main job, really, is to be sure that everything is on track. We ask our sponsors to do a great deal. They get a share of the money, but that’s not free money. We ask them to do a number of things for us. We ask them to put window cards in the various stores, to advertise the circus in some manner. We don’t specify how or what amount to spend, but we do expect them to advertise the circus. They provide the dumpster, a good sized dumpster that we need every day. They provide the lot. They also provide any permits that are required. Usually, a town, if you’re doing a circus for, say, an Optimist Club, they’ll give you the permits, and we ask them to sell advanced tickets for us. The press agent checks on all of that while he’s in there, and you can tell right away if they’re working or not working. The ones that make money are the ones that follow our suggestions. The ones that just sit back and don’t do anything don’t make any money. They never blame themselves. They blame the circus when they don’t make money.

Again, I just naturally like women. I love to work with female sponsor groups, they work so hard. I had one group I worked with one time, it was ladies, I don’t remember what it was, but it was a club of ladies. We send out what we call a circus chairman’s planning guide. It has got every kind of suggestion in the world in there that you could do. Nobody ever does them all, but there are so many things you can do, all different kinds of contests, be honorary ringmaster for a day, and all this blah, blah, that sponsors could do to promote the circus. I had one club, when I was working press, I was talking to the circus chairman lady and she said, “We’ve done everything on that list.” (Laughs) And I said, “You what?” She said, “We’ve done all of it. Now, what else can we do?” Well, that’s what you like to hear. I’m sure they had a good day, I don’t remember, but I like to work with women on those things. They work harder. Men, I guess they’re worried to death with other things, but women, you can put them on a committee like that or say, “All right, Sue, you’re the show chairman.” They take it seriously and they sure do
good, good work. I like to work with them.

Nykolaiszyn  
*Well, outside of press agent, did you do anything else?*

Hamilton  
Yes. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn  
*I’m just running down your career in the circus.* (Laughs)

Hamilton  
That’s all right, that’s okay. One year, the first year I worked on this show [Kelly Miller], I was just David Rawls’ yes man, or gopher. I just kind of followed him around and worked with our booking agents somewhat. I’d go to town everyday and call all the agents, which I learned that from Mr. Jessen. He used to call every one of his agents every day, a lot of times at six o’clock in the morning. He used to call at six and if I was in the motel room it would ring, ring, and ring—I’d just keep sleeping. I knew who it was. After a while, he’d call back. He’d say, “I tried to call you earlier.” I’d say, “Well, I was probably down at the coffee shop or something,” and I was laying there asleep. See, I’m telling on myself. (Laughter)

I worked for David that year just sort of following him around and trained all the agents. I think I mentioned earlier that I was the last agent that Mr. Jessen trained. After that, he’d send them all to me. I worked two or three years at Carson and Barnes and trained every new agent they had. Well, when I came down there, I thought, “I’ll get away from that.” You don’t get away from a job at the circus. They find out you can do something and that’s your job forever. I got down here, every time they’d hire a new agent, they’d send him to me. I didn’t care. We’d do the same thing, except I didn’t go out to the meetings and things because I was not on the show, but we’d still do the classroom stuff. I worked press and I really enjoyed that more than I did booking. It’s not as stressful with the circus.

Nykolaiszyn  
*And I guess you’re not on commission as a press agent?*

Hamilton  
No, that’s salary.

Nykolaiszyn  
Okay.

Hamilton  
I kind of liked that, too. I always made it okay. One year, I came down with colon cancer and was supposed to die, but didn’t. I guess that disappointed the funeral home man. (Laughter) But I beat the thing and that’s been, I guess, nineteen or twenty years ago. I wasn’t really able to get out there and really work hard, like I did on press or as an agent. A lot of shows have what they call a pie car. Pie is short for privilege. It’s a little canteen where you serve coffee, cold drinks, hamburgers,
cheeseburgers, French fries, but it’s just for the circus employees. It’s
not out front for the public. It’s in what we call the back yard. When I
recuperated, David asked me if I’d like to run the pie car so I said, “Yes,
I’ll do that.” I had a little Class-C motor home. Class-C, if you all don’t
know it, was the one with the bed built out over the cab, a smaller motor
home. I didn’t want to do that cooking in there and get grease popped all
over it. I’d bought it new so I borrowed a little old single-axel house
trailer, a tiny little thing, about ten feet long, maybe twelve. I gutted the
thing and built me a kitchen. I put a refrigerator in there and got me a
little griddle.

I ran the pie car for two or three years and did real good. I pulled that
thing behind my motor home. We’d make a jump every morning and as
soon as I’d get on the lot, I’d set that thing up and open up the pie car
and sell breakfast. One or two eggs and toast and whatever, and did
pretty good with it. We let the guys, the working guys—the laborers on
circus are always called working guys. They’re the old unkempt looking
guys you see around the circus. They’re good. I admire them because
they’re working. They’re not sitting around on welfare, drawing money
from the government. They’re working so I respect them. But we’d let
them buy stuff on credit and I’d keep up with it. Payday on this show
was always Sunday morning and I’d add it all up on Saturday night, how
much the different guys would owe. I’d turn it into the office and the
office would just hold that much out of their paycheck. I’d go by later
and they’d hand me the money. It worked beautifully. I knew I was
going to get my money and it worked. The guys liked it because a lot of
them would spend all their money the first day they had it to buy beer
and cigarettes and whatever. I did that for two or three years.

One year, this campground wasn’t here then, someone came in here
when the show was on the road and took a piece of the metal off the
back of one of these buildings. People on the show put their vehicles in
these barns when they go on the road. Those barns that are out there
now, they’re always full of cars and pickups and trailer houses.
Somebody got in there and stripped everything in there. They took all
the radios out, the tape decks. They even took the air conditioners off the
tops of the motor homes. We didn’t know anything about it until the
show came in. They took tires, starters, just stripped that stuff. It was
probably days in there, and all this back here was grown up in weeds
then. There never was anybody around winter quarters at that time. Our
office, then, was downtown. We’ve got the office now right here on the
property. There was nobody out there.

David Rawls decided he wanted someone to live here and I was getting
older. He asked me if I’d like to do this. He said, “All I want you to do,
(we’ll talk about this thing), you can put a little trailer out there and you
Nykolaiszyn

can live in it. It won’t cost you anything. I think we’ll give you one hundred dollars a month or something just to be here.” Well, I said, “That sounds good to me,” so I took him up on it. I had some old guy come and mow the grass about once every two months, but it was always like this (gestures about three feet high). It was so bad that I told David, I said, “If you’ll buy me a good lawnmower and some equipment, I’ll keep that grass mowed out there.” So he did. The job sort of evolved into what I’m doing here now. I ended up being, fancy name, night winter quarter superintendent. What that means is you mow the grass and trim the trees. (Laughter) But it’s interesting.

I love the circus. The people that work for circuses are not there because it’s a good paying job, because it’s not a good paying job. They’re there, usually, because they were born in the circus and that’s all they know or they love it, because if you don’t love it, you won’t do it. I always admired the women on the circus, because it’s pretty tough. Women like to have all their little trinkets and everything in their house. You can’t do that when you live in a trailer and move every day. Some of those girls, they’ve got these old, huge pickup trucks now, two seats, big, long things, and house trailers that are huge. A lot of the wives and girlfriends drive those pickups and those trailers. Their husbands or boyfriends drive the semi-truck. You can see them pull onto the lot with a big, old, huge rig, jump that concrete curb and it would be a girl driving that thing. And they just do it. I do love it. They just do a good job of it.

Well, going back to your early years, tell me about the first time you met Mr. Miller.

Hamilton

I don’t really remember. Really, to talk with him, was after I told him I’d take the job. The show was somewhere a hundred miles from wherever I lived so I went to see the show before I went on to California to start working. I introduced myself to Mr. Miller and I loved that old man. He was fantastic. He and Mrs. Miller both were such good people. He just treated me like I was one of his kids. He took me all over that lot and introduced me to everybody. I got to feel important there. I didn’t know what I was in for! (Laughs) But he’s such a nice, old fellow. A year or two later, it was wintertime and the show was in. That thing is impressive when all that junk is up there, it’s big. And I stopped by there and D.R. had a golf cart. He said, “Get on here and I’ll go show you everything.” We went in every building up there, and he pulled out every drawer and showed me what was in it. I really enjoyed that. He’s a good, old man.

When we had D.R.’s funeral, I guess that’s the biggest thing that ever happened in Hugo. He died a couple of months before the end of the circus season and they froze him, or refrigerated him, whatever, because
they wanted all the circus people to go to the funeral. They waited until most of the shows were off the road and announced the funeral. This little old town of Hugo was the who’s who of circus people—the night before that funeral. Show people from all over the United States came here to see it. That old man was very well known and most of the people that were coming here had worked for D.R. That’s one thing about that old man that always impresses me is you meet showmen on other shows and at some time or another, they’ve all worked for D.R. Miller. He’s good.

He and Mrs. Miller—she was just a kid when they married. She was from Kansas. She wasn’t circus. She had come from a large family, a farm family, in Kansas. They played somewhere up there and I think D.R. went to a dance somewhere and met Isla. Of course, whatever show he was working for would move and get farther away every day. Well, he went back and forth two or three days and finally got to where he just couldn’t do it anymore so they got married and lived in a little pup tent. D.R. told me one time—I forget the name of that old circus they worked for. One of their old trucks is in the museum up in Baraboo, Wisconsin, the circus museum. But he said that he and Isla would ride on top of that truck on the morning jump. They’d set that little pup tent up and that’s where they lived. Hard working, honest people that worked hard, worked like dogs. They did without and they saved their money. They had a goal and they were to become very wealthy people.

Nobody gave them anything. They earned every penny. They’ve got a big, old, pretty home up there. He used to drive Lincolns around and bought him an airplane—he’d fly—I doubt that the old man ever had a pilot’s license, but he used to fly. They tell me it was kind of frightening. (Laughter) I’ve heard people criticize them because they had wealth, but I’ll tell you one thing, those poor, old people earned every penny of it. I loved them both. They’re such good people. Isla used to come down this road out here and if anybody was walking across the lot, it didn’t make any difference if it was the lowliest guy on this crew, she’d always honk and just wave. Show people are kind of that way. They sure stick together. You know how a lot of people are kind of wary of show people? Well, that works both ways. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn  

It’s true.

Hamilton  

Show people don’t fully trust town people. We call them townies or towners. They just don’t. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn  

Even in Hugo?

Hamilton  

Well, Hugo is unique. Towns where a lot of circuses are headquartered
don’t appreciate the circuses, but Hugo loves us. It’s a big part of the economy here. Down through the years, there have been probably twenty or more circuses headquartered in this town. A lot of those people, just like I have, myself, have stayed here. They spend a lot of money in Hugo. I know that the first year this little show was on the road, they bought seven or maybe ten brand new one-ton Ford trucks. When the show came in, they had them all lined up down at the fence up here. We bought them down here at the local Ford dealer. That’s a pretty good lick for a town this size, to sell six or ten or whatever. There are a lot of those kinds of stories. This town, they love the circus. They love circus people. We’re just welcome.

Rosebud (the cat), that’s her name. That was the tackiest thing I could think of when I got that cat. (Laughter) I listened to those old-time radio programs. The old Lum and Abner program, are you familiar with that?

Nykolaiszyn

Yes.

Hamilton

Abner had his milk cow. Her name was Rosebud and I thought that was the corniest thing I ever heard. Of course, they were trying to make it corny so that’s what I named that cat.

Nykolaiszyn

Well, I know you’re going to show us a little something about Showmen’s Rest but...

I’ve got that tape.

Nykolaiszyn

Can you just give us a little background on Showmen’s Rest?

Hamilton

Yes, yes I can. Back, I don’t know what year, but back a good many years ago, there was a pretty large area out there in the cemetery that was blank. One of, I think it was, Mr. Miller’s brothers died and they buried him in that area and they just bought that whole block in there. Along about that time, we had an old elephant hand up there. He was just an old circus bum, old nasty, unkempt guy. I don’t guess he had any family. He died and that old man had a little money, I guess his life savings, and he left it to Mr. and Mrs. Miller. They needed a little more money like a hole in the head. They didn’t know what to do with it so they established a trust fund. When a show person dies, if they can’t afford to buy their lot, the trust fund will buy it for them and they’ll put a little stone up there. It won’t be anything elaborate, but something small like you saw out there, just nice. They were that way. They’ll pay for it with the trust fund, and there’s a tall stone out there where that old elephant hand is buried.

He started Showmen’s Rest Trust Fund—or Mr. Miller started it with
the money that he left to them. There are a lot of big names buried out there. I told someone one day if all those people could be resurrected overnight and we put on a show it would be one whale of a circus, because everything in the world is buried out there. (Laughs) We’ve got wire walkers, trapeze people, elephant men, circus owners, show girls, snake handlers, they’re all there. I’ve got my stone out there already. We’ve run out of room out there. There are still some blank spaces out there, but they’re bought. About ten years ago, people started buying those spaces six or seven or eight at a time, for families. They go quick when you do that. I understand there’s nothing out there anymore for sale.

Nykolaiszyn  
Well, you’ve been to many places throughout your life, you’ve seen many different towns and...

Hamilton  
You know that old song “I’ve Been Everywhere”?

Nykolaiszyn  
That’s right. (Laughs)

Hamilton  
That’s me. (Laughter)

Nykolaiszyn  
And I know you’ve had opportunities here with the circus, but why do you plan on coming back—you’ve come back to Hugo, you’ve made your home here. Why did you decide Hugo, of all places?

Hamilton  
Well, I don’t even really know when I officially started doing it here. I used to come in here every winter for a while, but I don’t know. I just like this little town. The people here are friendly and they’re especially friendly to circus people. I started going to church here and kind of got involved in that way. I’ve gotten to know people at the coffee shops. It’s just home for me. I intend to be here until they put me out there in Showmen’s Rest.

Finchum  
And you came in 1954, is that right? About 1954?

Hamilton  
No, it was about, I think, ’82.

Finchum  
Oh, what was I thinking?

Hamilton  
I was about fifty-four years old.

Finchum  
Okay.

Hamilton  
Fifty-two or fifty-four, and I don’t remember which. I’m eighty-two now. But I just love it. I look forward to them coming in every year and I look just as much forward to them going back out with all the crying
babies, the barking dogs… (Laughter)

Finchum  
*How many agents do you think you’ve trained? Booking agents?*

Hamilton  
Oh, I don’t know.

Finchum  
*If you had to guess.*

Hamilton  
I don’t know, maybe twenty or thirty. I never thought that I was that good at booking the circus. I’ve got everybody fooled, really.

Nykolaiszyn  
*It’s hard work. It’s all about hard work—working hard.*

Hamilton  
There’s one guy—he’s dead now—a great, big fat man. He’s this big around (gesturing with arms open wide). He’s a circus producer, and my son worked on this show for, I think, nine years. He was the head mechanic. He was talking to that guy one time. I know the man, but I never did work with him or for him. He told Keith, he said, “Your daddy is the best booking agent I’ve ever known.” I thought, “Wow!” And Keith, after meeting him, he came back home and told me that so I’ve got them fooled. (Laughs)

David Rawls, he embarrassed me once. He has an uncle, Mary’s brother, born in this business, has managed circuses, has owned—I think a time or two, he owned little, old shows. It’s all he’s ever done. He decided to book some dates but David said, “I want you to go down there and let Uncle Dudley talk to you before you go out.” I felt like an idiot sitting in here trying to tell this guy, “Probably what you want to do is this and that.” It was embarrassing. (Laughs)

Finchum  
*It’s a compliment.*

Hamilton  
But anyway…

Nykolaiszyn  
*Well, the circus has undergone many changes through the years. Where do you think it’s headed within the next ten to twenty years?*

Hamilton  
Well, it’s frightening to think. Someone asked Mr. Miller that and his opinion is worth much more than mine. What he said was, he said, “I think there will always be a circus, but it’s going to be different.” And I have remembered that and since then, I have seen so many changes in the circus business. And it is a changing business. For instance, used to, there weren’t any indoor shows, but now that’s the big thing. The Shriners usually do theirs in the cities. They always do an indoor thing. Ringling does. Ringling quit using a tent, I don’t remember what year it was, but it’s not the same.
I used to tell sponsor groups when I’d make a presentation, I’d say, “Indoor circuses put on good shows. Maybe better than the rest of us, I don’t know. You can take your family, wife, and little kids to an indoor show and sit there in that air conditioned coliseum and see the show, but when you get home, you don’t feel like you’ve been to the circus. If you go to one of these things in a tent, and you’re up close enough you can small the elephants”—and elephants have a strong odor. I don’t know if you all know that or not. But, I used to tell sponsor groups, I said, “Going to an indoor circus is just like if you have a picnic planned and it starts raining, what do we do now? Well, you go get in the high school gymnasium. You eat the same food you’d eat at that picnic and play the same games, but when you go home that night, you don’t feel like you’ve been on a picnic.” I said, “Going to an indoor circus is the same way,” and I’m that hardheaded about it.

There’s an old fellow, Mr. Loyal. In his youth he was a part of the Loyal Repensky Bareback Riding Act that John Ringling North brought over from Europe right after the war, or just before the war. One of the young men in that family, Alfonso Loyal—I think they’re Italian—lived here. They ended up working for Carson and Barnes Circus. The Loyal Repensky troupe was one of the three top bareback acts in the world, I guess. They were good. But anyway, the little, old man spoke in kind of a broken English, and I heard him talking—I think it was a reporter that he was talking to or someone that was interviewing him, and they asked him about the indoor circus. Old Alfonso said, “If you don’t got no tent, you don’t got no circus.” (Laughter)

But, back to your question, used to, on circus day, the circus would go to town and they would do a parade. You get to see that in that movie, Greatest Show on Earth. You might not remember that, but they did that. Well, they don’t that anymore. Everything is in trucks instead of horse-drawn wagons so we lost that. The music at circuses—what we call traditional music was written especially for circus acts. Most of that old circus music was written by circus bandmasters. For instance, the flying trapeze acts all, used to, always played waltz music because you’re on that trapeze, you’re kind of swinging slow and the waltz music just works beautifully. But now, the new generation will play that old hip hop and the guy on those drums just bang, clash, boom while those people are slowing swinging on the trapeze. It’s just…

Nykolaiszyn  It’s different.

Hamilton  They have quit using traditional music and what they’re trying to do is appeal to young adults. I guess that’s all right, but it makes me angry. Music has always been a big part of the circus. Merle Evans was the
band director on the old Ringling show when they were under canvas, when it was a real circus. He had about a thirty-something piece band and boy, they were good. There are very few bands in circuses anymore. They use taped music now. Some of the tapes are good, some of them are terrible. But that’s another big change. I wrote a tacky letter to the editor of one of the circus publications about the music and I said, “Why is it when you see on television an advertisement for a circus that’s going to be in town or a radio spot, they always have background circus music?” And it’ll be old, traditional circus music every time. The circus comes to town, that circus, you go down and buy a ticket and go to the show to hear that good band music, and they’re playing orchestra.

I knew I was in trouble one time when I went to see the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus. Saw it once and they had a good band that played traditional music. Several years later, I drove a long, long way out in Texas to see the Clyde Beatty Circus again. At the very beginning of the circus, they introduced the band director and I knew I was in trouble. The ringmaster said, “Directing our orchestra today is Joe Blow,” or whoever, and I thought, “Uh, oh.” Sure enough, it was all pop music. But it’s just—that’s where you get a lot of the atmosphere so that’s another change that we’ve seen.

This Cirque du Soleil outfit has come along and I’m not at all in tune with that. But, very few of them come from circus. They’re show people, they’re actors or performers or gymnastic-type people. When that thing first started—that’s a Canadian company, it was originally, and the Canadian government underwrote that thing. It wasn’t some poor guy out there that put his own million dollars up. But anyway, the first one or two [years] of Soleil, the acts were just pretty ordinary. About like stuff you see on our show. But since then, it has improved greatly, but I don’t like them. What has happened, that thing has been so successful, that all the other circus owners were copying that thing there. Even Ringling! Ringling has always been the trendsetter in this industry—lo and behold—even Ringling is doing stuff the Soleil way now. Kenneth Feld, who owns Ringling, he’s got a daughter about the age of you girls. He has turned most of that circus stuff over to her. I guess she thinks like younger people. I don’t know.

There’s another very successful show, the Big Apple Circus in New York. It used to sure be a top-notch circus. It still is, really, but a lot of circuses now, they want to have a theme for the entire program, which I don’t go along with that either. I think, “Get in there, do the act, get out,” but every act in some of these circuses now is supposed to tell a story, blah, blah. Like what did the Russians call their flying trapeze act? The Flying Eagles or some such hooey—the Flying Swans and they’re supposed to look like swans floating around out there. Well, good gosh,
give me a break! Introduce them, let them do their act, and get them out of there, put somebody else on. But anyway, that’s another change that’s come about.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Well, what’s your favorite part about the circus?*

**Hamilton**

My favorite part is something else that has changed. We used to do—all circuses, the bigger they were, the more impressive this was—would do what they called a spec, s-p-e-c, which is short for spectacular. At some point in the circus, they would do this parade around what we called the hippodrome track, a wide track, all the way around the rings. Every performer was required to make spec. You had to be in it. You not only had to be in it, but you had to smile and look happy and wave at the crowd and all that. Management people used to hide themselves around the audience to check and see who’s—a lot of them, especially the young kids, fifteen, twenty years old, expect to walk along like they were bored to death, just looking at the ground as they’re walking instead of smiling and waving. They’re supposed to act like they’re as excited as the people in the audience are. Of course, they do that two times a day, seven days a week.

But anyway, spec has always been my favorite part of any circus. The bigger and better the show is, the bigger and better spec is. You see a lot of pretty wardrobe in spec, and it’s just good. We started doing spec on this show a number of years ago. We had a pretty good, little old spec. You come in the back door and get on the track and go around. One of the ways you can judge spec, if they’re still coming in when the first ones are going out the door, that’s pretty good. And we did that on this little show. We had some miniature donkeys about—they don’t get but maybe that big (gestures about four feet) and David Rawls had guys in the shop to build a little, two-wheeled cart. We have three or four little Mexican kids about this big (gestures about three feet). Their mommas fixed little costumes for them, real circusey stuff. We put them on that thing, and one of the working guys would lead that donkey in spec.

They always have the elephants in there with pretty blankets on them. I just love spec. It’s exciting, to me it is. On the circus, there is a great deal of thought that goes into what act follows the next act and the next one and the next one. What you do—it’s difficult—most shows have gone to one ring and it’s difficult because used to, they’d use ring one and three while they were setting up the center ring and then when one and three would finish their act, then the next act would be center ring, and then they were changing props in one and three. But when you’re one ring, it creates problems. You can do several things to get around that. You can send clowns in, over to one side doing their foolishness while the prop guys were getting things ready. But you kind of mix the
acts. You do a ground act, then you follow that with an aerial act. After three or four acts, then you throw in an animal act of some kind and you mix that. You don’t want too many aerial acts in a row, and you don’t want too many ground acts in a row, and you’d like to throw some pretty wardrobe in there occasionally, that’s usually the girls. A lot of thought goes into all that.

Finchum  
*A lot of thought.*

Nykolaiszyn  
*Well, you’re quite the student of the circus.*

Hamilton  
Well, I just love it. I told you all those other things that I had interest in, but when I started working for the circus, that was it. It’s just the most enjoyable thing I’ve ever done in my life. It’s all I want to do. And I’m happy just to be here in this shack, right in the middle of everything. I’m always glad to see them come in and glad to see them go out. Some of them call you, like this old girl that called me, old Sue, a while ago. You make a lot of friends in this business. After you’ve worked on the circus for several years, you can walk on any circus lot, wherever, whatever show it is, and there will be somebody there that you know, that, usually, you’ve worked with. It makes it fun. You never know, you hear about one that’s going to be in Paris, Texas. You drive up and, sure enough, there will old whoever.

Nykolaiszyn  
*It’s family.*

Hamilton  
Yes, exactly, exactly.

Nykolaiszyn  
*Well, as we wind down, is there anything else that you’d like to tell us that we haven’t asked you about?*

Hamilton  
We’re trying to get a circus museum. I hate to say it, but with the economy being the way it is, I don’t think we can ever—I can’t see that happening.

Nykolaiszyn  
*It takes time.*

Hamilton  
Yes. We bought an old house and we were going to try to redo it and put the museum in that, but we decided the thing is too rotten so we’re in the process of tearing it down. We’re right across the street from the library. It’s a good location, but I’m interested in that. We’ve got the Showmen’s Club here. There’s always something.

Nykolaiszyn  
*Well, is there anything else that we haven’t asked you about that you’d like to add?*
Hamilton: Well, I don’t know. Not offhand.

Finchum: If you could be a performer, which one would you be?

Hamilton: Well, that’s a good question. I have always liked the high wire, but most people say trapeze, the flying trapeze. There’s a difference. There’s flying trapeze and there is trapeze. Trapeze is single trapeze, you would call single trap, a big difference. That’s the one, usually, with girls, sometimes men do single trap. It’s mostly just striking various pretty poses. They do a little bit of acrobatic stuff on there. But flying trapeze, that’s the one where they leap through the air and that’s what most people like, flying trapeze. But I just love high wire. To me, that’s very dangerous, very dangerous. That’s what I like.

Nykolaiszyn: Well, we appreciate your time today.

Hamilton: Well, I’ve enjoyed it.

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