

Oral History Interview
with
Robert Rawls

Interview Conducted by
Tanya Finchum and Juliana Nykolaiszyn
July 2, 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

Interview History

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

Project Detail

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

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Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Robert Rawls is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on July 2, 2011.

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About Robert Rawls...

Robert “Bob” Rawls was born in Dixon, Illinois to Harry and Mary Rawls who were traveling with a show called Ayres and Kathryn Davies Circus at the time. Bob began performing at the early age of five, working in a rolling globe act with his father. Also at a very early age he and his brother, David, had a trampoline act. His mother was a tight wire walker and she trained him on the wire as well. As soon he could drive he was driving a truck over the road at night for the circus.

After high school, he entered the Army and served in Vietnam. After his discharge he returned to the circus and performed for a while and eventually became a boss canvasman. Over the years he worked with several different circuses and has done just about every job there is to do in a circus.

In part due to an accident at an early age, Bob became interested in drawing. As time moved on, he would draw posters for the circus and paint circus trucks. Around the age of thirty-five he stopped performing and moved into the management end of show business and began painting more. He has painted for the Culpepper and Merriweather Circus, Carson and Barnes Circus, Kelly Miller Circus, Fisher Brothers Circus, Hoxie Brothers Circus, Great American Circus, King Brothers Circus, Sells and Gray Circus, Clyde Beatty Circus, and others.

When Bob grew tired of traveling, he opened a sign painting business and settled in Mead, Oklahoma where he maintained the sign shop for fifteen years. Bob and his wife, Mary, have been married for over thirty years and have shared the circus and sign painting life. Bob has also served as fire chief for West Bryan County, satisfying a need to give back to the community which accepted him and his family.

Bob and Mary have two children, David and Annie, and make their home in Mead, Oklahoma where Bob continues to paint, both for the circus and for his own pleasure.

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Robert Rawls

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Tanya Finchum
& Juliana Nykolaiszyn
July 2, 2011
Mead, Oklahoma



Finchum *My name is Tanya Finchum, along with Juliana Nykolaiszyn. We’re with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at the OSU Library and we’re in Mead, Oklahoma, to speak with Bob Rawls. Today is July 2, 2011. Thank you for inviting us into your home.*

Rawls Sure.

Finchum *Let’s start by having you tell us a little bit about yourself, where you were born, when, and then we’ll just work forward.*

Rawls Well, I was born in Dixon, Illinois. My mother and father were traveling with a show called Ayres and Kathryn Davies Circus, and they wintered in Dixon, Illinois. Most of my family were born in the winter, in the off season. I was born in June, June 8, which was an unusual thing so my mom had to leave the show, come back to winter quarters, have me, and then go back to the show. There were only two children in my family born in Dixon, Illinois, myself and my sister, Margaret. Those are early memories, vague memories of the circus. I don’t really remember a lot about the circus until I was four or five years old, and then I began performing immediately at five.

Finchum *Doing what?*

Rawls I was the kid—my dad did a rolling globe act where he juggled while rolling and standing on a giant ball. The finish trick was to get me to stand in front of the ball, he’d reach down and pick me up by my hands, set me on the ball, then reach down and grab me again, bring me up to his shoulders, set me on his shoulders, then I’d stand on his shoulders and we’d both stop and style. A little kid doing that brought down the house, usually, and that was my earliest memories of performing. But after that, my brother and I formed what we called the Jumping Jacks.

We were trampoline performers, and we did a double routine every day, twice a day, on the trampoline as well.

Later on, I decided I wanted to be a tight wire walker, and so I trained to do that. All this training was difficult to teach somebody to perform professionally, but my mother was almost like a ballet teacher. I mean, that's how graceful she was and how beautiful she styled, and she taught us all how to respect the audience. Don't turn your back on the audience. No matter what's happening in your life, you're smiling and you're having a good time. And that was the idea. And we were trained rigorously to do tight wire walking. You start with a low wire, about two feet off the ground. It's made of steel cable and you wear small leather pumps so that you can feel the wire, but it's very hard on the feet. Every year, before we started out, I'd spend two or three weeks working on the low wire and barely being able to walk because your feet were so sore and bruised, and that would be just before we left school.

We usually left school a month early and came in a month late. We had to make up our lessons in advance when we left, and we had to do our lessons and send them in when we were coming back in. Later on, the school refused to do that when I was in high school, and my folks left us with people so that we could finish school. Then we joined the show as soon as we got out of school. But that was always hard on my folks. It was better if they could take us with them because we did, like, eleven acts and that's almost a whole circus. You throw in a few animals and you've got a whole circus. In fact, there was a fellow later on that did it on Fairyland Circus. We were about the only people on the show, other than the animal handlers, and we did eleven acts. They made up a program with all of our pictures on it and all that, and we used to stand and sign autographs at the end of the show on the pictures. It just was an odd place to grow up. It had its inherent dangers, but I wouldn't trade it for anything on earth.

Later on, my senior trip was to Vietnam, and my brother and I both went to Vietnam, and I believe that we survived it because of our skills and our abilities that we learned and the hardships that we went through in show business. My brother had three squads that all were killed or wounded in Vietnam. He was about the sole survivor. I give that as a testament to his earlier life. He just knew when to duck, he knew how to be faster, he knew what line to get in and what line to get out of and I did the same thing. I think that it really served us well when we went back. We got back from Vietnam, all we wanted to do was get back in show business, and we did.

When I was eight years old, I had an accident on the circus. It was about the time of my birthday, because I remember I had a quarter in my shoe,

but the horse act had bought a new horse, and the horse was a rodeo trained horse, to rope, calf roping. I was going to be the cow that day. So he roped me and tied the rope off to the saddle horn just like the cowboy would do, and he jumped off to come over and tie me up like a cow. Well, the horse got scared. It was unfamiliar with the territory. We were right in the back yard of the tent circus, and it took off running. Well, I got the rope off of me all the way to here (gestures to his shoulders) when another horse stepped on me and the rope went around my neck and the horse drug me for several blocks. My dad actually outran the horse and stopped it. They didn't give me much for my chances. They told my folks I wouldn't make it through the night.

I spent three years in and out of hospitals with operations down in Houston, in the Shrine Hospital and the Texas Children's Hospital, where they rebuilt my throat and put my neck back together. I came back and the only thing I wanted to do was get back in the show business. I became a performer, seriously, after that accident. But circus always had dangers. My brother was clawed by lions. I always had to feed some of the caged animals and that's a dangerous job for a young guy, to feed a tiger or a baboon or a chimpanzee or a lion, but we did it. There was a deal in circus business that you sign on to be such and such, but you make yourself generally useful in all departments. Whatever happened to the circus as a whole, it affected everybody. If there was a storm coming, everybody was out there. If the tent got blown down and ripped up, everybody went out there and sewed the tent back up so that we could get back with our business.

It's a tight knit group on a circus. It's a small town that moves to small towns around the country. We've probably been in almost every state in the union, most of Canada. We spent a lot of time in Canada, because Canada doesn't have a lot of entertainment so circuses were a big deal in Canada. I've been all the way up to Northern Quebec with the shows. I know how to put up a tent and take it down, any size tent you want. I've put up some of the largest tents in America. When I worked with Popcorn [the Clown], I was the boss canvasman. The boss canvasman was in charge of putting up the big top and all the seating that went inside of it. I had a crew of about forty guys, and we put up a tent that was probably one hundred and twenty feet wide and three hundred and eighty feet long. It was a huge tent. I also put up the tent for Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers. It was a little different type of tent. It was a bale ring top. A bale ring top, they set up the center poles first, they spread the canvas all around the bale ring top, and then they pull it up like a giant curtain on the poles. That's a bale ring top. It's a completely different affair than a push pole top. Most of the tents you see are push poles.

Finchum

And how long would it take to put one up?

Rawls

It would take approximately two or three hours to put it up if you had a good crew, and it would take about an hour and a half to tear it down. It was much faster coming down than coming up. You got into such a routine. Everybody had his little job and you just kind of oversaw that all those jobs were done and done safely. We lost a lot of people putting up tents.

I remember one day on Royal Brothers Circus, in Canada—when they get a push pole tent up in the air, they have a jigger line that runs across the top of the center poles and down each end to secure those poles, and they're hooked to pulleys on a dead man's stakeout on each end of the tent, just to pull it tight to make it safe. In Canada, we pulled the tent up, and they didn't check overhead before they put the tent up. That's the first thing you always do, is check overhead. The tent pole hit a high tension wire, a high power line, seven hundred and fifty thousand volts. The boss canvasman was a good friend of mine, Bob. Big Bob Rayburn was his name. His son was on the other end of the jigger line, and when he pulled that jigger line tight, it hit that power line and seven hundred and fifty thousand volts went down into the poles and down that jigger line. His son was electrocuted instantly, but was still standing when Big Bob ran the length of the tent and dove at him and put his hand right at his chest to knock him off of that thing. It was way too late by then. It was over by then, but when Bob touched him, he was electrocuted instantly as well.

There are a lot of stories like that around the show, and we've lost a lot of people along the way because of mistakes. There are some you can't predict and some you can't get around and some you should have. But it's a dangerous, dangerous occupation. No matter what you're doing around the show, it can be dangerous. But we all look out for each other. My mom had eight kids all together, but six kids most of the time, and we scattered all over the lot. Everybody knew us. If we were doing something wrong, everybody had the right to correct us. It was a big family and everybody watched out.

When I was three, I got bitten by a bear, and this is almost prior to my memory. I still have the scars on my rump, but the bear wouldn't let me go. They had tied the bear out under a truck to clean out his cage and I didn't know he was there. I was walking around the big top and the bear got me. He just bit into my rump and was shaking me around like a rag doll. They took a sledgehammer to the bear to get him to let go. Bears can be really dangerous. He let go and I survived that one, too. I survived all these things as it goes along, and all I really wanted to do was get back to show business whenever I was hurt. I just wanted to get

back into show business. I loved being a performer. But you can only do that sort of thing for so long.

At about thirty-five, I was worn out bad. My legs were gone, my knees were gone. I'd had multiple injuries from the tight wire and from trampoline. I finally got out of that and got into the management-end of show business, and more of the painting-end. I was always an artist. When I got my neck broke, I couldn't talk for a long time, and they gave me a Magic Slate so I would talk with the—do you remember the old Magic Slate? I would talk with the Magic Slate, but I'd also draw pictures. If I couldn't write what I wanted to say, I'd draw a picture of it, and that's where I started doing my artwork. From then on, everybody would always see me drawing. Well, "If you're an artist, well, you can paint this rigging here or you can paint this truck here." I always got those jobs, and that's how I evolved into a circus painter.

I took that knowledge and came here [to Mead, Oklahoma], bought that little house up there, and decided I was going to get off the road for a while. I opened up a sign shop, and I just went up and down the highway selling signs for ten dollars a sign or whatever. I've maintained a sign shop for thirty years here, but we always went back to the circus and worked on the circus. My wife, like I say, my present wife worked on the circus with me as the secretary to the owner. I was the manager at the time so we were very busy all the time.

We have two children who lived in a little trailer behind us, in number eleven, here. They would park right behind that every day, and the clowns would come out of their little sleepers and they would check on my kids because we were doing our jobs and we were on the lot, and so the kids pretty much were left to fare on their own. They had strict rules and regulations, and if they stepped out of that, we knew about it. Somebody told us so we would keep track of them that way. If we got a five minute break, we'd go in and check on them, but for the most part, they were on their own, and they traveled with us at night. We'd get them in the truck and trailer and head off. They would be in the back, in the crib, or whatever, and they were raised pretty much out there on the circus. I've got a picture of my daughter at the age of three, watering an elephant. And she loved it. She loved it. Both my kids really liked show business.

My son went back, later on, and became an elephant handler with the Kelly Miller Circus for two or three years before he decided to join the army. Right now, he's in Iraq and has got four weeks left of his second tour and we are really looking forward to his return. My daughter is in New York. Her husband is a major in the army and he is leaving on the 17th of July for Afghanistan. He's been over there four times and

received the bronze star already. We're pretty proud of both of them. They're doing a great job. I'll just be glad when they get him out of Iraq this time. I think it has been more dangerous this tour than any tour, because they've made them noncombatants.

My ability to manage people and deal with people and deal with the public, kind of lent itself to being in a community, which I've never done before in my life. When I came here, we started the sign shop. I also became the fire chief for West Bryan County, I guess because I had a way with people more than anything, and I wanted to give something back. I wanted to be a part of the community, and I wanted to give something to the community so I became fire chief and was fire chief for many years here, and fought fires whenever I was in town. Now, in the wintertime, I was usually in Florida painting circuses or something like that.

We took sabbaticals. A year here, two years there, where we'd just be here, making sure our kids got an education. They worked with us in the sign shop. We all worked together. It was a way to have children without having to put them in daycare or have somebody else raise them or have them on their own. They just stayed with us all the time, no matter what we did. And because of that, I think that they're a little more well versed. My son fits in real well in Iraq, in a place where people don't know how to construct or run electricity or things like that. David's pretty well versed in that so you can do that. He's also well versed in being uncomfortable and working hard and seven days a week and all hours of the day and night. I think this stands him in good stead. I have faith in him very much because of his background, even the short background that he had in the circus.

When I was a kid, there were hundreds of circuses running across this country, all in canvas tents. In the wintertime, we'd take those tents out and we'd boil paraffin wax, we'd take large mops and we'd mop the top of the tent with wax. That made it waterproof and let the rain shed off of the tent. It also made it a torch. You probably heard about the fire in Hartford, Connecticut, where the Ringling show set up their tent, the fire got started, and the tent just went up instantly. It was an old canvas tent that they'd paraffined. A lot of people got killed that day. It would never happen anymore because, first of all, all tents now are made of vinyl, and they all have chemical put on them so that they're fireproof. But even still today, I've taken Clyde Beatty into Connecticut, and we have to surround that tent with a charged water line and have eight firemen on duty all day long while we're showing in Connecticut, because of that fire.

That was my job on the circus. Not only did I have to handle any of the

problems with the performers—and there weren't that many, because performers know what they're doing in show business. You park your trailer, you get your equipment up, and you do your job. No matter what, you do your job. But my job was to handle their complaints, make sure that they were all comfortable and had what they needed, water and lights and all this stuff. It was also my job to liaison with the town folk. On Clyde Beatty, we play Queens, we play New London, we play all the big towns up and down the East Coast, so there were always four or five inspectors that would come out and want to see, inspect everything that you're doing, the concession stand and all that. Well, all these departments knew what they were supposed to do. It was my job to take these guys around and point out, "Yes, we are doing, we are complying, we are..." because we're inspected more than anybody.

When you come in and you've got an inspector from a local town—now, if he goes into a local café, he might have a problem shutting them down, but he wouldn't have any problem at all shutting the circus down, because he doesn't know any of us. You had to be very careful and handle these people with kid gloves. We've handled some very large operations, some serious operations with Clyde Beatty. All the trucks had to get on the lot. You couldn't be without one truck. If one truck broke down, you had to go back and get it somehow and get it to the lot. These were all of my jobs. Then I would report to the owner, who showed up every now and then. (Laughs) But I enjoyed the job of manager. I enjoyed it. I thought it was challenging. We did black ties and things like that all over the country and were always doing television, TV interviews and TV people coming and spending weeks with a show.

They did it on my family twice. There was a program called *Discovery 67*, it was a PBS program. They spent two weeks with the show filming, and they rode in the cars and the trucks with us at night, and everything. They stayed right with us the whole time, and they did a program. Another one, later on, was something like *1, 2, 3*. It was a PBS program, too. I've got that video over here, but they just live with the show and photograph and film us while we're working. We got used to it. You didn't pay any attention to it. I remember on Carson and Barnes when I was the boss canvasman, we had a Coors, I believe it was—not sure whether it was Coors or Budweiser—come out to do a commercial on the show. They wanted to catch the burly roustabouts pulling that canvas when the sun came up. Then, after that—no, it was Miller Time—after that, it was Miller Time and you go have your beer. They'd have these big tubs of beer and all that stuff.

Of course, Popcorn [the Clown] was on the show at that time, and I remember having to set—they said, "You need to be at the next lot, you

need to raise the tent right as the sun is coming up.” Well, in order to do that, I had to send the stake truck and a crew over early and put all the stakes down on the pins over there. Then when the show finally did arrive, we’d spread the canvas that night. Instead of going to sleep, we spread it that night, and as the sun came up, here goes the tent, up in the air. Well, as I’m going up with the tent and the sun’s coming up, these TV people drive up and say, “We’re a little late. Can you take it down and do it again?” And we did. We took it all down and put it all back up again for a TV commercial. It’s enough to drive you crazy. Especially when everything’s as tight as it is around the show, but these were just things that happened all the time. Driving truck, everybody had to drive a truck. That’s one of my earliest memories. As soon as I got my license I was driving a truck over the road at night.

Finchum

A semi?

Rawls

Yes, later on it was a semi. I drove number—this is number eleven here. I drove number sixteen. Sixteen was a support truck for this truck, and sixteen was all the supplies. Popcorn boxes, snow cone cups, Coca-Cola syrup, peanuts, popcorn, everything was in number eleven, and the concession manager’s office was in number eleven. It parked right behind—not number eleven, number sixteen—it parked right behind number eleven so that they could ferry all that stuff right into the wagon during performances when they needed it. I drove number sixteen for several years. They used to get mad at me. My dad was concession manager for a while, and that was his office I was driving and all of his supplies and everything. If I didn’t do it correctly, why all that stuff was on the floor when he walked in, in the morning, and that was a mess. But driving truck, I never did like driving truck, but it was just part of the deal. You work all day and you drive truck all night, and that’s the way it was. I’m sure it was dangerous. It certainly caused a lot of accidents.

I remember many accidents on the circus, but there were some trucks that were more difficult than others. If you’re carrying, for instance, I drove the elephant truck on Royal Brothers Circus, in Quebec. Well, in Quebec, they don’t have highways. They have dirt roads, and so you’re driving these trucks full of elephants in the backwoods. I remember one night having a problem and the truck backed down and half of the truck was hanging over a precipice and a French guy—they’re all French in Quebec—stops with his truck and says, “Can I help you?” And I said, “Well, sure.” He was speaking French and we were trying to work it out. I said, “I’ve got a problem. I’m over here, maybe you can pull me off this precipice with a chain or something. I’ll get a chain.” He walks back there and the truck is sitting there rocking like this (gestures going back and forth) on the precipice. He points to the truck and asks me what’s in it and I said, “*Elephante.*” There were three elephants in there and he

just shook his head, got in his truck, and drove off. (Laughs)

There are many occasions you have to empty those elephants out of that truck and get that truck where it needs to be and then put the elephants back in. You have to have enough wherewithal to do that, because elephants are very dangerous animals. For the most part they're domesticated, but an animal is an animal. It doesn't have human traits, it doesn't think like a human, and when you cage it and take it out of its environment, it can do anything at any time. I've seen animals respond, what looks like bad behavior, it's not. It's just a defense. I've seen elephants rampage and squash cars and throw people around, but it's a defense mechanism. You've got that elephant where it normally shouldn't be. Elephants are very smart creatures. They know their handlers. They know who's supposed to be there. They know what condition they're supposed to be in. They know where the food's at. They know if there's food in your pocket.

On many occasions, my wife would send cookies to my son out there working the elephants, and he'd stick them in his pocket while he was working the elephants, and they'd find the cookies in the pocket. With their little trunk, they'd sniff around and they'd find those cookies. An elephant's a very intelligent creature. I always had a great deal of respect for elephants, but they are animals. All of them are animals. I've seen tigers tear people up. I've seen elephants tear people up. I've seen a lot of that sort of stuff, but mostly because of something stupid, something that was out of line. I know I've seen drunks come up and try to play with them, "Oh, here's a peanut for the elephant," and just irritate the heck out of the elephant until the elephant gets enough, just picks him up, and just throws him somewhere. They can kill you so we try to keep people away from things like that. The handler that's supposed to be with that elephant should always be there and you'll avoid a lot of that.

It has changed a lot, but you have all these elephants in America, I mean, all these animals. At least they have a place where they're utilized. Now, in my day, it was thirty thousand dollars to buy an elephant so you didn't do anything to hurt that elephant. They're impossible to get. You can't even import them anymore. Elephants have to be born in this country if there are new elephants in this country. But the circus always gave the elephant a place to be, and he got his feed, he got his water, he was washed and scrubbed, and he did his act every day. To me, it was kind of like how humans and animals can inter-react with each other, and I think it worked very well.

There were many cases in the early days of people mistreating animals around circuses, but I don't think you'd ever find that today. Even though PETA says it happens all the time, "Just to have an elephant in

the circus is harmful to the animal.” Well, what happens if you don’t? Where does the elephant go? What are you going to do with an elephant? Because there’s only one or two sanctuaries that I know of that will even take an elephant in. You have got to be careful about that. If you’ve got a herd of elephants, they know each other, you bring another elephant in, and you’ve got problems. You’ve got to be careful about things like that.

Finchum

Before we move from the trucks, do you want to tell about the numbering?

Rawls

Oh, sure. Sure. Yes. This is a model of the truck that I used to do, and the lettering and everything has been reproduced just exactly the way I did it. There are numbers on the back and the front of each truck, and these numbers signify what the truck is, what its job is, and where it goes and its position on the lot. When you refer to this truck—this is the office truck—but they’d say, “Oh, go to the office,” you could understand that, or they’d say, “Go to thirty-three,” which that is the number of the office. I know most of the truck numbers of most of the shows in the country, the ones that are still going, because I painted them.

Finchum

How did the numbering get started?

Rawls

Well, it got started on the Ringling show. When the train came into town, they’d have all these wagons on the flat beds on the train, and they’d have to take the wagons off and move them to the auditorium or field, wherever they were setting up or whatever. They numbered these trailers because there were many of them. There were sixty, seventy of these things, and they numbered these things so that the men would know exactly where to take that unit off of the train and to its location to do its job.

Nykolaiszyn

Could you talk a little bit about the process of painting a truck? Does the circus come to you with an idea?

Rawls

Not anymore. Usually, I’m so well known that they say, “Okay, this is what we’d like to see,” the basic. They give me a general idea of what they’d like to see and then I take it from there. Some circuses are really particular. For instance, Kelly Miller is an all red circus. All the trucks are red so that limits what kind of color you can put on that truck. These are white trucks. They were easy, because you could put any color you wanted, it came right back at you vibrant and clear and shiny, but painting a truck was one of the cheapest things a show owner could do to refurbish his show. Every winter they repainted. All these trucks all went through a barn, and they all got spray painted white. Then they

were lined up at another barn, three at a time—they were big barns—three at a time. I would set scaffolding all the way around them so that I could walk at the height that I needed to paint all the way around, and I'd paint them just as fast as I could paint them. I would paint twelve hours a day.

You start out with a blank slate, like this, and you pop lines all the way across there in order to lay everything out. Then you come back with charcoal and you lay out the letters, get them all drawn in there exactly as you want them, the circles, and the scrollwork. Some people made patterns and did this (gestures painting then moving the pattern then painting). I never really did that, I just did it by hand. I got to the point where I can throw a scroll work across the top and sides of a truck just by looking at it. I can say, "Well, this is the way it's going to go," and bam, bam, bam, and you can paint it. I do it all with an inch and a half brush. Everything that you see is done with an inch and a half brush, and you got really fast at it. You mixed all your paints in the mornings so that your big paints were there. I'd add a little linseed oil so that it wouldn't dry so fast, and a little bit of thinner. Once I got a layout on there, I'd just pick up the red. We'd go down and do all the red, and I'd come back with the yellow, and do all the yellow and the blue, and etcetera, etcetera.

These blue circles, you'd have to paint the blue circle on there first, then come back and do the lettering on top of it. You usually did the blue circles first. All the blue circles went on first, and then you come back and paint all the red and yellow, and the striping and all that stuff. Then at the end, you'd come back and letter these individual circles out, because they'd be dry enough to do that. I could paint a truck like this, sometimes, in a day, back in those days, especially if it was a white truck. Now, Kelly Miller's, the difference in Kelly Miller is that everything has to be double coated because of the red background. When you put yellow on that truck, you've got to double coat that yellow. Everything that you put on there, you have to double coat. It's like doing a truck twice, but I've been painting so long that I just look at a truck and say, "Okay, this is what it needs."

I paint for Culpepper and Merriweather Circus over in Hugo, and most of the painting that's on that show, I've done it. I painted for Carson and Barnes over there, which is the show my brother works for right now. I've painted for, certainly, Kelly Miller, Fisher Brothers Circus, Hoxie Brothers Circus, Great American Circus, King Brothers Circus, Sells and Gray Circus, Clyde Beatty Circus, and a few dozen more thrown in there. These are all some of the major shows that I've painted for over the years. It's just a certain type of art, bright and colorful with scrollwork and pictures. You can see, on this truck, we do a lot of

pictures, panels of the different acts and things that are on that show. You see people coming out and taking pictures of these all over the country. Wherever we go, they line up and they take all these individual pictures. But these would change on a yearly basis. If you changed the performance, you'd change all of this.

Nykolaiszyn

Now, when you're creating those panels, are you working from photographs or are you...?

Rawls

Usually out of my head. A lot of times I'll do a sketch and I've got hundreds of sketches all over, sketches that I do for trucks and things. I'll do a sketch and I'll get it in my head what I want, and then I'll just go up there and draw it on there. You learn to draw huge, really big when you're doing elephants and lions and stuff, bursting out of the truck, or whatever. You just got used to it. I didn't set up a lot of patterns. I'd do a small sketch and say, "Okay, that's about the way I want it to look," and I'd go and take it to the truck and draw it on there by hand. Some show painters use patterns, and they'd set out paper and they'd make little pounce patterns, and then they'd use that. But to me, you couldn't do that because every truck is an individual truck. Every truck has different windows, different doors so you had to fit every piece of artwork to the individual truck. You haven't seen one of these shows, have you? Kelly Miller would be my suggestion for you to actually see the show. It comes into Ardmore towards the end of the year, if you ever really wanted to see it. But you can see right there, it's like the cookhouse truck has certain idiosyncrasies that you have to work with.

I remember doing a truck on Culpepper where they had a vinyl awning that came down over the door. It was just a big flap on the truck, but it screwed up my layout so much. I actually went over and painted the vinyl awning so that when it was lying there, the whole truck looked symmetrical. Now, when they opened that door and the awning went up, it didn't look the same, but of course, my idea was when it was going down the road, it had to look sharp. When Kelly Miller pulls into town with its six or seven semis, all red, all with beautiful pictorials and scrollwork and lettering all over them, you can't miss that. In a small town, that's a big deal. They pull all these trucks out to a lot and they get them all in their position and up the tent goes, and performances at four in the afternoon and eight o'clock at night. By the time the last show was over—that's the funny thing about shows—you started tearing down when the last show started. As the last show begins, as each act is finished, that equipment comes out, goes into its individual owner's truck or two of the owners' trucks, and they'd load it. You're already taking up stakes. Seats that aren't necessary are removed early. You're already in a process of tearing down and moving to the next town when the last show starts.

Finchum

Constant motion.

Rawls

It is a constant motion. A circus has its own electrical department. It has its own cookhouse department. It has its own mechanic department. It has its own performance director and staff management. It's all departmentalized and it all works like a well-oiled machine. We played Camp Lejeune one time with the Clyde Beatty Circus. I'm standing out there and there was a captain in the Marine Corps standing out there. I walked over to talk to him, because it was on Marine base and its all Marines. He had stood there for two solid hours watching us take that thing down. It was a Sunday afternoon and he said, "We could learn a lot from you people." And I said, "You could, you could." The only time in my military career that I was asked to do anything with a tent was when I was stationed at Fort Belvoir in Washington, D.C., and they were having riots in Washington, D.C. They brought in the Eighty Second Airborne. We had to go out as a troop and set up their tents in the middle of the night so that they had someplace to be when they got there.

Out there at the airfield, I sort of took charge of setting up these tents because I could do it. I can set up their tents in five minutes. I knew what I was doing. That's the only time that ever came up. I had a strange distinction there when I first got to Fort Belvoir, before I went to Vietnam, I was in riot control and we were taught to move down the streets. They didn't give us loaded guns, but they gave us guns and bayonets, and they said, "This is the way you do it," and we literally backed people down streets in Washington, D.C., during the riots. When I came back, I was on the other side. I was doing some of the rioting. I was still in the military, but I was on the other side. They were rioting about Kent State, at the time, and I was part of that riot. I got tear gassed just like everybody else, but it felt like we were doing the wrong thing by the time I came back. When I went over, I was just a kid. I mean, I looked like I might have been fifteen, and I didn't know anything about politics or war or anything else. Six months in that country, that all changed for me. I learned a lot and I was not too happy with what I finally woke up and found myself in. When I got back, I was on the other side. We did everything we could to stop the war, and it worked. It worked.

Finchum

Well, besides painting the trucks, did you do any of the poster work?

Rawls

I have done a few posters. I did a lot of work like that for Clyde Beatty, for their marketing department. They would have a problem and they would come to me and say, "Well, can you give us a layout with an elephant in it," or, "Can you do this and make it this way," and I'd do a lot of that. I got trained in the army as a printer. I was in psychological

operations and I got trained in the army as a printer, and that training helped me do stuff that was camera-ready artwork. I'd never been formally trained except for that little training I got in the military to do it, but that's where I picked it up. That's what gave me the thirst to go back to school.

I went to Southeastern State University, here, for two years and I loved it. Boy, I just thought that was—art history, I ate it up. I had no idea why we do all these things and why we don't do these things. It all came to me as they were teaching me all this stuff and I was just fascinated. I was fascinated. I was not greeted very well by the other students because I shot up the curve and because I always wanted to know why. I want to know why. Let's get into this and find out why, and so I think I was a bane to some of the students. Most of my professors liked me a lot, though, and I still maintain ties with a lot of the professors that I worked with at school. They taught me a lot.

Finchum *We understand that your grandfather painted windows.*

Rawls I'll tell you the truth.

Finchum *Or great-grandfather?*

Rawls My grandfather. Both of my grandfathers painted. I think all three of them did. I had three. My grandfather Jack, known as the Human Fly, you've probably heard that story, Jack Williams—he had several names, but Jack Williams, the Human Fly. That was quite a story of itself, but my grandpa Willy, who's the man that took my dad in after his dad was killed in Texas. He was a show guy, too, and he was killed when my dad was six. Well, I don't know how my grandpa Willy got in there, but he picked the boy up, my dad, and sent him to Catholic school in Searcy, Arkansas, which changed my dad's life tremendously. Willy paid for that and from then on Willy was my grandfather, and he's the only grandfather I really knew. He would teach you a lot of things, but he was a painter, too. He would paint windows and store windows and store fronts, and he always taught me, he said, "If you've got these brushes and you know how to handle them, you can just take those brushes and go anywhere. You'll make a living. You'll do fine."

It was true because I stopped right here and did it. I had no clue what a sign man did or how signs were done or what to charge or anything else. I just grabbed my brushes, went down the road, and said, "Do you need a sign? I'll do a sign for you." And I learned my way. I finally went to work with another sign company for a year or so, and learned a lot about the trade. I learned enough to raise two children and send them to school. My daughter has gone through college in the honors program.

She did that in two years, which really blew me away. My son is still hoping to go to college at some point on the GI Bill. It was a way that I could stay with my family, my family could stay right with me, we worked together and we accomplished everything that way. My wife worked with me in the sign business and we transferred that. I've painted signs all over the place. I don't know if you saw the mural over at the elementary school. There have been two or three murals over there.

Finchum

That's on our list. We haven't yet, but we will.

Rawls

That's an interesting mural because they came to me. They were building this school, and they wanted something to tie it to circuses. It's a brand new elementary school in Hugo. They give me this loft and they say, "Paint three rings of the circus," and I did. I painted this act going on here, and this act going in the center ring, and this act going in the third ring. There are usually three rings. There were five walls and on the two end walls, I painted the two show owners, the biggest show owners in town. One of them was my brother David and the other one was D.R. Miller. They're portraits. They're on the ends, and then there's this three ring circus. I don't know what happened or who told who, but *The Daily Oklahoman* did a front page spread on it in color, which blew me away. It kind of made all the other artists in the state mad, I'm sure, because I was a complete unknown, but I did that mural.

I also did a mural called "The Heritage of Hugo," and they came to me and said, "We want you to do this mural on this building." The building has since burned and gone away. I have a video of the mural, but I said, "Well, what is the heritage of Hugo?" And they said, "Well, we really don't know." I spent six weeks researching that so I could make a drawing of this mural. They didn't really know what the heritage of Hugo was. I know more about it than most people that live in Hugo now. I did a huge mural for that, telling of all the little things that happened in Hugo's life and how it came to be and its connection with the circus.

I don't know if you know it, you've heard of Ringling, Oklahoma, out here? Believe it or not, that's circus oriented. There was never a circus there, but Ringling Brothers had wanted to move their winter quarters from Baraboo, Wisconsin, where it was too cold for the animals, down here. One of the Ringling brothers came down here. They had a [railroad] track that went through Ringling, Oklahoma. It wasn't Ringling, then, it was nothing. He bought a bunch of land there, and he was going to put a circus winter quarters there for Ringling Brothers. Well, they never did it. It never panned out, but if you drive into Ringling today, you'll see a little circus tent that says, "Welcome to Ringling," and there are little flags on top of it, and that's their claim to

show business. They never had a show there. They never saw a show winter there, but that's why it's called Ringling, Oklahoma.

Hugo was always the big town for circuses, and when I grew up in Hugo, there were a dozen circuses that wintered in Hugo. The schools were oriented to it. You were never there in the summer. You were a student only in the winter, and you left a month early and you came back a month late, and the schools were fine with that, at first. That was all right. Now, later on, the state mandated that we couldn't do that, but that's why we particularly settled in Hugo. The banks were a little more—I mean, my dad would come in and sometimes he would have to make a loan just to get through the winter so that he could get out on the road. They got to know him and realized that, "He'll pay me when he gets on the road," and we always did. They had a good working relationship, and still do in Hugo.

I think the circus people are taken in stride in Hugo. They can live comfortably there and raise their families there without too much. I remember in school being called a gypsy a few times and things like that, but nothing serious. They pretty much put up with us. We didn't really feel part of being a student in high school or something, because we always left early and came late so we weren't really a part. All these kids did their summer things and summer trips and we never did any of that. We were working all the time. It's a little bit different, but Hugo was a good town to grow up in.

My father actually took a job as a radio announcer at the local radio station in the wintertime, and they liked him a lot. He reported the news. In fact, he gave me a sheet of paper a few years ago where Kennedy was shot. He got it off the AP [Associated Press] and he was the one that reported that news in Hugo, when it happened, and he gave me that before he passed away. I still have that paper stuck somewhere of when Kennedy was shot, over the AP wires, but we inter-related. My mom and dad would take jobs in the wintertime in Hugo. They worked in a hardware store. They worked as a radio announcer. They did all kinds of things just to get through the winter.

My mom was given twenty-five dollars a week, and she usually had to feed twelve people and maintain a house on twenty five dollars a week. We weren't allowed to go to the refrigerator and have a glass of milk. That was completely off limits. Meals were served, you got so much, and if you wanted seconds, if it was a meal where we could have seconds, we got it. But for the most part, you never went into the kitchen to ask for food in between meals or anything like that. We were poor people, and lived most of our lives in poverty—abject poverty. We carried our water, we didn't have indoor plumbing. We lived really

rough. Baths were once a week. They'd fill up a tub and they put the oldest kid in and then worked their way down to the youngest kid. Same water, same tub. Water was at a premium. I'm sure that that's the way they did it in the pioneer days, for the most part. It was a different way to grow up.

I did love performing. I loved going out there. Now, the one time that I didn't like it was when my dad came to me one time and he was the manager at King Brothers Circus. I was working for him. I was a tight wire walker. I was a trampoline performer. I did rolling globe and I worked the sideshow. I did the barking on the sideshow and set up the sideshow tent and tore it down and took care of the animals. It was quite a bit to do. But he came to me one day and he said, "One of the clowns quit," and he said, "You're going to be a clown tomorrow." I said, "All right." I had no idea what a clown did, how to be a clown. I put on the makeup—I'd seen them do it—and I put on the makeup and I got myself an outfit. I went out and tried to be as funny as I could, and I was a flop. The biggest flop I ever—I said, "I hate this! I don't want to do this anymore!"

Then a guy named Antar Wazzan, he's a comedian. He did an acrobatic act as a comedian. He came along and explained to me what a clown does and how a clown acts. You don't act silly. You don't act goofy. You act serious. All these mishaps that are happening to you are serious and you are serious about it. You climb a ladder and you fall down, you've got to make it—you really want to make it to the top of that ladder, and falling down, that's just part of—and people relate to people getting hurt. They can see that maybe they're not really hurt, but at the same time, you whack a clown and it's just funny. You drop a clown's pants, it's funny. You were always prepared as a clown, because a clown is the emergency guy, too. I don't know if Popcorn told you some of his stories, but I always kept a balloon in my vest. If an act went wrong, the program director or announcer would turn around and say, "Okay, get in there and fill in." You'd go out there and blow up the balloon and pop it. You'd just blow it, and then you'd say, "Do you want to see it bigger?" and of course, they want to see it bigger. So you blow it some more until you've got it huge and then it finally popped, knocked you down, you fell over. That filled up five minutes while they straightened up the rigging over there. You always had something on you that you could run in there and do as a clown.

I got to where I liked clowning. I was always the fool, the guy that got knocked around, the guy that got blown up with the dynamite, the guy that got run over, that was me because I was acrobatic at the time. I was supple enough to do that sort of thing. Popcorn was more of the boss clown when he worked. I never worked with Popcorn as a clown, but

we've done so many gags, and they're the same gags, that we know each other pretty well. We know how we'd work together. Popcorn's a very good clown, a very good clown. You'll never see him work again. The last time he put on his makeup was the day [of] D.R. Miller's [funeral]. He made national news that day, because his picture was all across the country.

My brother was D.R. Miller's protégé for the most part, for a long, long time. I think it's kind of neat that David's working for the circus, for D.R.'s circus. I think David's needed over there, and I think he will help that circus survive. A lot of my family, or most of them, are out of show business now. David and his daughter, Sasha, are still working in show business. I still work in show business when I paint and all that, but I have a sister that's a principal, a retired principal in Houston, who was a beautiful aerialist. She did beautiful work and was a tight wire walker. We actually had an act together for several years. She was the female and I was the male tight wire walker. My other sister, Margaret, who works in a bank over here in Calera, used to be one of the most beautiful aerialists I ever saw. She could fly through the air and just look beautiful doing anything. I mean, she was good.

My brother, Michael, has a tent rental business in the area here. He rents all these fireworks tents that you see all over the place. He never liked performing so he went into concessions. He was always in concessions, from the time he was about six years old all the way through. He never went into performing at all. My brother, Chris, went into a little bit of performing, but really didn't do that. He went more for boss canvasman and things like that. He was kind of like the roustabout pusher, the big, tough guy that can push all these guys around and get it all done. But none of them are in show business now. Occasionally Chris will go out and book a town for a show, because he still does a little of that. In this area he'll book, like, Madill or Kingston or any of these towns. He'll get them a sponsor and get them a lot and get them set, and he does that in the wintertime from time to time, just as extra work. That's about the only affiliation he has with shows anymore.

Finchum

What do you miss most about actually working on the show?

Rawls

Oh, I guess I got to where I was so comfortable as a manager on Clyde Beatty, I knew what I was doing, that by the end of the year, you would be able to walk out—it's like being on a ship, I guess, but you'd walk out to the midway, and everything works so well, everybody got along, and I really enjoyed that mellowness of showmen. Show people can get together and have a lot of fun. They enjoy themselves. It's like a reunion, I guess, anywhere else, like these homecomings and all that stuff, and show people do that. I like that part about show business. I

liked it when I was a performer. I liked the applause, and certainly, you miss things like that, but there are a lot of things I don't miss about show business. There is no privacy on a circus. If you're arguing with your wife, everybody knows about it. There's just nothing that's private on a circus, and that's one of the reasons I live down here. It's private and I don't let a lot of people into my private life, because it's something I protect. It's something I've never had before and so I protect it.

I miss a lot of things about show business. When you're sitting there on the sidelines and somebody rides into the center ring on a horse and does these tricks and is just fantastic and the audience just loves it and the band's playing, you just can't help but say, "I want to be a part of this." I still feel that, even today. My brother produced a circus for the Great Milwaukee Circus Parade, and it was one of the finest shows I ever saw. He'd only produce it for five days. He took all the equipment, got all the performers together, got it all up into Milwaukee, and he had me come with him to help put that show on. It was the finest show. They had six circuses there at the time. David's was the finest show on the midway. It was just done so well. I just loved being a part of it.

I mean, he shot cannon shots, twin cannon shots, of guys flying over the big top and landing in nets on opposite sides. That's something I've never seen before in my life. When a cannon shot goes off, that trajectory is planned to an nth degree. When it happened in the Beatty show, we shot the guy down the length of the tent, right beside the center poles. If you get off a little bit, you've got rigging everywhere. It had to be just a precise shot at just a precise moment. These guys couldn't even see their nets when they would shoot from their cannons on either side and land in these nets and pass each other in midair, over the top of the tent. It was an incredible feat! The cannon people, actually, a retired algebra teacher was in charge of that. He lived in a little, bitty tent whenever he put his cannons on. He was a retired algebra teacher, and he calculated that shot to the nth degree because his son was the other cannon guy. I've never seen a shot like that before.

I've seen some wild things in show business. I took a truck load of elephants to Wall Street along with about three other shows. They gathered up this herd of elephants and they wanted the herd of elephants to stampede down Wall Street, and that was the shot they wanted. It was for a floppy disk commercial. To get an elephant to do that, to get all these strange elephants together, early, five o'clock in the morning on Wall Street, wet Wall Street down, close it off by the police, all this nonsense, and you've got all this herd of elephants and they're all nervous as hell. Then they glued African ears to Asian elephants and they glued tusks—now, we had one elephant that had huge tusks. The rest of them were Asian, with small tusks, so they glued these giant tusks

onto these [Asian elephants]. All these things are strange to an elephant. Then you have the elephant stampede with a bunch of strange elephants down Wall Street, which is what you've taught them all their life not to ever do. It was an all day affair. I was totally washed out and exhausted by the end of the day, but we accomplished it. Somewhere in the archives somewhere is that commercial of those elephants charging down Wall Street, and they'll never know what a struggle it was to actually produce that.

There are hundreds and hundreds of stories. I mean, we get to talking, I get to talking with Popcorn, and hundreds of stories—stories of runaway trucks, of fires, of blow downs and tornados, and the struggles that we all went through. When show people get together, those stories just start flying and it doesn't matter where we are. I mean, I can be with any show guy and we're talking about the old days, and we all know them. We all heard the stories, we all know the stories and we were part of it, and I think it was exciting. I think it's something that's going to go away. They've almost regulated it out of business because you've got to remember, each state, each truck, has to be permitted, etcetera, etcetera. Each animal has to be permitted, health checked, and etcetera, etcetera and all of the people that you have to have. Nobody wants to work that hard. Nobody wants to work that hard. If you're born in it, you'd know, you'd work that hard. If you're not, nobody wants to do that so it's a dying art. It's going away and I'm sorry to see that. I'm sorry to see that.

I'm planning to do a series of paintings. I'm sort of a realist painter. I'm working on trying to get it like Michelangelo's figures of people doing simple things around a circus. To give you an idea of what I'm talking about, it's in my sketches. Here's one. I'm working on an idea and it's just a simple picture of a guy carrying a center pole. I'm trying to work it out so that it is simple. I want it to be very, very simple. I'm trying to get that flow and that movement in there at the same time. I want to do everything that a guy would do around a circus, like drive a stake or tie off a rope or do this, carry a pole, or handle an elephant or all of the things that the workers do around the show. I want to reproduce that in painting.

Nykolaiszyn *Do you have a lot of time that you spend dedicated to your art outside of sign making?*

Rawls Yes, yes. I always wanted to get away from sign making. Sign making is so boring. The biggest problem with sign making is you have to paint the back side the same as the front side. We finally got into the computer and we did a computer generated one and I hated that even worse, because all the signs you see now are generated by computer. I will do a sign now, but only from somebody that knows me, and they say, "Okay,

this is what I want it to say.” “Now, leave me alone and don’t ask any questions and I’ll do your sign for you.” That’s the way I do my artwork. That’s the drawing for my grandmother in there. But I do, I take a lot of time now.

Nykolaiszyn

So the focus of your art, today, it’s not just circus related?

Rawls

No. My art is politically related, but I also want to preserve the simple things around a circus, a show lot. And you’ve seen hundreds of pictures—my mother has hundreds of them, of people sitting in the back yard smoking a cigarette before they go in and do their act. These are the kind of things, the life that we led. I want to portray that on canvas. I want to do that on canvas. I don’t know that anybody would want that or put that in their living room or anything like that, but I want to do it, because at least they’ll be there. After I’m gone, they’ll still be there. So, yes, I do a lot of circus genre work, but I do a lot of politically motivated work. I do some stuff just for fun. Those are the things I’m serious about, and that is what I want to do. Hopefully, I’m just about getting to the point in my life where I can do it.

Nykolaiszyn

And do you show your art anywhere?

Rawls

I have shown my art. It was published in *The Southeastern Magazine*, and I’ve done two or three shows through Southeastern College. They don’t like my work because it’s not a body of work, as they describe it. A body of work is you paint a pear, you paint a pear again, and you paint a pear again, and that’s a body of work. All your work should be similar, and I got kicked out of a couple of shows because none of my work is similar. I do animals, I do people, and I don’t have a body of work. It just jumps around too much, but I have shown in several. I have not made it a point to push it very much because when I’m gone, I figure my wife can do whatever she wants with the paintings. In the end, it might be a retirement, help her in her retirement or something like that.

Yes, I’ve designed a studio in here and my shop out there so that I can find some alone time and do these paintings. And I’m going to do more and more. They’re all through the house. I know you’ve seen them everywhere, but they’re all through the house. Would I show them? Sure, I’d show them almost anywhere, but I just haven’t had a big inkling to do that. One of the problems with being an artist is that you have to schmooze. (Laughter) You have to go to these little dinner parties and you have to talk about this and you have to describe your art and all that. I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to do it. I can do it. I don’t have any trouble talking to the public about anything, but I don’t want to do that where my art is concerned. I want my art to speak for itself. Don’t ask me to describe it. Don’t ask me to enhance it some way.

Just, you like it or you don't like it. To me, that's the way it ought to be.

Finchum

Some of the same characteristics a good booking agent would have.

Rawls

Yes. A good booking agent's hard to find these days, very hard to find. My brother David is doing that for Carson and Barnes right now. It's a difficult proposition. I sat down with him and we sort of worked out a little plan before he took that job on how to get it under control. A lot of people don't understand the logistics of a circus. It takes a great deal of effort and time, even in his job. A circus comes to town, he's already squared the lot, he's got the sponsor, he's sent them the tickets, he's set up the billposting and the advertising and the radio and the TV, and he's done all that from that office over there. At the same time, when the circus leaves, you've got to come back. "Was the sponsor happy? Was the lot clean? Would you take us again next year or the year after that?" You have to do all of these logistics from this office to keep that thing out there on the road. If you don't do that right, this is going to fall on its face.

I've been on shows that didn't make it because they just didn't have a good enough, what we call the front end. It didn't have a good front end and the nut is getting higher. I don't know if you know about the nut. The nut is the expenses that it takes for a show to operate during the day. For instance, our nut on Clyde Beatty was about twenty-seven thousand dollars a day. We had to make that much to make any profit. The term comes from in the olden days when shows traveled with wagons and horses. When the show came into town and set up, they would buy feed and food for the performers and everything from the general store in town, and they'd say, "Well, we'll pay you after the performance tonight." Well, the merchant in town would take the nut off of the wagon wheel and keep it in his store until that night when they came and paid for the goods that they bought that day, and that's called making the nut. "I have to make the nut." That's where that came from. There are so many circus sayings, it's ridiculous!

Finchum

Twenty-seven thousand for one day, that's a lot.

Rawls

Yes. That's a lot of money. We had to get a lot of people through there all the time. It had to be full all the time. On Clyde Beatty, they did it a little bit different. Now, we got to where we set up for "two, two, and three," is what they called it. You set up two days in this town, two days in this town, and three days in the weekend town. On the second day, after they'd seen the performance the first day, the first few people that came to the show, the second day was always full. It was always full and that's the mark of a good performance, a good circus performance. One of the finest I've ever seen was with Clyde Beatty. When they came out

of that, I was the manager. I was on the gate. I solved all the problems going in. "Who gets this seat? Who got messed around? Who did this? How much did I have to pay?" There is all this stuff that you have to solve when they go in.

When they came out, "Did you enjoy the show?" "I loved the show!" "Loved the show? Come and see it again!" and the next day the tent would be full, whenever you stay in a town long enough. But you've got to understand, these days, like Kelly Miller, it comes into town, at five o'clock in the morning they're setting up the tent, some guy drives by and says, "Hey, there's a circus out there in the field!" By the time he gets off work that night, it's five o'clock, he gets his kids together, rounds them up, and tries to get down to the circus. Some people make it, but for the most part, everybody says, "Well, I'll catch that on the weekend," or, "I'll see that tomorrow." They'll go to that same field the next day and there's nothing there, nothing. Not even a paper popcorn bag.

It's difficult for town people to relate to that. I didn't know that until I was a town person, and you come in. I brought shows in, and you come in and, geez, you just haven't got time for that. You've got kids going to school. You've got a basketball game tonight. When are you going to go to the circus? And these days, the circus is an expensive proposition. For a family of four, you'd better have one hundred to one hundred and fifty dollars in your pocket to go to a circus, because that's what it costs to operate these things, pay these people, buy your insurance, and do all the things necessary to make the nut. I do miss it, and yes, I do have many fond, fond memories of the circus, and yes, I'm still involved.

Nykolaiszyn

Do you prefer the canvas tent circuses to the indoor circuses?

Rawls

The quintessential circus, to me, was under the canvas. It's a completely different feel all the way around if you're putting it up or even if you're around it. It's a completely different feel. But in those days, circuses were close-knit families, close-knit families. I enjoyed that. I mean, a Sunday afternoon in Canada, they have blue law so Sundays, you couldn't show Sundays. It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw. We had a day off! We'd play baseball together, and we'd have picnics together, and we'd have cookouts together on that day off. It was great! It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to a show. I thought, "My God, I ought to have that day off down in America, where we play all the time." But there's really no such thing as a day off in a circus. As a manager, I hated a day off because all these people get off for a day and you've got to put it all back together the next day. They're all kind of worn out from being tired of doing whatever entertainment that they wanted to do for that day off. I always dreaded days off on Clyde Beatty.

But back in the old days, it was a lot slower. There were gravel roads. The trips over were slower, the actual jump, what they call the jump, which was from one lot to the next, was usually short, thirty, thirty-five miles at most, and you'd get in, and you'd set up. When I was a kid, I loved it because we'd come in and heck, the lot, we'd always be waiting to see what the lot was, because it could be a fairgrounds. That was always great. We could explore the grandstands. We could explore the old barns. We could do this, or if it was a nice grassy park area or something like that, or there was a swimming pool next door. I mean, every day was a new adventure, a new place, a new town and you'd try to make the most out of that. When you hit the lot, you did your chores as fast as you could so that you could go explore, get away, go explore the woods or the creek down there or the pond over there. We did a lot of that, and yes, I loved that part of show business.

We weren't treated too badly. Now, there were places where we went in as kids, dime stores and stuff and they'd say, "You with that circus?" And we'd say, "Yes, sir." We were always taught to say, "Yes, sir," "No, sir," because we had to be on our best behavior, always, when we were around town people, and I'd say, "Yes, sir," and they'd say, "Well, get out of here. We don't want you in here stealing our stuff," things like that. That happens anywhere you go with anything you do. It was always neat to see because they'd bring school kids out in buses and troop them around the tent and show as you're going up, and we were always just as curious about these kids as they were about us.

People would have a tendency, I mean, you'd be in your trailer, and people would have a tendency to come and open your screen door on your trailer to see what you were doing, because they thought it was part of the circus. You're supposed to be in there in make-up, juggling or something like that. That privacy issue was always a problem with me. I always didn't like that, but there were so many things about the circus that I did like a lot, and good people. Good people that would go a long ways to help you or do for you and you could find that anywhere in the country in the old days. You could find show people in Florida or Texas or Oklahoma. You knew where they were. If you were down on your luck, you needed a stake, they'd do it. They'd do it. They'd say, "Come back in the spring. I'll have a job for you." Things like that.

Finchum *Do you have memories of the Modern Trailer Park in Hugo? Living beside it?*

Rawls Yes, I sure do.

Finchum *Can you share with us?*

Rawls

I lived down there for a long time. We lived in a little trailer there with several other circus folk people that lived there, and I grew up with their kids. We would actually share responsibility of the kids. My mom would watch your kids. Your mom would watch her kids and all of that stuff in the trailer park. And we all knew each other. We were all show people, going out on different shows, but in the wintertime, we knew, I mean, we could talk to each other. We were show people, and yes, I have fond memories. The first house I ever remember living in, other than in Macks Creek, was a little house that was in the middle of that trailer park. My dad rented it one year and that's where we lived, in that trailer park. It was in a little house. That's the first house I really remember living in.

There were a lot of fond memories of Hugo because there were so many show people and because the town people inter-related with us, correlated with us. It wasn't a problem that we were with the circus. My brother was probably one of the most popular kids in school. He played football, was top honors everywhere, and everybody liked him. I wasn't so much. Because of my accident, I wasn't there a lot. I had like three years where I was completely out of the picture, and so it was a little different for me. But most of my family were received very well in Hugo and lived comfortably there, on next to nothing. It's a great little town. I always like going back to Hugo. I always feel like some sort of a little bit of celebrity, going back to Hugo, because I know everybody and everybody knows me, and we get along real well.

Usually, I'm doing some sort of art project over there. I worked on a project in the new library there, and I painted little pictures of animals around the ring curb in the library. They had a circus wagon put up there, in the kids' section, and I did all the scrollwork and painting on it. I don't know if you got a chance to see that, but that was one of the last projects I did for the town. I've done several murals and several paintings. On Angie's Circus City Diner, I did all the artwork for their menus and their signs and all that stuff. A lot of my artwork is in pictures inside that place. That's where I eat lunch every day when I'm painting over there. Margaret, the waitress over there, knows me so well, I come in at 11:15, she has my lunch sitting right there, my coffee sitting right there, I get my stuff, and I'm back at work in fifteen minutes. She knows me very well. It's the little things about Hugo that make it neat.

I know everybody out at Showmen's Rest. I think I know just about everybody that's buried out at Showmen's Rest. A lot of them are my relatives and my friends. Most of those people are dead. I'm really sorry to see this form of entertainment begin to fade out from American life, because it's an American story like no other, I think. There's a picture

somewhere of my mom and dad. My mom's in her tight wire costume, my dad's dressed as a clown, and all of us kids are strung out in front of them, and one of them is on her hip, and it's a black and white photograph. I always wanted to send that to Ken Burns for the *American Experience*. That photograph's all I'd have to show him and he could take it from there, because there's just such a big story to be told. My mother's story is like a miracle, and she just went through heart surgery.

We found out the other day that she'd had this heart problem all her life. I remember taking her down when she was hung up in rigging where she'd passed out because of this condition right here, and you'd have to take the rigging down and remove her from the rigging. She had strokes over this and she lived this all of her life, raised all these kids, did all this performing and just towards the end of her life, she finds out she has a severe heart problem that's been with her since she was a child. It's incredible, incredible what she did. I just, I don't know another woman on earth that could do what she did. When I got married, I said, "I want a woman that can do something like my momma." (Laughs) And I married Mary. She happened to be named Mary. It just happened that way, but we've been together thirty years. I keep telling her, as soon as I find somebody better, she's out of here, but haven't done that yet. (Laughter) She's quite a woman, too, and I wish I'd have known her earlier in my performing career, because I think she would have been good at it. She'd have been very good at it.

Finchum

You've got to have special memories of performing with your mother, then?

Rawls

Oh, yes. I remember my mother walking a tight wire when she was six months pregnant, walking on a tight wire. Oh, yes. I have fond memories of that, my father, not quite as fond. My father was a great man, but the tactics that they used to train children in show business are rough. They're rough. I remember when we first—I'd never seen a trampoline before and all of a sudden we're supposed to be trampoline performers. Well, in order to teach you how to do that trick—because you're a kid, you're scared—halfway through the trick, you're going to do what they call balking, which is, "I'm afraid to do this trick and I can't do it," and you usually wind up getting hurt. My uncle would stand over here and my dad would stand over here and they both had leather belts. They said, "Okay. Now, you're going to do this trick, or you're going to get wailed," and you did the trick, and that's the way we learned. That's the way all family kids learned.

The tumblers, you'd see them in the back yard with their kids, teaching them how to tumble. If they didn't do the trick, they got whacked for it. That was the way it was. It didn't mean your folks didn't love you. It

meant that you were part of the support of this family and you had a responsibility. That started at about age five and so you did that. I never held it against my folks for training me that way or putting me in those situations. I wanted eagerly to be a part of that, and I would go through what anybody else today would say, “That’s abuse.” Well, it wasn’t abuse. I knew farm kids that got it far worse that we did. But that’s just the way it was in those days, and you trained kids that way.

I guarantee you, when we went to a restaurant, on the rare occasions when we’d go to a restaurant on a Sunday afternoon, we’d troop in there with six kids. The waitresses would look and say, “Oh, my God! Here it comes!” We’d sit there and not one of us ever made a sound. If somebody addressed us, it was, “Yes, sir,” “No, sir,” “Yes, ma’am,” “No, ma’am,” but we never made a sound. My dad said, “He’ll have a hamburger, hamburger, hamburger, hamburger,” like that. If he even looked at you, if you were doing something naughty or something wrong, if he even looked at you, you were in trouble. We had to be on our best behavior all the time and it was drilled into us, constantly, and especially in front of the public. If you’re wearing wardrobe, you’re a performer. And I don’t care—I’ve worked with a broken ankle. I’ve worked with busted tendons. I’ve worked with a hundred and two fever. It doesn’t matter, whether it’s raining, whether it’s cold, whether it’s too hot. It doesn’t matter. Two shows a day, every day, and you do it, and you do it with a smile. That’s discipline. Most kids don’t see that kind of discipline, but it was the kind of discipline that saved my brother’s life and probably mine in Vietnam. Is there anything else I can answer? I probably missed a lot. There are a thousand things I could tell you, but I just don’t know all of the things to say. I just know that there’s so much.

Finchum *You actually stopped performing in your mid-thirties because of...?*

Rawls Because it was getting to be...

Finchum *...stress on the body?*

Rawls I mean, I’d already busted both tendons. I did a trick on the wire and at the finish of the wire act, I would turn to the audience, standing on the wire, straight toward the audience, the wire goes this way. Well, to walk a wire you have to keep your eye on that end of the wire while you’re walking. When you turn around, you immediately get your foci on this end of the wire. To turn toward the audience, you lose all sense of balance, but the final trick in the wire was I would do my finish trick, I would stand up, I would face the audience like this and then I would throw my hands up in the air and fall and my knees would catch the wire. I’d swing around, flop up, and end standing on my feet on the ground. That was always a tough trick because it cut into your tendons

every time you did it, but no matter how bad the tendons were, you had to do it twice the next day. If you were hurt or cut or anything, you still did it. You still did your act no matter what. There was no such thing as being sick. "I can't put up the tent today, I'm sick," or it's raining cats and dogs out there, and Mom still sends you out there. Now, there were some times it was so bad that when we got in, we were so cold and wet and miserable, that she would feed us all a teaspoon of Old Granddad whiskey and put us to bed.

We slept in odd places. The trailer got to be smaller and smaller and smaller as time went on. My dad built a little box on the back of the truck where my brother and I lived and it was just big enough for two bunks. It didn't have any windows. It had a little door, but there was no door on it, just an opening, and we had two bunks in there. That's where David and I lived for a long time because there just wasn't any room in the trailer. Can you imagine, Mom and Dad and Grandpa and six kids, or eight kids? There was just no room so you spent most of your time outside or living nearby or something like that, and those are cool times. I didn't mind it, riding in the back of trucks and things like that. It wasn't too bad. You always had that anticipation of "What's going to be in the next town? Who am I going to meet, what am I going to do in the next town?"

That was always something to look forward to, and the end of the season, the last day of the season. That's a big day in show business. People have a tendency to get silly. I know we had a flying act on the Beatty show and the last day they all came out, one of them was dressed as Batman, one of them was Superman, and they did their act dressed in these costumes. Other people would play little jokes on people. They would put jam all over their trapeze bar or they would put the wrong dog in the wrong box, and so the wrong dog would come out. Or they'd come in and carry out part of your equipment that you used for the act so you had to ad lib or something. There were always jokes being played the last day of the season, because everybody's so happy. We've been doing this seven days a week for thirty-two solid weeks, and now we get to stop. We get to take it home and stop for the winter, but they're always just as anxious to get out in the spring. They're all out there painting their props and doing their practices and getting ready to go and can't wait for opening day. So it has its ups and downs.

Finchum

On the very last night of the season, when you do the spec, what happens?

Rawls

Oh, people just fool with each other. They do all kinds of stuff. The wrong people are in the wrong lineup, and they're just playing little jokes on each other, the whole time. Everybody's laughing and joking

and playing little games and it's kind of a neat time. Kelly Miller had this thing at the end of the season, it was usually in November. Well, in October, was Halloween. Kelly Miller always had a reputation for having a big Halloween party on the show, because it was three weeks before closing. They'd all come dressed as different characters and stuff like that, and they did it every year. You got to be part of a pretty famous tradition on Kelly Miller.

Kelly Miller was a tough show at first. Marriages didn't seem to work out too well on Kelly Miller. It was such a well-oiled machine that it got to be boring and I think, I don't know this, but I think that made a problem for married couples, because a lot of marriages broke up on Kelly Miller for a while. Marriages that had lasted for years and years, they'd go on Kelly Miller and all the sudden, they're going to get a divorce. It just was unbelievable, but Kelly Miller got to be such a well-oiled machine that people could do it without even thinking about it. The show would be up and down and you're in the next town, up and down and the next town, everything exactly the same, every day. That'll get you down, and I think it got a lot of marriages down.

I don't know why that went on. It was like a three or four year period where everybody seemed to go over on Kelly Miller, they'd get a divorce, or they'd wind up—the monkey girl would be with the elephant guy, and all this stuff. And I think it was just because it was just too well-oiled of a machine. It's one of the finest operating little shows I ever saw. It is still a great little circus. My brother doesn't own it. John Ringling North II owns it now, and I work for John in the winter. They love my painting so I'll probably be working for them for several more winters, until I can't do it anymore. It's still a great, little show. Whenever I get around that show and watch that show, I still get that old urge. I just want to get back out there and do it.

Finchum

Be a ringmaster, then.

Rawls

Yes. I did that. I was a circus announcer for a long time. I was the sideshow barker for a long time. I've done just about every job there is to do on a circus, much like the rest of my family. That's nothing special in my family. If you're on a circus, you might be a performer, but you also know how to set up a tent, to drive a stake, to operate a truck or a vehicle, or you know how well everything is laid out. You can do the twenty-four hour man job. You can do it all. We were trained to do everything. Whenever you're on a circus, you were always called to do something outside your so-called job description.

Popcorn's the only one I ever knew that had a contract. He actually had a contract as a clown. I never had a contract. In all my performing days,

I've never had a contract. But he had a contract and he would say, "Look, I'm not doing that because it's not in my contract." But he'd be the only one I know that could say that, because most people didn't have a contract. Most people, it was a handshake. It was, "I know you. You know me. Okay, you're going to be on the show." You don't quit a show before the end of the season unless it's just impossible. You don't do that. You always stick it out through the season, and no matter what comes up, you have to continue on. Just like me, I got my neck broke. I almost died. Well, they told them I wasn't going to live until morning. I fooled them, but can you imagine? Here's your child with a broken neck, a crushed throat, and three years of hospital visits coming up, and we still have to go on with the circus. They left me in hospitals and stuff. It was difficult to understand that kind of stuff, to make that stuff work. You just sit in the hospital for months on end and nobody comes to see you because they're all out there performing. They're all out there working. I understood that, but it was hard. That was hard. That was the, I think, the darkest part of my life. You sit in a hospital, day after day, not knowing what operation we're going to do next. I think I'd had somewhere around thirty or forty operations, major operations, and my parents couldn't be there. My family couldn't be there. That's just the way it was. I always wanted to run away from the hospital. I never quite managed it, of course, I had a broken neck.

Finchum *Instead of running away to the circus. Well, you wouldn't run away to the circus. (Laughs)*

Rawls Well, that was our saying, "I want to run away from home and join a circus." Well, "I want to run away from the circus and join a home."
(Laughter)

Finchum *Anything else you want to say before we sign off?*

Rawls I thank you for doing this. I've already called my daughter and told her about it, I said "Someday my granddaughter may want to know and may go to the Library of Congress, and there will be her grandpa spouting off bologna about circuses." (Laughter)

Finchum *Well, we appreciate you inviting us into your home today.*

Rawls Well, certainly, certainly.

Finchum *Thank you.*

Rawls Thank you for coming.

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

