

Oral History Interview
with
Popcorn the Circus Comic

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

Interview History

Interviewers: Tanya Finchum, Juliana Nykolaiszyn

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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 Popcorn the Circus Comic is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on July 2, 2011.

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About Popcorn the Circus Comic...

Popcorn was born ‘somewhere in the east’ and as a youngster became interested in magic which eventually lead to his career as a circus clown. Over the course of more than thirty years, Popcorn has entertained people, young and old. He recalls days of working in Clown Alley, of keeping a jar full of dimes for payphones, of occasionally ‘blowing the arrows’, and the rush he would get when the audience applauded for him.

Popcorn has traveled around the country working for various circuses and is now retired to “Cornville,” in Mead, Oklahoma.

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Popcorn the Circus Comic

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 State University Library, part of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program. We’re in Mead, Oklahoma today. It is July 2, 2011, and we’re with Popcorn the Clown. Thank for inviting us into your home today.*
- Popcorn** I’m glad you came in, because I hope I give you a little part of the history of clowning.
- Finchum** *Well, let’s start by having you tell us a little bit about your childhood, when you were born, where, and...*
- Popcorn** I was born at a very early age somewhere in the east, and I wanted to be a magician. I always hung out at the magic house, but then I saw you had to carry all these props. (Laughs) So then I lucked in. I used to do spook shows. Do you know what spook shows are?
- Finchum** *I have no idea.*
- Popcorn** At Halloween, when the theater would show Frankenstein and Batman—or no, who was that guy? The vampire. (Laughs)
- Nykolaiszyn** *Count Dracula?*
- Popcorn** Thank you. What was his real name?
- Nykolaiszyn** *Vladimir...*
- Popcorn** No, no, that’s the other one. That’s the updated one. (Laughs) Anyway, I started out on spook shows where the theater would bring in the horror movies in black and white, and then magicians and the hunchback and

the head-chopper and all that. I started on spook shows with Phil Chandler. Number one in clowning: you need a good announcer, yes.

- Finchum** *And where was this?*
- Popcorn** Somewhere in the east. (Laughter) I played a lot of places.
- Finchum** *What do you consider your hometown?*
- Popcorn** Mead, Oklahoma.
- Finchum** *Okay.*
- Popcorn** The rest of it disappeared. I became Popcorn and if you ask anybody within six miles, they don't know my name.
- Nykolaiszyn** *How did you come up with the name Popcorn?*
- Popcorn** I stole it. (Laughs) Yes, from a guy named Popcorn, and he was not a clown. And it's a catchy name. They'll always hear it, yes.
- Finchum** *And from the spook show, what next?*
- Popcorn** Shrine circuses and birthday parties and stage shows and corporate things in Jersey. I've had an interesting life.
- Finchum** *We want you to tell us about it. (Laughter)*
- Nykolaiszyn** *What drew you to clowning? What made you want to become a clown?*
- Popcorn** Never, never, never. I never thought I'd end up in the business, and I spent thirty-some years there. I had a knack, that's all I can tell you. Even Bob's father [Harry Rawls] said, "You've got a knack."
- Finchum** *How did you hook up with Bob's father?*
- Popcorn** Not until I moved here. (Laughs) I've seen him here and there. His father was a showman, and I was always with old clowns. I consider myself the last of the old-timers. We did the same gags, we did the same stuff, but you've got to switch it. "When are we going to rehearse?" The first show we rehearsed. "You do this, you do that." Sometimes there were thirty clowns, then it became ten, then it became eight, seven, six, five, two... (Laughs) There are no clown alleys anymore.
- Finchum** *I haven't noticed any either.*

Popcorn No, there are no clown alleys. They just run in and do their stuff and... Yes, I remember even working with old-timers. I'm an old-timer! (Laughs)

Finchum *So thirty-seven years, when did you retire?*

Popcorn Whenever I came here, and none of us can remember. (Laughs) I think one night I was doing a three hundred mile jump and fell asleep, and if it wasn't for a trucker, I would have hit a tree. It was time to go find a home. I think all circus people want a home. Bob [Rawls] hated the business, and he grew up in it. (Laughs)

Finchum *You get tired of being on the road?*

Popcorn Too old. "I've fallen down and can't get up!" (Laughs) Seriously, I used to tell them before I retired that if I drop dead in the ring, make it funny and get me out of there. (Laughs)

Finchum *How would you come up with your costume?*

Popcorn Oh, here and there, and here and there. The violin is me, the camera is me (gesturing to photographs). Bob [Rawls] painted that picture—that's me—and complained about the pin I put on it. I always said, "No autographs," and there are certain kids you can give an autograph to. I remember seeing grandfathers come who have never been to the circus. "Let me get you a seat." I used to do 'meet and greet' on the way in.

Nykolaiszyn *So Popcorn, could you tell us the first time you met D.R. Miller?*

Popcorn I can't answer that.

Nykolaiszyn *I mean, what you thought about him or...*

Popcorn Nobody liked him. (Laughs) He was a showman. He liked me, don't ask me. I don't know.

Finchum *You made him laugh?*

Popcorn I have no idea. [But I was always welcome at his home.] See if you can find me (gestures to route book), but that's my clowns on Carson and Barnes—English, Spanish... (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *Could you run me through, maybe, a typical act during your Carson and Barnes years?*

Popcorn Hurry up, change, and wait. (Laughs) [Just in case there was an accident

or an act was late,] you had to be ready. So you had to hurry and change and run back and wait. It was called “hurry up and wait.” “Oh, God! We didn’t have to go in this time.”

Finchum *You said you used different props?*

Popcorn Oh, yes. I made them out of junk.

Finchum *Like what, one or two?*

Popcorn That camera, I made out of old film boxes and an old tripod from a surveyor and took pictures of jackasses.

Finchum *Pretended to?*

Popcorn No, I took pictures of jackasses. (Laughs) It’s entertainment, [I literally took pictures of jackasses. I got the idea from *Hee Haw*.]

Finchum *Well, during one show, about how many times would you change costumes?*

Popcorn Maybe three. Yes, maybe three because you kind of wore the same costume for each thing, but you had to change. You’d change a hat, you’d change a vest.

Finchum *Just a little different.*

Popcorn They don’t see it. (Laughs) And the tacky, beat up, old props in the spotlight they look pretty. (Laughs)

Finchum *And the kids loved you?*

Popcorn I have no idea. I entertained both sides, adults and children. David Rawls used to say, “You’re a little too tacky.” (Laughs) But I had done that for twelve years!

Finchum *And you had a dog act?*

Popcorn I had a dog act, a chimp act, the lions, several ladies. (Laughs) Oh, they all thought it was a fantasy. I said, “No, it is not a fantasy. It’s mud and rain, snow, sleet, wrecks...” Yes. If you can survive in the circus, you can survive anywhere. Yes. You’re independent. Sometimes you don’t have water, sometimes you don’t have electricity. You pay your own insurance, which you didn’t hear from David. (Laughs) Yes. No, you paid everything. You got a salary, maybe gas, cookhouse, but you were responsible for everything else—independent contractor. I’m losing time

here.

Finchum *And did you have a trailer or camper trailer or...*

Popcorn I've always had a camper or a trailer or a vehicle, yes—independent, independent. No, I don't live in a sleeper. Have you looked in any sleepers yet?

Finchum *Not on this trip. (Laughter)*

Popcorn I did that one season just to save money because I knew that sooner or later I had to quit. But those sleepers are atrocious. You didn't hear that, did you Dad? (Laughter) Yes, you've got to go there when it's all in and take a look at everything.

Finchum *Yes.*

Nykolaiszyn *Well, when you're performing, are you paying attention to the crowd?*

Popcorn I pay attention to everything. The crowd, how they're moving, if it's not going over, we're going to cut it short. Get in and get out.

Nykolaiszyn *So you're responding to the crowd and everything.*

Popcorn Yes, I have no idea, I just had it. Oh, yes. I had an outline of everything I did, but never rehearsed. The first show was a rehearsal. After that, then we'll figure it out. I've been in the Kennedy Center, the old Cincinnati Gardens, Tom Snyder, Captain Kangaroo, and Bozo. Almost made the Kiss tour, almost.

Nykolaiszyn *Did you have any showbiz idols that you look up to, any clown idols?*

Popcorn No. Lou Jacobs was good. Felix Adler was good. Otto Griebling, Emmett Kelly—eh. No, I just tried to copy all of them. (Laughs) That's what Bob's dad said, "You remind me of all the old ones." I'm the last one left, I think.

Finchum *How would you come up with your new material?*

Popcorn I just rehashed the old stuff. (Laughs) Yes. I remember on Carson and Barnes all these clowns I just showed you, blah, blah, blah. They hadn't seen a clown gag in years. It was all mostly Hispanic people. I did the *Reducer* where you put the fat lady in and (makes buzzing noise) and boom! Out comes... (Laughs) And it actually got an applause at rehearsal from circus performers. I told Jennifer, I said, "You'll never hear that again." See, there are rushes, there are rushes. There is nothing

better than a standing ovation, which you don't ever expect.

Finchum *But you got a few?*

Popcorn What?

Finchum *But you got a few standing ovations?*

Popcorn Oh, yes. They bring goose bumps yet. (Laughs) I don't know. I had a very interesting life. I met a lot of interesting people. I traveled, too. I tried to see everything and hit the flea markets on my way.

Finchum *On the circus lot, did you have to do other things or did you just have to worry about clowning?*

Popcorn [I was told a long time ago by Albert White that I am a performer not a worker so I never did but many others did.] No, I was a performer and clowns in the old days, there used to be thirty, forty clowns on some of these shows and then the shows got less. When I started, there were around a hundred and fifty shows on the road. I think now, there might be ten, fifteen at the most. And all of a sudden, you had nowhere to go. The clown alleys got less and less. In the old days, every clown had a character, like the cop and the buffoon and the pretty one. But that all disappeared.

Beatty—Clyde Beatty, that doesn't exist. It's Cole Brothers now. They used to have a tent for the clowns called Clown Alley. Most performers didn't want to dress with the clowns, so we had our own place. (Laughs) I have no idea. Cookhouse, management, performers, working men, clowns (indicating a caste system with clowns at the bottom)—but that disappeared. Do you want to sit next to somebody that kind of smells? (Laughs) It's a neat life. You either like it or you don't. Some joined the circus and lasted three, four days. Some of them might have made it three weeks. They come and go, and I have no idea why I ended up there in the circus. I think I felt—I loved the audience. It was a challenge. (Laughs)

Finchum *Talk a little bit about your makeup, what you were saying before.*

Popcorn Oh, no. Remember Ringling Clown College?

Finchum *Yes.*

Popcorn Okay, they all painted their stuff on. Mine was put on with fingers. (Laughs) And it slowly went from white face pretty to corn. What I wanted to finally do was eliminate the makeup. On some shows I used to

take it off the last gag, and go out and do the gag, [and get the same laughs.] (Laughs) But then I retired. I didn't want to die on the road. I'd rather die right here in Cornville.

Nykolaiszyn

And would you have to make your own wardrobe?

Popcorn

I usually went to thrift shops and bought ugly shirts [and ties and suits]. (Laughs)

Finchum

I always look at the shoes for clowns. You had to order those from somewhere didn't you?

Popcorn

I've got my last pair, but it's in the archives. They were made by Griffin, Griffin Theatrical Shoes. They don't exist anymore. Handmade, shoe size inside, shoes. They're in the archives out there, but that's what they look like.

Finchum

And what are you referring to as archives?

Popcorn

I have so much stuff!

Finchum

Here?

Nykolaiszyn

Your personal archives?

Popcorn

Well, plus what people—I don't collect, I just acquire. (Laughs) Look around the house.

Finchum

But not at the circus museum that they're trying to start?

Popcorn

That's what I'm waiting on. They better get in gear because my stuff's getting dry rot. (Laughs) Are they still going to put it downtown?

Finchum

Yes, across from the library. Well, did you have a favorite costume, which one you liked the best?

Popcorn

No, it didn't matter. I tried to fit it to the gag.

Finchum

It changed each season?

Popcorn

No, winter, fall, summer clothes. (Laughs) Wardrobe, I always did have one of those, even the big tweed top coat, tweed. Remember those? Earmuffs and gloves, it used to get cold. I've seen it sleet. Did they mention Gainesville, Texas? They used to have a community circus. You know all about that?

Nykolaiszyn *I heard about it.*

Finchum *And did you perform with it some?*

Popcorn No, no, no. That was before my time.

Nykolaiszyn *Well, would you ever take new clowns under your wing?*

Popcorn Oh, too many. “I’m from Ringling! I can’t do that!” (Laughs) I’ve had a lot, including Spanish, which I couldn’t communicate with. “No! We work big top, putting up the top.” “No, you’re clowning! Mr. Miller said you’re clowning!” I don’t think I’ve got a picture of them. They ended up being funny, finally. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *Is it hard to teach somebody how to clown?*

Popcorn Yes, they’ve either got it or they don’t. I’ve been shot with a blank in the head, in the posterior area, because you made those things out of shells, explosions, firecrackers. That’s why I don’t hear well. I was small. I always got stuck in the box. I started out as a pointer. I said, “This sucks.” (Laughs) Then I became a producing clown, then I ran out of clowns, and then I did single things, and an announcer helps.

Nykolaiszyn *Would you work with the announcer on the script?*

Popcorn No! (Laughs) I just play it by ear. “Play it again, Sam.” (Laughs) No, yes. Jim Royal was a good announcer, a friend of mine. Most of my friends aren’t around anymore—Phil Chandler, yes. He was kind of my agent because he didn’t want to work with another clown unless it was me. But, we clicked. Albert White—I’m just running through names—Albert White, Ringling clown under the big top. When the clown college started, they wanted him to go to the college and he said, “I’ve done forty years and they want me to go to college?” (Laughs) It’s a neat history. I enjoyed it. It was the weather, the mud, the rain. My parents used to go, “Why do you live like this?” I’m kind of free, really, as long as you did your job and caused no hassle. I never had anybody up my whatever, really.

Nykolaiszyn *Would you have a signature piece that you brought to your act?*

Popcorn Well, sometimes I’d bring the camera, the violin. That was more stage than anything. I’ve worked stage shows, festivals, fairs—good food at fairs, by the way—and always the lady auxiliary had good home cooking. A lot of that stuff is gone now.

Finchum *It is. How would you learn of those gigs, or how would you get them*

lined up?

Popcorn

People would call me.

Finchum

You had a reputation then.

Popcorn

I guess. (Laughs) I guess. No, I don't know. The easiest part was that it was easy. (Laughs) Bob hates it. He clowned. You've got to remember, he grew up in the circus. Everybody says, "That clowning is humiliating." Hey, it's not if you get a laugh. If you don't get a laugh, you might get it the second show or the third show.

Finchum

Every audience is a little different.

Popcorn

Yes, you can't tell. I used to like to do 'meet and greet.' Bring them in and try to calm them down, and you're coming to the circus, or blah, blah, blah.

Finchum

When you did that, did you speak or was it all pantomime?

Popcorn

Oh, no, no. [I did both.] I'd pantomime [and speak], but that was, "Step right this way. Have your ticket ready." They already turned their ticket in. (Laughs) I loved the audience. I liked the smell of the big top. Shrine dates are like playing Ringling [dates but miniature]. I've done the Maine dates in the snow, the Jimmy Cole show in the snow. I've been coast to coast; California, east coast, Texas, Canada. I got to see more than people I graduated with, and I haven't been to a class reunion in fifty-five years. I wonder how many are left. (Laughs)

Finchum

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Popcorn

No. I should have.

Finchum

And you said you were a towner?

Popcorn

Yes, and I got accepted in a very hard business and did it for thirty-some years.

Finchum

Did your parents come and watch a couple of times?

Popcorn

Finally. (Laughs) No, yes, finally. Boy, I'm glad they took Dad's driver's license away because he was a terrible driver!

Nykolaiszyn

Do you remember your last show?

Popcorn

Yes, kind of. Somewhere in Bloomington, Illinois, and I said, "That's

it.” That was after I almost wrecked. I drove from Bloomington, Illinois, or Indiana—there are two of those—all the way here and I said, “Is that property on the hill still for sale?”

Nykolaiszyn *Why Oklahoma?*

Popcorn I have no idea! (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *I mean, you ’ve seen everywhere.*

Popcorn I liked it here. Look how laid back it is here. I knew Bob from a long time ago. The circus is sixty-five miles of a boring highway. I’m a member of the Showmen’s Club. I think number forty-nine. I don’t know, I’ve got to look. All I can say is it happened a long time ago and all of a sudden it was over. Yes, it was over!

Nykolaiszyn *Do you miss it?*

Popcorn Oh, yes. Yes. See, here it comes. (Laughs) There’s nothing better than the smell, the roar of the crowd—if you can get them to roar.

Finchum *Well, describe the smell.*

Popcorn What?

Finchum *Describe the smell.*

Popcorn Cotton candy, elephant dung, thoroughly dried and cured. I gave D.R. Miller one of those for Christmas. He liked it—I don’t know why.

Finchum *Just a combination of all those smells together?*

Popcorn Yes, the smell of corn, cotton candy (makes sniffing sounds]... It’s much preferable to step in elephant dung than dog dung. (Laughs) You’ve got to wash your shoes off. Chimps, chimps are like having three Hell’s Angels. They’re a hassle. When you have animals, you can’t leave, you can’t get a babysitter, you can’t leave them in the truck without a fan or air conditioning. And lions, the same thing. They can’t exist in the snow, I found out. I’ve just had a lot of—look at all the scars, okay? (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *Did you ever get injured?*

Popcorn Only by stupidity or over confidence.

Finchum *Shot out of a canon?*

- Popcorn** I slid down the barrel one time and I said, “No! No! No!” “Make yourself stiff and straight.” (Laughs) “No, no!” I thought I wanted to be a flying trapeze artist because I was very athletic. You see it on whatever you’ve seen them. That platform looks about like this. (Gestures big) No—it’s like this! (Gestures tiny) And the bar must weigh ninety pounds to pull you out of the loft. No, I didn’t want to be a flyer after that. My back was sore from landing in the—“Let go, Popcorn!” “Oh!” (Laughs) It’s different. The people risk their lives, not only during the performance, but traveling, the weather. Yes. I’ve seen the rain coming in my trailer. I’ve been in two or three tornados, a hurricane. Surviving.
- The most important thing is lights and water. Everybody says, “You’ve got everything in here.” I’m paying for it, and I’ve got lights, water, and not five gallons of hot water! (Laughs) Yes, mud, waiting for the elephants to pull you off. Clowning is basically a lost art, but they all become high-line singles. That’s the muddy lot in Greeneville, Ohio. (Gesturing to a photograph)
- Finchum** *Boy, it is muddy.*
- Popcorn** Boots, three pair, sometimes in a season, boots. I’ve worked muddy lots and gotten stuck in the mud during the clown gag, and they’d have to come out and pull me out of my boots. I said, “Get my boots.” Mud shows, that’s why they’re called mud shows.
- Finchum** *And the crowd probably thought that was planned?*
- Popcorn** No, they were all muddy. (Laughs) Yes, mud show. A friend of mine’s got a book after him, and I don’t have a copy, called *Mud Show*. I don’t know what else.
- Finchum** *What would do you during off season? Like November, December, January?*
- Popcorn** Save money, save change. I still save change and cash it in, in the winter. (Laughs) Seriously, and I save change from ’90, back.
- Nykolaiszyn** *The year?*
- Popcorn** Yes, ’90, back. I don’t know, it’s just a thing, but I still cash in all the other change at the end of November. It’s just a thing.
- Finchum** *But would you work? Do other jobs between the end of the circus and when it started back up?*

Popcorn Whatever I could find. Usually the easiest job to get was a custodian, which then, they called janitors. No, I'm a custodian of the school.

Finchum *And where would you usually winter?*

Popcorn Hugo.

Finchum *...in Hugo.*

Nykolaiszyn *And what did you think of Hugo?*

Popcorn Hug-o, hug-o. (Laughs) The streets need fixed. The only ones that are smooth now is the one from Kelly Miller all the way out to Carson and Barnes. (Laughs) It used to be that way.

Finchum *Did you ever live in the Modern Trailer Park?*

Popcorn You mean a trailer trash joint? (Laughs) No, I always look for a state park or a nice campground when I had time off, just to get away from it. No, no trailer parks. Who's got that on there? Jerry! Jerry! Episodes in trailer parks. I don't sleep good so sometimes I'm up at three, four, five in the morning, and I think its old age. I kind of like watching daylight break.

Finchum *I guess you got to do a lot of that when you were on the road?*

Popcorn Oh, no, it was dark. Honk, honk, honk! (Imitates knocking) "We're going to move!" And then you'd go off in the darkness, and then you'd see the sun come up and then there'd be thunder and lightning. "Oh God, another muddy lot!"

Nykolaiszyn *And how would you know where you were going?*

Popcorn See that arrow and that sign? (Gesturing to photograph on wall) That's slow down, you're going to make a left. Then you would get a little route slip, for those that could read, but you followed the arrows. A lot of times, you didn't have to think because they led you right to the lot. So you lost some of the thought, but I can read a road map, yes. Slow down, you're going to make a left.

Nykolaiszyn *Would you ever get lost?*

Popcorn Oh, yes. Other shows would change the arrows. (Laughs) The old days, it was hit and run, hit and run.

Finchum *Each show had their own color?*

- Popcorn** Yes, or their own insignia. I think that's—the old one, Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers, but those [arrows] are old Cole Brothers. Some of them, you couldn't see at night or in the early morning. I've seen them on paper plates. They draw the arrow out. (Laughs) I've seen them on top of bridges just for somebody they wanted to agitate. Follow the arrows. I don't have all this stuff. I didn't know what you wanted, but I've got archives. I hope the museum opens.
- Finchum** *Did you use particular music for your act?*
- Popcorn** Oh, just the violin. That was from *Clockwork Orange*. It was a good... (Imitates music) And then I added a Michael Jackson glove, that the high pitched—blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But I'd do the fingers. (Laughs) Don't ask me, I just did it! It was being accepted and for a townner going into the circus, I—if I was a gun shooter, I'd put a notch. (Laughs)
- Nykolaiszyn** *Well, what was payday like?*
- Popcorn** Wait in line, wait in line, and wait in line! (Laughs)
- Nykolaiszyn** *Would they pay you cash or check?*
- Popcorn** No, they'd give you—well, in the old days, you got cash. That's why I don't make a lot on Social Security. Oh, and they'd cash it at the window, but you had to wait and wait, and the line would be real long.
- Nykolaiszyn** *And would you ever get fined?*
- Popcorn** I never did.
- Nykolaiszyn** *And what were some of the things you could get fined for?*
- Popcorn** Not showing up for a clown gag, not showing up for the Spec that went around the tent, bringing the law. (Laughs)
- Finchum** *Would you do it all over again?*
- Popcorn** Yes, but I can't. "I've fallen down and can't get up!" (Laughs)
- Nykolaiszyn** *Well, you mentioned the last time you put on your makeup was for D.R.'s funeral. Could you tell me about D.R.'s funeral?*
- Popcorn** The best funeral I was ever at. It was under a big top in Hugo, out at that complex out there. His casket was sitting on two elephant tubs. It was

candy apple red with gold handles. It was a whole thing, and then I was honored to do makeup. That's the last time. Hugo closed down. There was a big parade from the horse blah, blah, blah, all the way to the cemetery. They bused people in. After the funeral, they fed everybody. D.R. was on ice for months until the show came in. Wherever he died—I've got that back there—was the first time he ever saw a circus. That's where he died. And he was on ice until the show came in and then they shipped him out here. There was an old funeral carriage pulled by two, four, six black horses, I think. I can't remember. An antique bandwagon from Baraboo, Wisconsin, a parade. The best funeral I was ever at. I felt funny posing at the funeral in clown makeup, but that was an honor and that's the last time I put it on. I'd have to go back and look at the articles to give you the date.

Nykolaiszyn *Did they ask you to put on the makeup? Or did you think, "I'm putting it on."*

Popcorn No, no. I was asked to do it.

Nykolaiszyn *And how did that make you feel?*

Popcorn The last time I had to put that crap on. (Laughs)

Finchum *Do you remember what you wore? What particular outfit you wore?*

Popcorn Probably a ruffled shirt, a vest and pant. I don't know. I can't remember that.

Finchum *That's okay.*

Popcorn But the article went around the world. Yes. No, why he liked me, I have no idea. Not many people liked him. (Laughs)

Finchum *I'm sure you made him laugh, though.*

Popcorn I have no idea.

Nykolaiszyn *Well, when people think back to Popcorn the Clown in his heyday, what do you want people to remember?*

Popcorn He was kind of funny. (Laughs) Really! I don't know what Bob said, but he always said, "You're funny!" I said, "It's tacky clowning. What do you mean?" David Rawls called me sick. (Laughter) I tried to play off of what was going on. If it was the *Titanic* movie, I'd be in a captain's thing and a hat and, "Welcome to the Titanic. I can get you on the top deck. Have a pleasant journey." (Laughs)

One time, they rebuilt the Cincinnati Gardens and I was playing there with the show and it was atrocious, whatever they did to it, the tent. I said, "Welcome to the Cincinnati Gardens. Come on in. Yes, it looks just like it!" (Laughs) I tried to entertain everybody. "Welcome to Wright Patterson Air Force Base, hanger eighteen." Do you know what's in hanger eighteen? The one from—where was that where the aliens supposedly landed?

Nykolaiszyn

Oh, Area 51, yes. (Laughter) Do you think clowns get a bad rap?

Popcorn

Yes, yes, yes, yes. I was told, "You're a necessary evil." Like I said for years, you couldn't dress with the performers.

Finchum

But they needed you to fill in the gaps.

Popcorn

Yes, but it was kind of nice having your own joint. (Laughs) I remember working with—who was the sergeant from Gomer Pile, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I lost that picture of me and him together, but he always had ice cold beer in his dressing room. Stars get...

Finchum

Special treatment?

Popcorn

Yes. It would've been nice. The best I got was a private dressing room with a shower and towels and a limo to the restaurant. (Laughs)

Finchum

Well, that was pretty good.

Popcorn

Well, yes. Where was that? Pine Knob, Michigan, somewhere, a big resort.

Finchum

Did you have a favorite town or venue that you played?

Popcorn

No, no. There were some shows you would play the same towns over and over, like three, four years in a row, and you would meet people from [all over]—"Popcorn, do you want to come out and have lunch?" "Well, yes!" (Laughs) Yes, you meet friends. You met a lot of interesting people. Yes, the people, the people. I liked the public and circus fans. We have circus fans, or we used to. I don't know. Like baseball fans and football fans. They'd come out and they'd bring a lunch and go pick your mail up. You had to tell in advance what town they're going to pick it up. [My opinion of circus fans is they always wanted to run away with the circus and never could. They were always a friend to the circus!]

Payphones, they don't exist anymore! You used to have to carry a jar of

change along for the payphone and sometimes you'd forget it. Then along came the AT&T credit card, and now I have one outside communication, that's it. [referring to his cell phone] And the TV with six channels because of that box the government made us buy. (Laughs) Payphones, I see them maybe at Wal-Mart, maybe at Lowe's.

Nykolaiszyn *How is clowning different today versus your time?*

Popcorn They've become more elite. They've become more elite, that's all I can say.

Nykolaiszyn *Is that a good thing or a bad thing?*

Popcorn It depends. It just depends.

Finchum *How could you break into the business today? Do you have to go through Clown College to do it?*

Popcorn No, that's obsolete now. It's called experience. No, if anybody says, "Oh, I want to get [in the business]"—I say, "Don't even think about it!" It's tough and in the beginning, you were kind of the low rung. Below us were the working people, above that was cookhouse, above that was owners, above that was performers. I went from there to here, okay? (Gestures from low to high) Because I remember, you're a performer. Clown, that says thirty-five bucks [back in the day].

Finchum *Thirty-five bucks for...*

Popcorn And a cookhouse and sleeper. (Laughs)

Finchum *Thirty-five per week or per show?*

Popcorn Per week [is where I started and progressed quickly]. I told you, the clowns that I've had—\$125 a week, plus cookhouse, plus a beautiful sleeper.

Finchum *That they provided or you bought, the sleeper?*

Popcorn No, they provided it. You might get electric, you might not. The shower might work at the end, communal shower. Air conditioning might work. I stayed one season just to save money and wear and tear. And the next season, I took my van on the road. I said, "That's enough of this!" I paid somebody for a shower. The fairgrounds, that has got cold water if you're going to shower! (Gestures shivering) Yes, see? You got lights, water, sewer... (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *But it was a good life?*

Popcorn I enjoyed it. I felt free there. As long as I did my job, nobody bothered me.

Nykolaiszyn *That's probably a good feeling.*

Popcorn I did my job and got no harassment.

Finchum *And applause.*

Popcorn It was the rush.

Nykolaiszyn *Well, as we wind down, is there anything else you'd like to tell us?*

Popcorn Oh, we're winding down?

Nykolaiszyn *We're winding down.*

Popcorn You're spring's running out? (Laughs) I don't know what to tell you. I'm just Corn, that's it.

Nykolaiszyn *Just Corn.*

Popcorn That's it.

Nykolaiszyn *Today, you're just Corn.*

Popcorn Oh, I've been that for a lot of time. (Laughter) Like I said, most people don't know my name around here.

Nykolaiszyn *And you like it that way?*

Popcorn Yes, yes. Corn, I made it somewhere where you don't make it much. And why, I have no idea. The mud, the rain, the snow, the sleet, the hail, the wrecks. "Did we blow the arrows? Damn! Got to turn around!" (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *Well, we appreciate your time today and just sharing a little bit about your life.*

Popcorn Well, I don't know. I didn't even think. I've got so much crap, I just brought out. I've had a good life.

Finchum *You have. [Well, thank you.]*

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

