

**Oral History Interview**  
**with**  
**Barbara Miller Byrd**

Interview Conducted by  
Juliana Nykolaiszyn and Tanya Finchum  
November 19, 2011

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

**Oklahoma Oral History Research Program**  
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# *The “Big Top” Show Goes On*

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

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## **Interview History**

Interviewers: Juliana Nykolaiszyn, Tanya Finchum

Transcriber: Miranda Mackey

Editors: Ashley Sarchet, Tanya Finchum

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

## **Project Detail**

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

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

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

## **Legal Status**

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Barbara Miller Byrd is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on November 19, 2011.

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## **About Barbara Miller Byrd...**

Third generation circus owner, Barbara Miller Byrd was born in 1946 in Smith Center, Kansas to D.R. and Isla Miller. Barbara is the current owner of Carson and Barnes Circus, which finished its seventy-fifth season in 2011. D.R.'s father, Obert, was the first generation of the family involved in the circus business, starting with a dog and pony show.

D.R. and Isla moved to Hugo, Oklahoma in 1941 and Barbara continues to call Hugo home. When she was five, Barbara performed in the circus for the first time on the swinging ladder. From that day on, she has performed various acts and worked multiple jobs on the circus from selling tickets to riding elephants to managing the budget.

Barbara attended and graduated from the University of Oklahoma where she met her husband, Geary Byrd. They were married in 1970, and after he returned from a tour of duty in Vietnam, they ‘joined’ the circus together. The duo has managed the business operations of Carson and Barnes Circus for the last fifteen years. Barbara also oversees the Endangered Arc Foundation in Hugo, committed to the care and breeding of Asian elephants, a vision her father had many years ago.

Barbara and Geary have two daughters, Traci and Kristin. The Byrds continue to proudly manage and operate Carson and Barnes Circus, keeping the family tradition alive by providing quality entertainment to cities along their route across the United States every year.

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## **Barbara Byrd**

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Juliana Nykolaiszyn  
& Tanya Finchum  
November 19, 2011  
Hugo, Oklahoma



**Nykolaiszyn** *My name is Juliana Nykolaiszyn with the Oklahoma State University Library. Also with me today is Tanya Finchum, and we're here in Hugo, Oklahoma. It is Saturday, November 19, 2011, and we're here interviewing Barbara Byrd as part of our oral history project of Hugo circus occupations. Thank you so much for joining us today.*

**Byrd** You're welcome, glad to be here.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, let's begin by learning a little more about you. Could you tell us where you were born, the year you were born?*

**Byrd** I was born in a little town in Kansas, called Smith Center, and I was born July 9, 1946.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And tell me a little bit about your parents.*

**Byrd** Well, my parents were wonderful people, of course. They were my parents. I was an only child so we were particularly close, especially my mother. They came from varied backgrounds. My mother was the third youngest child of eleven in a farmer's family in Kansas, and they had very meager beginnings. They had the typical story of all the kids riding an old horse to school and having hand-me-down clothes, but they had a wonderful life because of all the siblings. She had fond memories. I was close to my grandparents. They used to come and stay with us when we were in our off-season, back down here in Oklahoma. They would come down from Kansas and stay with us during the winter months so that was a wonderful experience for me, being close to my grandparents.

And then, of course, my grandfather on the other side, he traveled with the circus so we were always together. But my father was from a family of maybe a little more well-off financially people in the county. He had

teachers in his family, and his grandfather owned the hardware store in the town, and he also owned what was called the Opera House, and traveling shows used to come and perform at the Opera House. Later, they converted it to a silent motion picture theater. And during the time when they would be re-reeling the reels of film, my father and my grandfather would perform on stage with little dogs and ponies to entertain the people, while the reels were being changed. And then my father would sell popcorn, and that's kind of how they got into the circus business.

I'm third generation so it was my grandfather that really had the interest in the circus. They just started fiddling with dogs and ponies and monkeys and typical I guess you would call it a dog and pony show. And they started traveling around Kansas within a fifty-mile radius, doing little shows in little farming communities. My grandfather loved the animals and loved that part of it. He wasn't like a flashy guy. He was very quiet, kind of unassuming, a small man, but he loved dogs, and he loved ponies, and he loved training them. So they got into it that way, just very gradually. And my father was about eight years old, I believe, when they actually started doing these little shows in the state. His mother passed away shortly thereafter, and he was taken out of school, even though there were schoolteachers in his family. And my grandfather proceeded on this career of circus business.

They worked for other circuses in the beginning. They started a couple of other little circuses and failed. My father also had—I don't want to leave him out because he was very important to the whole scheme of things—an older brother, named Kelly. So it was basically the three of them after their mother died, and they would travel around and work for other circuses. My grandfather was very tight-fisted with money. Everything they earned went back into the box to start their own circus. And, like I said, they started a couple and had a couple of failures.

My mother, in the meantime, went through eighth grade. And, at that time, it was all in a one-room schoolhouse out in the country. She was going to go on to further her education, but they had to move into Smith Center, to the town. She was waiting for her sister to graduate from eighth grade so they could go in together and live in a boarding house or somewhere and try to continue on with school. But my mother and father met at a barn dance, and I don't know if it was love at first sight, but my mother said she was very drawn to him. They married when she was fifteen and he was sixteen. They'd had their license for, oh, several months before they actually got married. And my father tells the story where when they got married, the minister charged them—I don't know the exact figure, but it was five dollars, something like that. And then he turned around and gave them three dollars back as a wedding gift,

because he could tell they were going to need it. So they were married and they went with the circus.

My mother had never even been out of the county. And the first night they stayed in like a pup tent, and they stayed on the edge of a game farm. And she heard these lions growling and trains going by, and she'd never experienced any of that. Also, she ended up with chicken pox on her wedding night. I'm sure it was a very frightening thing for a young girl to be in a pup tent, listening to lions and having chicken pox. But they went on, and they worked for a circus. She learned to perform, and she loved it. When I came along, it was twelve years later, and like I said, I'm an only child. So they were married twelve years before I was born. She loved the circus as much as my dad did and really devoted her life to the circus. It was his passion, but it grew to be hers. She was a wonderful woman. She really was.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*How did your family come to Hugo?*

**Byrd**

My family came to Hugo in 1941. In traveling around the country, there are people in every area of the country that are circus fans. They love the circus. They'll go to any circus that comes to the area. But, in traveling, they met a man named Vernon Pratt, who was an influential businessman here in Hugo. He owned the big grocery store. In fact, Pratt's still have a grocery store in Shawnee, Oklahoma. So it was a very prominent family, but he loved the circus. And he met my parents and my uncle and my grandfather, and they became fast friends. My parents had already left Kansas. They moved south gradually, looking for warmer climate as they acquired more animals, looking for a place where the winters wouldn't be quite as severe as Kansas.

So they moved first over to Springfield, Missouri, and then they moved to Joplin, Missouri, then they came down to Mena, Arkansas. Then Mr. Pratt talked them into coming to Hugo with the promise of free water for the animals for life. That was one of the big draws to come to Hugo so they did come to Hugo. By that time they had one elephant. And my mother and father lived in the truck, in the front—one part of the truck with the elephant, and the elephant lived in the back part. They parked up as you're going out of town, if you go through town and on the way to Paris, Texas, there's a corner down there. When you live in a town you don't always remember the names of the streets, but it's still in town. But on the way out towards Paris, there was a building there. And I don't know if Mr. Pratt owned it or what, but he let them park there the first winter.

So the first winter in Hugo, my mom and dad lived in the truck with the elephant. The rest of the equipment, I guess they parked there so they

would have maybe lights or something for the elephant. I don't know why they got to park behind this building, but the other people were parked out at what they called the poor farm. And, again, I don't know—as a child, you hear this, but I never said, “Well, Mom, what was the poor farm?” It was a piece of property out there where they let them park. And then they bought the farm across the street from where we're sitting today. It was an established farm, and they bought the acreage. My grandfather moved into the little house on the property, and the elephant got a barn. So my mother always joked and said that the elephant had a house before she did, because she was still living in what we would call a RV now, but back then it was a very crude-type mobile home.

They were very fortunate to find this community, because the community has always opened their arms up to us, and we've always felt at home here. We didn't always get free water. We pay for our water now, but it's always been a good town. (Laughter) I was born in '46 so they actually came here before I was born. And the only reason I was born in Kansas was because I was born in the summertime and the circus was touring. So my mother went back to Kansas to have me, and then I returned to the circus when I was two weeks old. So that's how we got to Hugo, and we've been here ever since.

One funny story, my father was always a dreamer. My grandfather and uncle were more realists and kind of settled, but my father always had big dreams, and so he found a property on further south in Texas one time. This was probably back in the late '50s, I'd say. He found a ranch down there for sale that he thought would be perfect for our winter quarters. He wanted to make one more move further south, and it was going to cost fifty thousand dollars. Back then, that was—it's still a lot of money—but back then, that was a fortune. So I guess they each had equal vote, and democracy rules. My grandfather and uncle voted no and my father voted yes. But it turned out that it was where the ballpark is and Six Flags and everything, in Arlington, that's where it would've been. We always joked with them that we didn't make that next move south. But we've always been happy here in Hugo, and I think the people of Hugo have really kind of adopted the circus, because as you go through the community, you'll see a lot of evidence that the circus is here.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*What is your earliest circus memory?*

**Byrd**

My earliest circus memory—I wish I was one of those people that could remember the day they were born, but I can't. And sometimes I don't know if I'm really remembering what happened or if I'm remembering the stories that were told about what happened. But really, my earliest

memories are of riding the pony in the—we called it a spec. It's short for spectacular, but it's really the parade that happens during the performance of the circus. And I remember riding the pony under the tent, in the circus. And I had a little gold cocker spaniel, named Goldie—that's original—and Goldie used to follow me everywhere. So when I was about five years old, I learned to do a little—it's called swinging ladder, and it's the first thing that all the little girls in the circus learn to do. It basically looks like a trellis ladder, but it's hung, and it has a little loop on it, and you swing back and forth and do little poses on it. My mother was the swinger, and my little dog used to come in the ring with us and watch me go back and forth.

It was a wonderful life. And looking back now, I realize how magical it was, but as a child, you take your surroundings for granted. I mean, it was a wonderful playground, and you got to travel everywhere and be applauded for doing a silly little trick, with your dog watching you, in the center ring. And it was a great life. I got to be around the animals, and I traveled with my mother and father, my grandfather, my uncle, my aunt. My uncle and aunt had a daughter, also an only child, and her name was Karen. She was eight years older than me and so I always looked up to her. So it was a magical life.

The circus is, maybe some people wouldn't think so, but the circus is a wonderful place to raise a child. It's a really protective community, and everyone's always watching out for the kids, but yet you have this freedom to run across the lot. There's the horses and the elephants, but there's always a set of eyes watching you and very protective of the children. We got to travel. I've been everywhere in the United States and seen probably, not every park, but I've been to the majority of national parks and the wonderful cities of the United States. But then you come back to little Hugo in southeastern Oklahoma, and you have roots. And that was the great part of my particular life in the circus, because I had, I always felt, the best of both worlds. I had the roots and the community of Hugo, but yet I had this opportunity to travel and do all these exciting things.

Some circus children don't have the opportunities I had, because I went to the same school system all my life until I graduated and went on to university. Some children don't have that, that chance that I had in circus business. Their parents are artists, performers that travel from circus to circus, and they don't have that root. But as you talk to circus people in Hugo, I believe that anyone that traveled with the circuses in Hugo felt that sense of having a home, because they were always welcome back to Hugo and felt a part of the community. They didn't feel like the outsider or the weird circus person. The children didn't make fun of them because of their parents' occupation or because they



traveled and their home was only on wheels. The children here were accustomed to that so they didn't make fun of them. I think Hugo has been good for circus.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So you would come home and attend school during the school year?*

**Byrd** Yes, yes. I went through school just like any normal child. I've got my first grade picture, my second grade picture, my third grade picture, all with the same children that were my friends, and still are my friends, here in Hugo.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And would your mom come off the road, too?*

**Byrd** Yes. What we did was, as long as I was doing well in school, they would let me leave in March, when my parents left for the circus to start. And my parents always saw to it that I came back when school started, but the teachers would let me take my books. And I still have letters from my friends that were students, where they would write to me and send me the letters while I was on the road, telling me what was going on in school and how much they missed me. And some of them are most prominent citizens here now, but I still have the little letters that the teachers would have them write me. It was a magical, enchanted life I led. Problems of adulthood eventually hit me in the face, but at that time there was not a care in the world.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, you started with swinging ladder. What are other acts that you may have gravitated towards as you were growing up?*

**Byrd** Well, I was the owner's daughter so I usually did anything that either no one else wanted to do or that maybe someone broke their leg and couldn't do. But I always say I was kind of a jack-of-all-trades. I wasn't very good at any of it, but I did it all. So it's a very varied list. I rode the elephants, and I rode dressage horses, I worked ponies in the ring, I wore a pumpkin head. I mean, anything that my parents, or my father particularly, asked of me, I tried to do. I walked tight wire, I did an act called bounding rope. It was a thick rope and you had a pole. It was kind of like a ballerina-type costume, and you used to do like different little poses on this rope. It sounds silly when you talk about it, but it was fun and I enjoyed it. It was funny. I learned to do an act. I used to practice every day after school. They had a trainer for me in the old barn across the street, and so I would practice over there every day after school, especially after grade school.

After I got into junior high I was a cheerleader, and I was in the band, and I had a lot of different activities. But in grade school, I had practiced almost every day, and I had learned to do a little single trapeze act where

you hang by your heels and your toes. It was funny, I never got to perform that act, because we had an employee on the circus that was very important to us and his wife learned to work that act. So my parents decided, “Well, we’ll let her perform instead of you.” But it was still good training. I enjoyed doing it. I did Spanish web, which is kind of a step up from the swinging ladder. All the girls learned to do the Spanish web, and that’s just a rope hung. You do basically the same tricks that you do on the swinging ladder, but it’s on a rope, and you climb up and do the poses on it. And let’s see. What else did I do?

Like I said, I kind of did anything that no one else wanted to do. I progressed onto the concession department. I made cotton candy. When I graduated from high school that was about the last year that I performed, and my parents decided that it was time for me to move into the office, that they could hire people to do that but they needed some family members in the office. So I went into the office. Of course, I’d already started with my grandfather when I was twelve years old. I used to collect tickets on the main gate. My grandfather was losing his sight in his older years, but it was funny. He could tell a twenty dollar bill from a five dollar bill. (Laughs) No one took advantage of him when it came to money. But that was a wonderful experience, working with my grandfather out on the gate, collecting tickets from the patrons as they came in. So I sold tickets.

One year, after I was an adult, our cook quit, and I was already married to my husband then. And so we went into the cookhouse, and we cooked in the cookhouse for about three weeks. That’s one of the hardest jobs on the circus, is trying to make one hundred, two hundred people happy with their food every day, and they’re usually not. It was funny, because my mother-in-law lived in Lawton, Oklahoma, and there was a Vo-Tech school over there. So she went and she got two graduates from the culinary school at the Vo-Tech center. They came up to take over our cookhouse, and they arrived on my birthday so my husband put bows all over them and brought them up to the cookhouse. That was my birthday present, to get sprung out of there. (Laughs) It was funny. I’ve done everything on the circus, really. I haven’t physically put the tent up and down, but I’ve helped carry poles or when the wind hits, I’ve tried to help guy out so it wouldn’t blow over and done whatever I could.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Growing up, did you always think that you wanted to be involved with the circus?*

**Byrd**

I guess I always did. I knew that I was going to complete my education, and I graduated from OU [University of Oklahoma]. But I guess I never made a conscious decision of, “This is going to be my path in life.” I met Geary at OU. He was an engineering major. He had never been to a

circus before he met me. We got married a year after we graduated. He went to Vietnam, and so I came back on the circus with my parents, to stay while he was gone. And I guess I just assumed I would go and do whatever Geary wanted to do. We were going to build roads and bridges or whatever, being a civil engineer. When he came back from Vietnam he was going to get his master's, and we went back to the campus. This was kind of a tumultuous time, the early '70s, and I don't know, we just didn't seem to fit in.

In the time he was gone, the governor had changed, and the programs to help the Vietnam vets had changed so we were just kind of in a flux. So my dad said, "Well, come on. Come with the circus. Just follow me around for six months, and you might like it." And I had also determined in that six months that I was gone, before he went to Vietnam, that I was sad. There was something missing, and I didn't realize it would be like that until I was married and was taken out of this element. Basically, except for when I was away at school, I had never been away from the circus. And I guess I didn't think I would miss it as much as I did. I found that I missed it tremendously.

So when he came back and my dad said that, we decided to just go. He got back in July, and it wasn't time to start school anyway, and so we would just at least take one semester for him to decide what he wanted to do. We got married in '70, and that was '71. He was gone, he left in July of '70 and came back in July of '71, and we've been here ever since. He said Vietnam was great training for the circus. (Laughs) He learned how to sleep anywhere, eat anything, and work under very adverse conditions. So he's been a great guy to do this, and he basically loves it now as much as I do. He's devoted all of his life to it. We'll be married forty-two years in January so he's as much of a pro at it as I am now.

**Nykolaiszyn** *After college and after you all decided you were going to settle in with the circus, were you more involved with business operations at this point?*

**Byrd** Yes. Well, actually, I had our first daughter, Traci, in '72, and then our second daughter [Kristin] came along in '75, and so I was kind of involved in raising them. (Laughs) I did help. I helped with the costuming, I helped with the performance direction, I would still fill in anywhere they needed me, to sell tickets or whatever. But I didn't really get into the office part of it until about fifteen years ago, where I was in the office on a daily basis. I was more involved with, like I said, the costuming and the performance and raising my girls.

**Finchum** *Can you talk a little bit more about the costuming?*

## Byrd

Oh, yes! Back when we were making it in our basement, we changed themes every year. We would come up with a new theme. And at that time, we probably had maybe sixty or seventy people performers in the circus, plus the animals you have to costume, also. And so it was quite a task. It was a full-time job. We would be in our basement eight, nine, ten, twelve hours a day, making the costumes. We went from the design to purchasing the materials to cutting out. It went all the way through the process in our basement. And sometimes it's harder to fit the animals than it is the people. It's harder to get them to stand still. But at that time, we were carrying with us eighteen or twenty elephants so we made each elephant a blanket. And they were very detailed. We had a Mexican theme, a South American theme. We had a Knights of the Round Table, we had a Roaring '20s, we had an Under the Sea. I mean, every year we would have a different theme. It was quite a time consuming and very expensive thing that we did.

And then, of course, on the road there were always repairs and making of things that got destroyed. The elephant might eat the corner off of one of the blankets or something, or it would get blown off and caught onto a tent stake and get torn. There were always repairs to be made. So it was a very all encompassing task, making the costumes, but that's the icing on the cake. If they went in there in their street clothes, it wouldn't be very pretty. So I think it's a very important part of the circus. And we carry the tradition on today. We are constantly making new costumes.

We don't have quite as many performers as we used to. We've condensed it down to a one-ring circus, and I often wonder what my dad would think of that, because like I said, he was a dreamer, and he always wanted the tent so big that you couldn't see from one end to the other. And he accomplished that, but with today's economic times and with the rules and regulations, government oversight and just the complicated world we live in today, we have downsized. But we have a wonderful product, and we get rave reviews everywhere we go. So I'm hoping that it would only be my father that would be critical, not the public.

I was kind of sad, one time I was sitting in the tent. And we had actually gone from a five-ring circus down to three so we hadn't even gone down to the one-ring yet. And I was sitting in there, kind of melancholy. It was the night before we were going to open, and the lights were very dim, and I was sitting in the seats. And in walked David Rawls' father, Harry Rawls, who I hope you were able to speak to before he passed away. And he walked in and said, "What's the matter, Barbara?" We were setting up over at Paris, and he had come over to check out the operation. And I said, "Oh, I was just feeling kind of sad, Harry. I was wondering what my father would think of cutting down to three rings."

And he said, “Well, I want to tell you one thing, Barbara.” He said, “Your father is probably mad at you, but,” he said, “your grandfather is so proud.” My grandfather never wanted to have that big colossus of a circus. He wanted to have the smaller, more intimate family experience-type circus. So it made me feel better that he thought my granddad would be okay with the idea.

I know that my father would be happy that the show is still continuing. He wouldn't care what form it was in, and when he says he would be mad at me, he really wouldn't be mad at me. He would just be so proud that we're forging on, that no matter what it takes, we're going to keep this operation going. And if it has to be one-ring, has to be thirty or forty performers, has to be three or five elephants instead of [thirty], that's okay because it's still continuing the tradition, keeping the circus going.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Backing up just a little bit, I think the two circuses that I associate with your family are Al G. Kelly Miller and Carson and Barnes.*

**Byrd** Yes, right.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Can you talk a little bit about Al G. Kelly Miller?*

**Byrd** Yes. When I talked about my childhood and of growing up and how wonderful it was, that was on Al G. Kelly and Miller Brothers. Miller is my maiden name. They used to be called Miller Brothers Circus, and as most people in Oklahoma know, there was a famous Miller's 101. So it was kind of a confusion there. We used to even get some of their mail. I don't know whether they got any of ours or not, but we used to. And as they went along, they thought they needed to differentiate the name a little more. So there was a famous traveling circus back in the, probably '20s, '30s, called Al G. Barnes Circus, and that kind of had a ring. They liked that. So they kind of pilfered the Al G., and they put the Kelly on because that was my uncle's first name.

So they called it Al G. Kelly and Miller Brothers Circus. That was the one they actually formed in 1937, and it was in business until the mid-'60s, late-'60s. And my father, he went through some downtime, because my uncle died at a very young age. He was only forty-six years old when he passed away. And then my grandfather died in 1969. I was married in '70. And I think my dad went through kind of a really hard time for him, because his mentor and his brother were gone, and he didn't really know if he was capable or able or even wanted to try to keep going. So he had started I don't know how many circuses in his lifetime, lots of them right down in Hugo. There was Famous Cole, and there was Tex Carson. There were several different shows that he had started, and he had started Carson and Barnes Circus with a gentleman

named Jack Moore and his family so it was in operation. It was founded in the '50s, and it was operating simultaneously with Al G. Kelly and Miller Brothers Circus. We didn't travel with it, but my father had financed it, and Mr. Moore was running and operating it with his family.

As Al G. Kelly and Miller Brothers kind of took a back seat, it actually went off the road for a while. He had it about twenty-five years. David Rawls was a young man that worked for us, and he came from a long history of circus families. And he's ambitious, and he was running our concession department. My husband and he are about the same age. They were friends and they often discussed that David didn't want to do this his whole life. He wanted to be a circus owner and manager, and so my husband put the bug in my dad's ear, that David would probably be leaving if we didn't do something with him, to hang on to him.

And so my father bought an old, defunct circus, and David put the elbow grease in it. My dad put some of the finances behind it, and they took it back out. And that would've been about thirty years ago. So have to do the math there—and David ran it successfully for twenty-five years before he decided to retire. And he wasn't out of it but for about six months, then John Ringling North [II] came along, who's a descendent of the famous Ringling family, and I think he wanted a hobby. And so he bought the circus. By this time, the name had been shortened down to, legally, to just Kelly Miller Circus. David thought the Al G. Kelly and Miller Brothers was a little wordy so he condensed it down to just the current title of Kelly Miller Circus.

And how we ended up on Carson and Barnes was, during this kind of downtime for my father, Mr. Moore developed cancer, and his wife asked us if we would come over and kind of help. So we went over, I worked in the office, we ran the concessions, and my father was just kind of there to support him. He did pass away and Ann [Angela] didn't want to continue so my father bought her 50 percent of the operation, and we were right back in the middle of circus business again. So I called Carson and Barnes Al G. Kelly Miller Brothers and everybody did for a long, long time until we finally got it into our heads that we were on another circus with another title. But my father built that circus from a very small operation into the largest traveling circus in the United States. And that's when we had the five rings, a lot of elephants, a lot of animals, a lot of people. At one time we had almost 250 people that were traveling and moving everyday to a different location. It was a huge undertaking.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*The logistics...*

**Byrd**

Oh, it was mindboggling. The armed services actually went and studied

Ringling Brothers when they were under tent to see how they did what they did, because Ringling Brothers, in its heyday under the tent, had two thousand employees, and they had five hundred horses. They traveled by train, but they moved this huge colossus thing in a very orderly and organized manner. And we get tickled, really, when we hear—I think the media in this day and age kind of use the circus in a negative light. And it really drives me crazy because they’ll—the O.J. trial or the whatever, “It’s a circus! It’s a circus!” And if they only knew how organized and orderly a circus is, they wouldn’t even think about using that in the terms that they’re using it today, because there’s nothing chaotic or disorderly or unorganized about the movement of a circus. It’s very coordinated, and it’s time-driven, and everyone knows their job. You come to see our circus set up, you won’t see any screaming or hollering. Everybody knows their job, they do their job.

People ask me, “How do you get them to move so fast and to do that job so well?” I said, “Well, they get a salary. They don’t get paid by the hour. When they’re finished, they’re off.” So they kind of keep moving along, but it’s not a negative word. Circus is a positive word, and it’s brought joy and entertainment to millions and millions of people all over the world for centuries. So it should be seen in a positive light, and it kind of ruffles me every time I hear the media use it in that manner.

**Nykolaiszyn** *You talked about your father being a big dreamer. And I think something else the circus industry associates your family with are elephants.*

**Byrd** Oh, absolutely.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Could you talk a little bit about that?*

**Byrd** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Did he just wake up one day and say, “I think we need a whole lot of elephants.”?*

**Byrd** Well, he loved elephants. And, like I say, when my parents moved to town, my mother lived in the truck with the elephant. The elephant came first, and it had a home before my mother had a home. And they just have always loved elephants, especially my father more so I’d say than my uncle and my grandfather. And so he wanted to have more elephants than anyone. I mean, that was his big dream. And at one time, he did have fifty elephants, and so he’s always been associated with elephants. All of his life he loved to work with them and train them.

When I was a baby, my mother tells stories about how they would go on the off-season and they would take their elephants. They made a *Tarzan*

movie in Hollywood one time, which is always hysterical because, I think, Tarzan was in Africa and these were Asian elephants, but no one paid any attention. And they would go and make like the big Shrine dates in the coliseums during the wintertime, and they performed with elephants since before I was born. My mother tells a story, like I said, she was a little farm girl from Kansas, never even seen an elephant. And so when they finally got their first elephant, my dad was so proud, and he brings this elephant in. So my mother's going to style the act for him, be the beauty in there with the big pondering elephant. And so my dad says, "Lay down." And he was kind of a jokester anyway, "Lay down." So she laid down. So he brings this elephant, and this elephant is going to step over her. The first thing she did was got up and ran, of course, but it did go into the act. And eventually, the elephant did step over her, and she did all the mounts and everything.

But they just always loved elephants. And when they passed away they actually left their estate directly to the elephants. They had already given property to the elephants, to the Endangered Ark Foundation, 120 acres. So we used their estate to erect the buildings that house the elephants and the exercise pens, and we have some left in a fund for perpetual care of the elephants. It was very important to them, that they felt they were a part of our family, and that they stay together, and that we care for them until they pass on. So that was an important part, and he also set up the breeding program and wanted there to be baby elephants around us. And he wanted there always to be elephants in the United States, because it is predicted—at one time and maybe still is—that if the birthrate didn't change, then by the year 2050 they would be extinct in the United States. We have the second largest gene pool of Asian elephants in the United States next to Ringling Brothers, and so we're a very vital part of trying to see that the Asian elephant doesn't disappear from the United States. We don't have much control over the rest of the world, but hopefully we can keep them coming here.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*And in the early days, they were named after...?*

**Byrd**

Oh, yes. They're still named after members of our family. That's a very important thing if you get an elephant named after you. Our latest baby, as you may have well known, was born in April. It was a little boy, and the town got the honor of having him named after Hugo. But before that, we had a little girl and she was named Val, after my mother-in-law, Valine. And we have a Traci, and we have a Kristin, and we have a Lisa, Libby was my grandmother. At one time, in the '70s, my father got twelve elephants at one time, and so seven of them were named after my mother's sisters and her. I actually have a picture of them, the elephants, when they were small, with each aunt that was their namesake. That's a treasure because they've all passed on now, and they got a big kick out



of it. Isa's had a couple of babies. Well, my real Aunt Isa never had children, and so she got a big thrill out of her elephant, Isa, being pregnant and having babies. As you look around my home, I have elephants everywhere. Elephants have always been a very important part of our lives.

**Finchum**

*How long has the oldest one been with the family?*

**Byrd**

My namesake was Barbara, and we lost her two summers ago. She was sixty-eight years old. Our oldest elephant now is probably Minnie. Minnie and Susie are almost the same age. I performed with Minnie in the ring when I was about twelve years old, and she was probably about five years old. I'm sixty-five now so she's getting on up there, but she's semi-retired. She only does just a little bit of traveling, not much at all, and she will be retired soon. But the elephants, they're kind of creatures of habit, and they've been doing this all their lives. They ride along with us, they've been moving and performing, and they know when it's time to get in the truck and go to the next town. And when they get to the next town, they put their trunks up in the air, and they kind of smell around and try to see, "Well, what's this new town going to offer?" And I think they're kind of like people. Sometimes people, when they retire, they think it's going to be wonderful, but it really isn't. So I think elephants are kind of like that. I think as long as they're healthy and they're not in any pain, they should keep performing, they keep their muscles toned, and that's what their life has been. And I'm not retired yet so Minnie will keep going for a little while. (Laughs)

**Finchum**

*So they live to be seventy-five-ish?*

**Byrd**

Well, they live to be in their mid-sixties, late-sixties. We have never had any that have reached seventy, but hopefully, we will someday.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*I kind of want to get into you as the owner/operator of Carson and Barnes, but I do want to step back and talk about when your father passed away. Did he pass away on the road?*

**Byrd**

Yes, my father passed away in McCook, Nebraska. It was about time for the circus to start, the afternoon performance, and he had a motor home—my mother had already passed away. My mother passed away eleven months before my father did, and they were almost married sixty-five years, I believe it was. As a child, you—maybe everyone doesn't—but I often wondered which of my parents would do better if one of them passed away. I think it would've been my mother because my father, like I said, only lasted eleven months. He was visiting the show after my mother had passed away. He came on, fell, and broke his hip, and so that was kind of the start of the bad stuff. It wasn't so much the hip; he

passed away from his heart. He had a heart attack, but he had a rough go with the hip.

He was a very proud man, and he used to drive himself to his physical therapy in Paris. He wouldn't let anybody else drive him so he'd put the walker in, and he'd drive over to do his physical therapy. And I think maybe he felt like he was going to be limited, and he kind of went downhill. He did pass away in McCook, Nebraska, and he passed away while his circus was touring. Actually, my youngest daughter, Kristin, drove his motor home over, and he was riding with her, and he had a heart attack so they had taken him to the hospital in McCook before I even got there.

So as soon as I got there, they started motioning and I could tell something was wrong. I didn't even park my trailer. I just jumped out, got in a car, and they took me down to the hospital. But he was doing better when I got there. They were going to release him, and so they told us to bring him back at nine o'clock in the morning. I have a little hard feelings for the hospital there, because he never actually saw a doctor. He saw a physician's assistant. He was an eighty-three-year-old man that had come in with an obvious heart attack. I said, if he'd been the mayor in the town, they'd probably air-flighted him to Lincoln. But he was just the circus guy coming through town so they sent him home and told him to come back at nine o'clock in the morning and they'd look at him. Well, he died at four o'clock that afternoon. And he died in his motor home on the circus grounds, which was probably preferable to him, anyway.

When we picked him up at the hospital and we were talking, asking him how he felt, of course, and my husband and I and our two daughters were in the car with him, and we were driving back to the fairgrounds where the circus was set up. He said that—and I had never heard this story—he said that this was the first town he had ever seen a circus in and that when he was a little boy, his father and mother had brought he and his brother Kelly from the Smith Center area of Kansas up to McCook, Nebraska, to see a circus. It was called the John Robinson Circus, and I later had someone look it up, and it would've been in 1924. They had records of the circus being in there. So he told us about his experience of coming and seeing his first circus. We got back to the fairgrounds and, of course, like I said, it was just about time for the band to strike up for the four-thirty show, and he died at his motor home. But it was really—it was almost like it was full-circle. And the weight that that story took off of my shoulders, I can't even describe to you how it felt. If I had never heard that story, I think I would've been completely devastated. There was something about that story that he had come full-circle from that little boy seeing his first circus to this famous circus

owner seeing his last circus. It was a very moving experience for me and for my family.

He had basically planned his own funeral. He had already purchased his own coffin. It was a shiny red coffin with brassy gold trim. And he always said, "You can get a lot of publicity out of this, for the circus." So we did. We got a lot of publicity off of it. But he didn't want to be buried while his circus was touring. He wanted to be buried after his circus came home. So it was also strange because we were in McCook, Nebraska, but we were heading to Colorado. The only people in the world besides the people here in Hugo that I know that own a funeral home happened to be in Denver, Colorado. They're relatives of relatives so we called them and they said, "We'll come get him." So they picked him up in McCook. We had a couple of moves in between, and we ended up in a Littleton, Colorado over the weekend. They had already gotten my father. We went down that morning before we left McCook. My husband and our two daughters, and we picked out a very plain, wooden casket for him to be transported in because we knew he had this shiny one back home. And they came and picked him up, they took him to Littleton, to Denver, and they prepared him for a funeral.

We had two shows in Littleton, but we had a service in the tent between shows. It was a wonderful service. We gave our show, we had full capacity people, which my father would've loved, we ran them out, and we all came in, and he was brought into the tent by a young male elephant pulled in on a wagon, and he was placed on elephant tubs, which are the big tubs that the elephants perform on in the ring. His casket was placed there, we had some flowers, we had music over the sound system. At that time, we actually had some Catholic nuns that traveled with us. We're not Catholic, but the majority of our employees were so we had some Catholic nuns that have done this for forty or fifty years, traveled with circuses. And they happened to be traveling with us at that time so they helped greatly with the service. Our minister from Hugo flew in and some friends flew in from all over, and we actually had a service, right there, in between the shows on the circus, just like I think he would've enjoyed.

But he didn't, like I said, want to be buried while his circus was on tour so our friends in Denver took him back to their mortuary, and they put him on cold storage until the circus tour was over in November. Then when we came home, we had the one that got us all the publicity. (Laughs) The one in Littleton, Colorado was very quiet and private, but the one that we had in Hugo was covered around the world. I received clippings from around the world from newspapers, and it was covered quite heavily here in Oklahoma. It was on the front page of the *Tulsa World*, the *Daily Oklahoman*, of course, our paper here in town and the

Paris paper. And it was a glorious day in the fall, and I think everything went just like he would've planned it. David Rawls and Trey Key actually helped us quite a lot, because it took place just two days or three days after we came home, and so I wouldn't have had time to coordinate everything.

They set the Kelly Miller tent up out at the fairgrounds, we put the seats in it, we set the rings up, the lighting. Again, he was placed on the elephant tubs in the center ring, and circus owners from all over the United States flew in. They were his pallbearers. All the townspeople came out, and it was really a celebration of his life and of his love of the circus. Very moving, many people—we had representatives from the community that spoke. We had representatives from the circus world that spoke. My daughter composed a poem. Our minister, again, conducted the services. And from the fairgrounds, we had a parade. We paraded to the cemetery. We even have a video. Someone produced a video of it, and they closed the schools. The businesses closed down, and there were hundreds and hundreds of people that stood on the sidewalk for the procession to the cemetery, and we made it a circus parade.

We had camels, elephants, and horses. Mr. Rawls and Mr. Key had arranged to have a circus band there, and they brought circus wagons in from historical museums from Peru, Indiana and different places. We had a circus band up on top of the parade wagon. He was in a horse-drawn hearse and—my father was—and we had the elephants decked out in their best blankets, and the lead elephant actually carried the flowers that were placed on his coffin. They carried it to the cemetery. And when we got there the band played. Of course, he served in World War II, he served in Europe and so he had the military burial also, but it was quite an affair. As we went along the city streets, people held up signs thanking him for all the fun memories of the circus and the good times. It was quite moving.

**Nykolaiszyn** *The way he would've wanted it.*

**Byrd** Yes, exactly the way he would've wanted it. He got a lot of publicity, and even in his death, he brought a lot of smiles to—there were clowns in the parade, and so it was a great day.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What do you think your mother would've thought?*

**Byrd** Oh, Bette Midler's song, "The Wind Beneath Your Wings," well, she was that to him. She was the rock in the family, and she always took second place behind him, but she was really holding him up. She was a wonderful lady and one of the strongest people I ever knew or ever will

know.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, at this point, I guess there was no doubt in your mind that the circus was going to continue.*

**Byrd** Well, pretty much so. He kind of said it had to, so—and everyone usually listened to him. But he also gave other sage advice. He said, “It can break you so don’t let it break you,” and so that’s one reason we’ve tried to cut down is because we want to keep it going, but it’s very, very costly in this day and age to keep it going. That’s one reason why we’ve made it smaller, is to try to keep it going. But he would be happy. He would be happy with our attempt, and he never got to know his great-grandchildren, but he helped raise his granddaughters, and he would be very proud of them today, and of me and my husband.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, here in Hugo at the Mount Olivet Cemetery, we have Showmen’s Rest. Can you talk a little bit about how all of that got started?*

**Byrd** Sure. We had a gentleman that worked for us, and he was just a drifter that came on as a teenager and ended up spending his whole life with us. His name was John Carroll, and he worked with the animals. And especially back in the old days, some of the guys that would come along, they were drifters and didn’t really have family connections, and so the circus kind of ended up being their family and their home, and they spent their lives here. So John Carroll was one of those characters. He had lost his eye in an accident, and he received like an insurance settlement. I think it was seventeen thousand dollars or something, and he didn’t have a family. About five or six years later, he passed away. And unbeknownst to my father, he had left this insurance settlement to my father. My dad didn’t know what to do with it, and about that same time my uncle passed away, and that was in 1960.

So he got the idea of making this place where circus people would be buried, because a lot of times circus people, like I say, don’t have roots, and they would be buried in Timbuktu. Nobody would ever know who they were or know this rich history that they had or anything about them. So he thought it would be cool to have this area where circus people could be buried and that there would always be somebody that would come and visit that would be able to tell stories about that person or have a connection. It was just going to be a place where they wouldn’t be forgotten. So when my uncle died, he took this John Carroll money, and he purchased this area at Mount Olivet. He named it Showmen’s Rest. My uncle was the first person buried there.

My father buried John Carroll there. He has one of the biggest headstones out there. I don’t know if you’ve been there or not, but his is

quite large. And then my father —what was left, he invested it so that it would always be earning money. And he had it fixed so that if somebody died in the circus business and wanted to be buried there, if they didn't have the means or the family, that John Carroll's fund would supply the plot and put a small marker. And if you'll notice while you're at the cemetery, there'll be some small markers that say, "Donated by the John Carroll fund." It's worked quite well. We're almost full. We only have just a few plots left, and we're trying to figure out how we can expand. But that was the basis of it, how it got started. It was an inheritance from one of our workers that didn't have family and left the money to my father, and my father had this vision of a place that would be like it is today. It's really become a landmark in Hugo.

I'm always amazed. I go out to change the flowers on my parents' and my grandfather and step-mother's graves, oh, four times a year or something, and I'm always amazed when I'm there. It never fails that at least one group will stop by, or maybe just a couple, or maybe a bus tour will stop by to be looking at this particular part of this community cemetery. So it has gotten quite a bit of notoriety around, at least in the state, and it was in *Southern Living* magazine one time, and it's gotten some national publicity. It's kind of a tourist place in Hugo. And you always feel kind of silly asking people, "Well, you've been to the library, you've been to the museum, you've been here, you've been there. Have you been to the cemetery yet?" And they kind of give you a funny look. But it's a really neat place, and it kind of gives you a sense of well-being when you are there to know that these people will never be forgotten.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And a lot of people who are buried there have been so closely tied to the circuses in Hugo.*

**Byrd** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And not only just to Hugo.*

**Byrd** Oh, absolutely. There's our circus mechanic, and there's our trapeze star, and there's just all these different people there that have lived in Hugo and are known in the community. But there's also people buried there that just wanted to be where other circus people are buried, which it may sound corny, but that was their desire. So there are people there from California. There's a young man that was killed in a train accident with Ringling Brothers who never worked for our circuses in Hugo or never lived in Hugo, but he wanted to be buried there. And so there are a number of people there that really have requested to come from many different parts of the United States to be buried there.

**Finchum**            *You said you're uncle was the first to be buried there?*

**Byrd**                Yes.

**Finchum**            *Did your father design the stone?*

**Byrd**                Honestly, I don't know. My aunt was still living at that time, and I don't know whether my father—unfortunately, she's passed on and so is her daughter. Her grandson still lives here in Hugo, but I don't really know who designed it. It was put up by Griffin Monument Company, out of Ada, Oklahoma, and they have done a lot of the stones there, the wonderful wagon wheel and ones that are very unique. But I do know that they did take a picture of the archway in front [of this house]. And it was done stone by stone, an exact replica of what the archway is. It's still there. My aunt and uncle built this home, and it was built in the mid-'50s. And for this part of Oklahoma at that time, it was quite a place—and still is.

I can remember my aunt and uncle didn't live here very long, because my uncle passed away and my aunt just didn't want to continue living here. It's a large home and her daughter was at the University of Oklahoma at that time. She started at OSU. She was in the band at OSU, but she actually ended her studies in Oklahoma City, but she did attend OU so my aunt moved up to Midwest City to be closer to her and her grandson. So she wanted to sell the house and my father bought it from her. I moved in here when I was fourteen, and so I've lived here ever since. But it was quite a house and people used to just pull up and ring the doorbell and say, "We've heard about this house. Can we look at it?" and my father would just bring them in and show them around. We're talking the early-'60s, and it was very trusting at that time. You wouldn't necessarily do it now.

I remember him being very proud of it, and the fact that his brother had built it. My uncle did a lot of the woodworking in the shop in the back, making the cabinets and the windows and stuff. So I would hear my father giving his fifty-cent tour, and I'd be a teenager in my bedroom, throwing my clothes in the closet trying to get my room straightened up before the people walked in. (Laughter) Our home has been a very important part of our life, because we came back here every year. And every year we'd come back, we would always have—well, my grandfather's birthday party or a New Year's party or whatever, and we would invite the circus people from the community. It's always been kind of a gathering place. Many, many baby showers and different events have taken place here. And we still have the occasional person that wants to go through and see it, because it does have some very unique aspects.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, I think your family is also known for innovations in the circus through the years.*

**Byrd** Absolutely.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Could you talk a little bit about some of them?*

**Byrd** Well, my family started many businesses here in Hugo. They started a printing company, and so we would do our own posters and printing of our items. We had that for a while. They started a welding shop with Wayne Sanguin. My uncle was a very creative guy, and he was a lot of the force behind some of the mechanical innovations that took place on the circus. Actually, they invented and held patents on several different circus paraphernalia. One was called a tent spool, and they named it a spool because it basically is like a giant spool of thread, but instead of winding thread, it wound the big top. So at night when the boys would take the tent down, instead of having to physically hoist it up onto a semi or a flatbed, they would unlace it in the middle, and they would fold it, fold it, fold it, until it was less than eight feet wide. They would hook it onto this spool, and as the truck backed up, this spool would actually turn and pull this canvas up on it. It was divided into two parts to distribute the weight. And also, the tents were so large it couldn't go on one, it would be top-heavy. They actually perfected that here and patented it.

They also were very innovative in developing—you call it a pile driver—we call it a stake driver. The posts or rod irons that are in the ground, we call them stakes, S-T-A-K-E-S, and they had different techniques to drive these. Of course, in the old days, it was arm power. It was five or six guys standing around, slinging these sledge hammers to put these down, but as the tents got larger and there were more stakes to be put in the ground on a daily basis, I think most people think, “Well, the circus sets up and you set there for...” No. We move everyday to a different town so the stakes had to be driven in the morning and pulled up at night. So they developed different systems to drive these stakes mounted on either tractors or the back of trucks, and it eased up the physical labor a lot.

And as labor got more expensive—back during the '30s and '40s you could pay somebody a dollar a day and give them a place to sleep and food, and they were happy. But as times progressed and minimum wage and demands increased, we could afford fewer workers. So now, all the stakes—I say all the stakes. That's not true. We still drive some stakes the old fashioned way. Number one, the public loves to watch it, five or six guys in coordination, driving these stakes. I still like to watch it, but



also, for the smaller tents and for areas where you can't maneuver the tractor or the truck we still send the guys out to drive the stakes. But it's much faster and requires a lot less help so they developed the stake driver.

We were the first circus in America to carry a giraffe in a truck, and my father designed a semi truck that was especially designed for the giraffe. We make all our own like, elephant trucks. You don't just go out to your local trailer store and buy an elephant semi. They all have to be specially reinforced and designed, air openings in the floor and everything, to haul the elephants. They've done a lot of innovative things as far as seats, seat wagons. In the old days, the seats were put—they were called stringers and boards. The stringer was the part that went up and then they would have an A-frame thing that held them up, and then the boards would fit on them, and they'd tie them on with binding twine. It was very time consuming to erect these. And honestly, they weren't quite as safe, probably, as they should've been because some of the ground's unlevel, or if there's mud they would have to put boards under them to try to level them up.

And so my father was very involved in developing the modern seat wagons that actually fold out. We call one of ours—newer ones—we call it a transformer because the kids have the Transformer toys, and so it kind of transforms into a vehicle going down the road that hauls equipment, poles, ring curbs, different lighting and things. And when it gets there, that all gets unloaded and it transforms into this seating grandstand. So they were very inventive in that matter. My father was way ahead of his time in many things. He was the first one to use airplanes as advertising. He had a small single-engine plane that traveled in front of the circus. And back in those days, you could do about whatever you wanted to in the air so the pilot would fly over the town with the loud speaker and circus music and tell about the circus coming to town. There's just many, many examples like that of things that they did that were innovative and kind of ahead of their time.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*That kind of leads us into how the circus has changed from yesterday to today. Maybe we could hit on a couple of those things. I guess today, music is probably canned?*

**Byrd**

It is, I'm sorry to say. That's one of the true regrets I have, because I loved the circus band. They used to hit some awful notes and be out of tune, but to me, that was all a part of it. I love the circus band. When we first got started—I wasn't around, but I have memories, even when I came, that usually we had an organ and a trumpet and a drum. That was all we could afford. But in the very beginning, my aunt was a talented musician. My mother leaned more towards performing in the circus, but

my aunt usually supplied the music, and so she always played the organ. And we'd usually have a drummer that was keeping beat over there. He might not be a real drummer, but somebody could hold some sticks and kind of stay with the music, and so my aunt always supplied the music.

I think music is very important to a circus. And proof of that, I think, would be the modern example of the Cirque du Soleil because they have—don't get me wrong, they have wonderful artists—but the majority of their appeal is their smoke and mirrors and their music, the illusion. Some of the acts came straight from Carson and Barnes or straight from other circuses so it's how it's presented. I think music and the staging is very important. And I love those old-timey bands. We, at one time, had an eleven-piece band, and we would have the organ, the drums, a couple of trombones, trumpets, a bass, and it was really an oom-pah-pah-type thing. And, like you imagine, the ta-da at the end of the act and everything. We were one of the last ones to go to it [taped music]. We held on until the very end. But, again, it's hard to find musicians that want to travel on our schedule.

We get tickled when we hear the rock people and the country people say, "Oh, we're doing fifteen spots over three months," or whatever. They're just all this talk—we show in a different town every day, two to three shows a day for eight and a half months. So I don't accept their belly-aching when they are traveling in these multi-million dollar buses, and they arrive and it's all set up. But it's hard to get musicians that want to live under those circumstances. Also, the union had an effect on bands, circus bands. We never really had that direct problem but other circuses did. Ringling Brothers, I know did, that if the performance ran over the allotted time, they weren't allowed to keep playing. Well, you never know how long a circus performance—if the lion or tiger doesn't want to go back into the chute, it may last five minutes longer or if, God forbid, somebody falls. There's a number of things that can happen. Circus isn't like a movie where it starts at an exact second and ends an exact second.

There were a lot of things that made circuses have to change to the canned music, but we try to have the very best can music we can. (Laughs) We have a gentleman in circus business, we're very lucky to be connected with a man, who composes the music for us. So therefore, he can take a modern piece, tweak it, and make it adaptable for the circus. We're lucky to have him around in these days, and a lot of circuses depend on him to write their music. Of course, some people pay and use the original music. I love music and, of course, I love music that's done by the wonderful singers and whatever, but I think there's something that isn't quite right about hearing Mariah Carey or someone sing in the circus. I think it really needs to be adapted to have that circus

feel so that's what we try and do.

**Nykolaiszyn** *How has the performers changed through the years?*

**Byrd** Well, I think of all the changes in the circus business, that's probably the least thing that has changed. Performing is—circus is an art, and I think a lot of times, especially in the United States—in Europe and South America, circus performers get a lot more respect and have a lot more admiration than they do in the United States. In some places they're treated like movie stars if they're at the top of their game. And it used to be that in Russia and China the very best athletes were chosen for the circus school. I think in different parts of the country maybe circus performers are viewed a little more different. But I tell you, I think that's turning around a little bit, because of these shows on television. If you'll notice—what's, *America Has Talent?* [*America's Got Talent*]

**Nykolaiszyn** *Yes.*

**Byrd** A circus act, I don't believe, hasn't won it yet, but if you watch that show and you watch the reaction to the circus acts, they get as much applause, or in some cases, more applause than the singers or the comedians or the dancers. So that's kind of neat for me to see, that a true circus act is getting that kind of appreciation. The people that do that show, or the people that watch that show, might not realize they're watching a pure circus act, but they are. Performers are usually multi-generational. Some performers do get into it. On that particular show, there was a girl who said she fell in love with the man on the flying trapeze, and so she decided she was going to learn this act, and she was marvelous. She had to have had some gymnastic background. But usually performers are raised in the circus and are multi-generational. It's a gift that is passed on from one generation to the other. I think of all the things that have changed and modernized in the circus world, probably, that aspect of it has least changed.

**Nykolaiszyn** *When you get ready to plan your next season, do you already know who you want?*

**Byrd** As a performer?

**Nykolaiszyn** *As a performer.*

**Byrd** Yes, well, we try to change our performance drastically every couple of years. A lot of the communities we go back to are repeated every couple of years so we want to have something new and fresh for the audience. And we may keep the same people, but we may ask them to learn a new routine or to change it in such a manner that it's not recognizable. Some

of our performers have been with us for many years, but they have evolved into different acts so that the public wouldn't realize it's the same person. But we do, I mean, we know now who'll be with us next year. But there are always unforeseen things. We had a young man fall last year, and he was injured quite severely. He's recovering and will recover, but it's possible that he won't be ready for the start of the season.

It's kind of, I guess, like a football team. You have injuries or pregnancies or marriage breakups. It's living life on the road in the center ring, but there's still all the problems of living life that go along with it. You're not immune to any of the problems that you would have in Stillwater or wherever you live. I mean, you still have illnesses and problems, but you know what I'm trying to say. Life goes on, even underneath a tent so we have to adapt for those circumstances. We had an accident this year. The third day out a high-wire troupe was rear-ended by a truck through no fault of their own. Completely demolished their living compartment and their rigging for their act so they had to hurry and scramble and go and try to get it. We were without them for a little while, but they eventually came back. You have to keep adapting to every day what comes up before you.

It's probably a little more complicated than the average person would imagine. It's not just a circus, it's many different types of businesses put together. It's a trucking business, it's an animal business, it's entertainment, it's concessions business. We feed our people. We have a truck that all it does is prepare meals so they get two full meals a day. Everyone on the circus that wants to go there and eat can go there and eat. Then they have coffee and rolls in the morning before they leave. Say we're in Hugo setting up, and we're going to Paris, we would get up at five-thirty, they would have their coffee and rolls, they would get their little route slip that tells them "Highway 271," and whatever, and they would go to the next town. At eleven-thirty they would have lunch, but it would be in the next town. And that cookhouse will go and prepare a meal and be ready to serve it by eleven-thirty. So they'll take a break from whatever they're doing, and they'll have the night meal and that's usually the larger meal.

A lot of the performers won't eat that meal, because it's in the middle of the performance. So they'll get take-home trays, take them home, and then after the show they'll eat the meal. So it's many different—it's a costuming company. It's so many things put together. We have someone that handles the logbooks, and we have to do DOT [Department of Transportation] and IFTA [International Fuel Tax Association]. You have to get those—every day we purchased two thousand dollars, last year, worth of fuel to pump into our generators and our trucks. All that

has to be taken care of on a daily basis. We have a mechanical crew that travels along with us. They follow up with the wrecker and the tires and everything. We don't call a local guy to come and fix our tire. We fix our tire ourselves and move on to the next town. So it's quite an amazing operation, it really is. It's a big umbrella or big, big top. Everyone that travels with the circus is not wearing that spangled costume in the center ring, but they're just as important as that performer in that center ring. Their job is just as valuable.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*How do you keep everything straight?*

**Byrd**

Oh! (Laughs) Sometimes we don't, but it's, like I said, if you come and see us set up, you won't hear anyone hollering instructions or screaming. It's very departmentalized. There is a head mechanic, there is a head electrician. We have one man that all he does is secure water all day. We have a truck with a huge tank on it, our local host, the rotary or the chamber or whoever, arranges for us to have a water source. He goes and fills his tank, he delivers water to the animals first, the elephants, the ponies. Everything gets watered. He goes back, he gets another load, he comes and brings it for the cookhouse, the concession department. He goes and fills it, then he fills the sleepers with water. So that's his job all day, is to procure water so nobody has to tell him.

We have a man called a twenty-four hour man that goes ahead of us and meets with the local hosts, looks over the grounds, sees where the tent's going to be, finds out where the water is. So he meets that man when he gets to the next lot at seven or eight in the morning. He leads him to the water source so he knows where to get his water, and that's his job all day. The cooks know that they have to prepare these meals. We have one person that goes and buys local produce and fresh meat and everything every day. That twenty-four hour man, a day ahead, schedules hay to be delivered for the animals. It's very organized. It's very departmentalized. When the tent is going up, there's a big top crew, there's an electrical crew, there's—we call them butchers. They're vendors that sell the popcorn and stuff during the performance, but they help put the tent up too so they have their job, they have their seats to erect. It's very, very organized.

And not that things don't go wrong, they do, but we have good bosses, we have good people, and so that part of it usually—it's usually outside forces that throw wrenches into our gears. It's usually mother nature or the local health inspector decides that he wants something different than the last one hundred towns we've been in. Everybody has their own little pet-thing. Maybe this day the electrical inspector thinks we need to bury all the cables instead of just laying a rubber matting over the cables. So you never know what to expect every day, but mostly it's not within, but

it's the outside sources that usually slow us down. (Laughs)

**Finchum** *When the show's going on, where are you?*

**Byrd** It depends. Hopefully, I'm in the office counting money. (Laughter) But not always. I still consider myself a jack-of-all-trades. I will sell tickets, I'll take tickets. I'll direct the people. My husband will be out there parking cars, if needed. If I see that they need me in the tent, I'll go in there and help sit people. If the line at the concession stand's too long, I'll jump in and make snow cones. My father watched every performance. He was very famous because he had his folding chair, he would carry it in, he would sit by the back door, and he would watch every performance. I don't do that for several reasons. One, I'm very critical, and I'm very picky.

If I watch it too many times, I start being too critical, because I don't see it as the audience sees it. I see it as somebody that's sitting there seeing it every day and maybe critiquing something that really doesn't make any difference, if that makes any sense. A lot of people wonder why I don't sit there every day, but honestly, that's the main reason. I think I get too critical. And if this person's shoes are a different color than this person's shoes in the same act—or that the public wouldn't—I want it to be good, and I want the acts to be completed properly, and I want the wardrobe to look nice, and I want all of that. And it is, but I just feel that if I watch it every day, every show, that I might become overcritical so I don't watch it. I like to walk in and it to be fresh, and I really enjoy watching it, if that makes any sense. (Laughs)

**Finchum** *So you may watch the first one of the season and the last one of the season?*

**Byrd** Well, I watch a few more than that. And I kind of watch at the end of the seats sometimes, when they don't even know I'm in there, because I want to be sure that what I see when I'm sitting in the front row is not something different than the average person that comes to see it would see if I'm not sitting in there. So I kind of surprise them and drift in and out and don't get in too much of a routine. But I also do a lot of the paperwork. Everybody in our family is responsible for different aspects of it, and I have the unpleasant task of inputting the bills. (Laughs) But that gives me a chance to see who's spending what and whether this guy stopped at a gas station that the gas was \$3.98 a gallon and the other guy stopped where it was \$3.68 a gallon and I'll ask that guy, "Why didn't you look for the \$3.68 a gallon gas?" It gives you a chance to see how the money is being spent. So that's my job.

Traci, our oldest daughter, is in charge of all the immigration papers.

She does all the immigration for the people that come from a variety of countries all over the world to work with us. She and her husband also are in charge of the concessions, and then her husband oversees and designs the lighting and is kind of responsible for hiring all the acts. He comes from a circus family, and he has a lot of contacts, and so he does that. Our other daughter [Kristin] is in charge of all the animal permits, which is very complicated. Sometimes each city, each state, has to have different documentation for the animals. And she also meets with our local host every day, the Kiwanis or the chamber, and she settles up ticket sales and that part of it. Our other son-in-law is more in charge of erecting the big top, and he likes animals. He doesn't really work with the animals, but he observes and checks on them. So they all have their own expertise and their own jobs, that way we try not to step on anybody's toes. (Laughs) So it takes everyone.

There are people that are single owners of circuses that don't have family working with them. And, to me, it would not be a fun thing. I really enjoy our family being together and working towards one goal. My grandchildren have jobs. My granddaughter rides a little pony in the parade like I used to do when I was five. And my one grandson is our office gofer, he gets change and tickets and changes seats and runs for us. And then my other grandson—kind of interested in performing, but this year he worked in the concessions. He worked one of the windows, waited on the public. They're ten years old, will be eleven soon, and so they learn at a young age to work and have responsibilities.

I'm not bragging because anything is possible, but we don't have a drug problem or anything like that on our show because they're busy, they're working, they're occupied. We have a school that travels along with us, and we have a teacher that is usually a retired teacher and has never been on a circus, but they like to travel. The one we had last year was wonderful. We had fifteen students in our school, and they go to school every day. He had four different classes, and they go Monday through Friday, all the way through the summer. And then we take them to state parks and national parks and museums and things along the way so they get exposed to all kinds of things.

We have a young lady that travels with us that was a roommate of my daughter's at TCU, and she graduated and she kind of liked the circus so we said, "Come travel with us, just for a summer." She'd never traveled much, and so she did. And that was seven years ago, I think, and she is our office manager, but she really works with the children. She works with them on the weekends. They have little productions they do. They had a beautiful ceremony on 9-11. We have one young lady that's about fifteen, she has a beautiful singing voice, and she sang "God Bless America," and a couple of songs. And they recited poetry, and it was

wonderful. All the circus people attended. We have Easter egg hunts. We have all kinds of things for kids during the year. We have a weenie roast at the Fourth of July. It's great, it really is.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Just a big family.*

**Byrd** Yes, it's kind of like, I guess, you imagine in the old days in the cities where there are blocks, have block parties, and the blocks kind of have personalities. Well, it's a true melting pot because we have people from all over the world, and we seem to live together and function well, even though sometimes the language is a problem, because there might be five or six different languages spoken on the circus grounds. And the food tastes aren't always the same, but at least once a year, sometimes more, we have potluck where everyone will bring different foods from their countries, and we all share in the big top and have potluck dinners. So that's something fun we do, too. But it's extremely hard work, and you have to love the circus and love what you do or you couldn't do it. It takes too much out of you physically, emotionally, to do this day after day if you really didn't love what you are doing. And that goes down to the working man that's driving that stake in the ground or the guy on the flying trapeze that's completing the triple. They really have to like what they're doing.

**Finchum** *Do you have a favorite part, yourself?*

**Byrd** As far as the performance?

**Finchum** *Yes.*

**Byrd** The elephants, yes, yes. There are several different acts that I really enjoy, and we have a wonderful flyer, and he's really a joy to watch. He's really good. We have a young man that has been here. He's eighteen now. He came when he was fifteen, fourteen or fifteen, and he's a contortionist. More than watching him, I love the reaction of the audience when he does his act. I love to see the young performers that really have practiced. I've seen them practice in between shows and before and after, and then when they get to debut that act in the ring, I really enjoy watching them. But I guess I've inherited that true love for the elephants. They're the most magnificent animals on earth, and I just really like being around them, seeing them.

**Finchum** *Do you have a favorite venue or town?*

**Byrd** As far as the...?

**Finchum** *Stops, what's your favorite town?*



**Byrd**

Oh, stops. Yes, historically there've been some that we've developed over the years that we really look forward to going back to, one of them is Sheboygan, Wisconsin. We always play right on the lake, and Sheboygan has a circus history. My mother and father, the first circus my mother ever worked for was called Seils-Sterling Circus, and it was a family out of Sheboygan, Wisconsin that had that, the Lindemann family. A lot of them still live there and are retired, and so they always come and see us, and we have brats, and we have a polka band. I guess my favorite venues maybe don't have anything to do with the circus, but rather the location and the camaraderie of different places around the country where we set up, Jacksonville, Illinois is one.

A lot of it depends on the people that are in the community, rather, I guess, than the location. Sometimes we're down around Houston, we'll set up on the Gulf and here my RV is parked with a perfect view of the Gulf, and I think, "Wow! It'd cost me several million dollars to have a condo here," and so those venues are always nice. But I like to set up in Kansas on the farmland. It all depends on the response of the community and whether you feel like you're wanted and appreciated. If people come out in the morning and watch the tent go up or maybe they'll bring school buses of children out to see the animals and see the activities, that's what makes you—I know it sounds really corny, but that is what makes you feel like what you're doing is worthwhile. When you feel like you're coming into a community that wants you to be there, that appreciates you, and you bring joy and fun into their lives, that maybe they wouldn't have if you hadn't have brought the circus to town that day. So I think wherever that happens, that's my favorite venue.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*How do you decide your route every year?*

**Byrd**

Well, we cover a lot of the United States. Maine and New Hampshire and Vermont, besides Alaska and Hawaii, I think, are the only three states that we haven't ever set up in. So we try to vary it. We went west last year. This year we'll probably stay in the midwest, which is my favorite. Then we might go east. We vary it from year to year because we go to smaller communities. I mean, we play Chicago, we play Fort Worth, we play Dallas, but I probably prefer being in Shawnee or Okmulgee or Elk City, rather than Oklahoma City or Tulsa, just because we like to be the big fish in the pond. Those cities are inundated with entertainment. They can pick to do something every night of the week if they wanted. But if we pull into Chickasha, it might be a big deal. So Chickasha we wouldn't go back to every year. We might give it a year to rest. Tulsa, we might go back to every year. So we will vary the route to let it rest and hope that another circus doesn't come in in the year we're letting it rest to go back to, just so that it'll be fresh, and they won't say,

“Well, we just went to a circus last year,” which it might’ve been two or three years ago. So we try to let them rest in between, the smaller towns.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*And how big of a lot do you need to set up in?*

**Byrd**

Well, it’s changed during the years. It used to be a lot bigger than it is, and I’m amazed now, at some of the places my son-in-laws can get this set up. We’ll pull into a grounds and I’ll look and I’ll say, “There’s no way that we’re going to get this on.” But it was funny, we set up on a mall this year and they had trees on it. We actually had a tree sticking right up through the tent. They had to lay it out where it laced around this tree for us to be able to set up on. So it has gotten smaller, but we need at least somewhere around four hundred by four hundred feet, not counting parking. We set up in so many different types of venues. We’ve been on soccer fields, we were on a golf course—which I don’t recommend that because it might rain—we’ve been in Farmer John’s pasture, where you’re stepping over the cow patties, we’ve been on deserts, we show on military bases, we’ve been at universities, parks, you name it. We’ve set up malls, strip malls. We’ve been on just about every kind of land you can imagine. Some of them not suited for circus, but somehow we made it work.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*And you also play indoors some?*

**Byrd**

Some. It’s not our forte. Our favorite saying is, ‘If you don’t have a tent and you don’t have an elephant, you don’t have a circus.’ But we do break away from our traditional love every once in a while and set up in a building. We set up in Tulsa every year at the fairgrounds. American Airlines bring us in as a Christmas party for their employees. And we also do a Fort Worth ten-day stand in Will Rogers Coliseum for the Shriners. And we did a thing in Guthrie, out at Gaylord’s Horse Pavilion. So every once in a while we will, but it’s not our preference and it’s not our love.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Well, the circus business, it’s hard work, and it’s definitely changed through the years.*

**Byrd**

Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*What are some of your current challenges as an owner?*

**Byrd**

Well, getting people to want to spend their scarce dollar for entertainment. That’s the largest challenge that we have to overcome, currently, is the economy. I think we’re kind of like the canary in the mine. I think it kind of hits us, and we see it coming, maybe, before the average business. People still have to eat, they still have to wear clothes,

they still have to do whatever, buy food, but they don't have to go to the circus. So this problem in our economy has really hit us. That's our big challenge is to get people excited enough before we get to town to think that this is something they want to spend their hard-earned money on. Once we get them there, they love it and we have a wonderful response. We've got a great product, and we're very proud of it. Sometimes, just if I'm down, just to make myself feel better, I'll go stand at the gate as the show's over and take in the compliments of, "Thank you for coming to town," and, "It was a great show," and, "Come back." It makes you feel good. But you've got to get them there, and right now that's our most difficult challenge.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*How has government regulations impacted the business?*

**Byrd**

Oh, it's impacted it tremendously. It's because, like I said earlier, it's such a business of varied businesses. It's not just that if you are a rancher you have to deal with the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] or whatever. Or if you're a restaurant you have to deal with the health inspector. We deal with all those entities. Right now, immigration is very difficult. We can bring people in as performers, which is different than bringing in laborers, but we also bring in H-2B laborers. And believe me, everyone that works for us is legal and they have Visas, because we go everywhere in the United States. We're upright and above board, and we don't hire any illegals. But it gets more difficult each year to bring those workers in, because of the climate in the United States now where people think that all these people are coming in and taking our jobs. If we were honest, they're doing jobs that nobody else would want to do, and they are a caliber of people as a whole, I don't want to judge people as groups—but as a whole, the caliber of people that we can hire to do this job from foreign countries are a higher caliber person that we could hire from the United States to do the same job.

So any barriers that are put up for us bringing people up legally because of the reaction to the ones that are coming illegally, that makes it harder on us. Just every community is having financial problems now, so therefore, every community is trying to raise money rather than taxing their constituents. So all these new permits have blossomed over the last few years. A permit for everything you can imagine, we have to have. Where it used to be twenty-five or fifty dollars for a business license, now it's five hundred dollars for a business license. So it's kind of like a domino effect. The economy effects the local communities, which put on more rules and regulations, which effect the businesses. And, basically, we're a business, and so anything that comes along down the pike like that effects us. I mean, it's just things like that that have changed over the last years.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Where do you see the future of the circus, in general, going? Do you think we'll always have a circus?*

**Byrd**

Well, I've been asked that before, and I believe there will be. It may not be in the same form as it is today. When my parents started, I'm so grateful that my father lived in the time he did because for him to be a real circus guy, a real showman in that genre, he lived at the perfect time. When they came to town, they didn't have TV, they had limited radio, no internet of course, or anything like that. This was the entertainment coming to town. They would let school out. I mean, kids would come from all over. I have eight-millimeter movies of the crowds coming. They had their white gloves on, the gentlemen had their hats, their white coats, and their ties. I mean, this was an event. They would sometimes bring picnic lunches and spread their blankets out, and they would be there all day. And that's changed.

We are lucky to get them there. Hopefully we can get them to come in the morning, like I talked about, but that doesn't happen every day. And hopefully, we can get them to come and spend a couple of hours with us before the show. But it used to be an event so my father lived in the best possible time to be a circus owner and a showman. I think the challenge nowadays is to get the kids away from the computers and all that and to get them to the circus. Because once we get them there, they have a great time. They enjoy it. And even teenagers, who really think it's beyond them, if we can get them there, they have fun.

We had a friend of ours that was a retired superintendant of schools, and he traveled with us for, oh, seven or eight years and did marketing and publicity. He also traveled on the show with us. And we set up in this town just this fall where his godchild was going to the university. She was majoring in journalism so she took that opportunity to come out and do a little story on the circus and talk to me. So I invited her back and I said, "Get some of your friends. Bring them back tonight. We'll treat you." I didn't think she would. She showed up at the night show, and she had five or six of her college friends that she had just met, because the school had just started, and she's a freshman. But she talked them into coming to the circus and they rode the elephant, they had their face painted, they saw the show. I got thank you letters like you wouldn't believe. They just went on and on, what a wonderful time they had. And I bet if I had told them or talked to them the day before the circus came to town, they would've had no interest at all of going to the circus. But because she came and had a connection and talked them into coming, and it was free for college kids because I treated them, they had a wonderful time. So those are the challenges that we face and making the circus relevant in today's society.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Where do you see the future of Carson and Barnes going?*

**Byrd** We're holding on. We're holding on. And my children love it. I can't plan my grandchildren's lives, and some of them may end up in the circus, and if that's what they want—but we would never push them towards it. All of my grandchildren will go to college, whether they want to or not, and then they can make that choice of whether they want to continue or whether they want to go in a different field. And I can't predict what that will be, they're only ten, seven, five, and one week old. I have five, four boys and a girl. But if that's what they want to do, then hopefully Carson and Barnes will still be there for them to want to continue on with. And my husband and I and our daughters and our son-in-laws are doing the very best we can to see that that happens, but it's very challenging, very challenging.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, you can call any place home, yet here you are in Hugo, Oklahoma.*

**Byrd** Yes, Hugo, Oklahoma. (Laughs)

**Nykolaiszyn** *You've seen all parts of the US, why do you decide to continue to call Hugo your home?*

**Byrd** Well, this is our home. I mean, this is where we feel comfortable. We love Oklahoma. We feel we're good ambassadors for the state of Oklahoma and for Choctaw County and Hugo, because in every performance, in every town we're in, our elephants are introduced as being either from the Endangered Ark Foundation or the Carson Ranch in Hugo, Oklahoma. So everywhere we go, people know we're from Oklahoma, and we're proud to be from here. And we feel welcome here. We feel part of the community. David Rawls was our partner for many years. He had seven brothers and sisters. I've seen them grow from children into adults, and he is the only one that really has stayed in the business. He's been our mayor, he's been our city manager. I mean, circus is an integral part of Hugo.

And I'll have to be honest with you, one time, back in the—let's see. I was in high school. It was in the '60s. My father bought property on the Gulf Coast, in between Biloxi and Gulfport, and he had every intention of moving the winter quarters to there and trying to make it a year around business, because it's very hard to travel. Expenses are so much that it's very difficult to come home with enough money to see everybody through the four, four and a half months. I mean, hay is now eighty dollars a round bale. A couple years ago we paid \$120 dollars a round bale for the hay, and with cold winter like last year, the elephant barns are heated by natural gas. We spent seventeen thousand dollars a

month on one barn. It's one hundred dollars a day just to open one of those shops just to keep it heated during the winter. And it was very appealing, the thought of going to the Gulf Coast and having a permanent park there that would continue to stay open during the summer while we were gone, and then we would be able to have tourists and people come in the winter times, and it would be continual revenue.

He did very seriously consider it, and he did take some stuff down there. We didn't physically go. We stayed in our home. I was in school and they didn't want to uproot me and take me to a different place, and so we had people down there. But it didn't pan out. I'm glad it didn't, but it didn't pan out, and I think half the property is probably washed off by hurricanes by now. But it was a good idea, and I could see why he thought of it, but we didn't move, and I'm glad. I unfortunately lost my purse, and why I was carrying this in my purse I have no idea, but back when telegrams were still a way to communicate long-distance, the city of Hugo actually sent us a telegram telling us how important we were to the community and that they really wished that we would not leave. That means a lot to you. So we're here, and we're glad we're here. Hugo's evolved just like the circus business has evolved, some for the better, some for the worse, but it's home.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*As we get ready to close out our interview, any wisdom or lessons that your parents passed down to you that just really resonate with you today?*

**Byrd**

Well, they were hard working people, and they loved what they did. And I think that that is a very important lesson for young people to learn, that there are things of value that you may not even realize that you're learning as you're growing up with your parents. I think they instilled in me the love of the circus and hard work and trying to take care of your employees and making it feel like a family. When you're the owner of a circus, you end up being their banker, their minister, their psychologist, their—you become everything to them. So it is like a big family. And I think they instilled that feeling in me as an adult or a child, and I hope I've continued to do that to the people that we've worked with today.

But they were just good people, and they tried to give people good value for their dollar, and they appreciated that people worked hard to earn that money to come to the circus. And they didn't want anybody leaving without having a good time and without feeling that they—we don't please everyone. You can't please everyone, but I'd say we give it the best try we can. And I see that in my girls, too. If a little kid trips and spills his snow cone, they go get his cone and they put another snow cone in it. They don't wait and let their momma buy another one. Or if the little kid's balloon bursts, then you go get them another balloon. As

far as the circus world, that's what they instilled in me and what they instilled in my children and I've tried to instill in my children, that what we do is—it's good, and it's worthwhile, and it's not just for the money. I mean, we do have to make money. It's how we make our living, but it's not about the money. It's about the tradition of the circus and putting on a quality show and giving people a good bang for their buck. I don't know if that's what you had in mind, but that's what came to my mind when you asked that question.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Well, do you have anything else you'd like to add that we may not have asked you about today?*

**Byrd**

Well, I have stories about my family and my upbringing. Everyone says, "You should write a book," and I don't know whether it'd have to be under fiction or fact because there are so many things that have happened to us and to them. Their stories seem to be more fascinating to me than mine do to me because mine seem normal, but they have stories. My father bought a ship one time, and he had a vision of going up the coast and performing in different towns and being in a ship. So my mother and I were there, and we bought a ship, and we had a little airplane. We flew up to Nova Scotia and waited for the ship to come from Florida. It kept breaking down. They finally got there, and we had our show. The ship catches on fire, and it sinks, and we have to get the animals off. It's just like a movie, and there's just so many stories like that.

When they moved to Mena, Arkansas, they didn't have anything. My mom and dad used to get twenty-five cents a week. That's what they got to spend. Everything went back to the circus so my mother would buy a candy bar, and my father would buy a cigar. And they built this house out of green lumber and they left, and when they came back it had all shriveled up, and so they had to pack dirt and rags into the—I mean, there's just stories. I could go on forever. When they'd been in show business fifty years, we bought my parents a beautiful, nice motor home, and so they stood up, and they were saying how grateful they were and everything. So my mother stood up and she says, "This is beautiful. Thank you all." She said, "When your father and I got married"—she was talking to me—"we didn't have a pot to pee in." And she said, "Here fifty years later, I've got one that holds thirty-five gallons." (Laughter) And that was her sense of humor. There's just so many stories we'd be here for days. So we can wrap it up with that, I guess. (Laughter)

**Nykolaiszyn**

*When we look back on circus history, your family, not only in Oklahoma, it's just something that will always be remembered.*

**Byrd**

I hope so. I hope so. I hope we've been an asset to the circus business. I hope we've had a positive influence on the circus world. And I believe we have. I'm very, very proud that we just completed our seventy-fifth tour, seventy-five years of doing this all over the United States. And that, actually, there's never been a family in the United States that has continuously owned a circus in the United States for that length of time, for seventy-five years. They've done it in Europe a lot, but here in the United States—I mean, Ringling Brothers has been in business longer than we have, but they've been owned by a variety of entities, Mattel Toy Company, Ringling Brothers, the Feld Family. I'm very proud of the fact that we've been doing this continually for seventy-five years.

**Nykolaiszyn**

*Well, we appreciate you talking with us and spending some time with us and giving us just a little glimpse into your life as a circus owner and the contributions your family has made. Thank you so much.*

**Byrd**

Well, you're quite welcome.

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