

Oral History Interview
with
John Frazier

Interview Conducted by
Tanya Finchum and Juliana Nykolaiszyn
September 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

Interview History

Interviewers: Tanya Finchum, Juliana Nykolaiszyn

Transcriber: Ashley Sarchet

Editors: Miranda Mackey, Tanya Finchum

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

Project Detail

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

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Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with John Frazier is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on September 19, 2011.

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About John Frazier...

John Frazier was born in Corpus Christi in 1932 when his father was moving the family around earning a living. For a time John’s father, using the stage name of Jack Williams, was known as “The Human Fly” and would climb tall buildings for pay. He would also paint store and restaurant windows to support the family. As the Depression hit, he began moving around more and continued to paint signs but also began the transition to performing various acts in various venues. His father taught his sister, Mary Frazier Rawls, the carrying perch act. He also taught his mother how to juggle. John and his brother, Corky, did a boxing match to add to the family’s act. As they moved from town to town the family would perform on the streets to help support themselves.

John recalls being seven or eight when he performed on his first show which was with the World Brothers Circus. Much of his youth was spend with various shows and circuses. In 1946 the Frazier family moved to Hugo, Oklahoma and he would continue to call Hugo home for many years, rearing his own family there. Through the years he held various jobs within circuses from performer to managing concessions to agent to co-owning shows. He has held just about every position within a circus. Among the shows he has been associated with include the Herb Walters Circus, the Royal Brothers Circus, the Bud Anderson’s All-American Victory Circus, the Clyde Beatty Show, the Carson and Barnes Circus, the Hagen Brothers Circus, the King Brothers Circus, and the Fisher Brothers Circus.

John has seven children, resides in Calero, Oklahoma where he stays abreast of circus happenings and continues to enjoy ‘catching the show.’

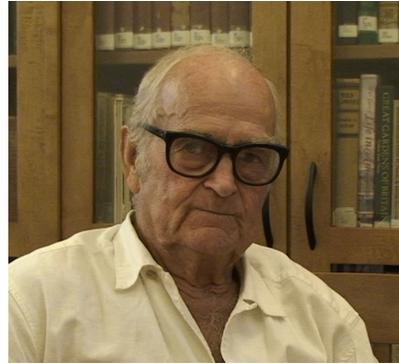
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John Frazier

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Tanya Finchum
& Juliana Nykolaiszyn
September 19, 2011
Durant, Oklahoma



Finchum *Today is September 19, 2011. My name is Tanya Finchum, along with Juliana Nykolaiszyn, and we’re with the Oklahoma State University Library. We’re in Durant, Oklahoma, today, to speak with John Frazier about his memories and experiences of circus life in Hugo. So thank you for having us today.*

Frazier Well, thank you for having me. (Laughs)

Finchum *Let’s start with having you tell us when and where you were born.*

Frazier I was born in Corpus Christi in 1932 on January 30, and I had an awful time proving that when I went in the army. I had to have a security clearance and top secret clearance for the outfit I was in, and I couldn’t produce a birth certificate. So I talked my way into staying in without the birth certificate, and when I got out, I started hunting for it. One of the nurses at the hospital, Spohn Hospital in Corpus Christi, she said, “I’ll look through the old records down in the basement.” About six months later she called me, and they found my birth certificate. So I knew I was born. (Laughter)

Finchum *Was the date right?*

Frazier Yes, everything was right, everything but my middle name. My mother wanted to name me Atwood, because her favorite movie star was Lionel Atwood, at that time, silent movie star. They got it garbled, and they got it down as Edward. Well, I was Atwood for the fifty-six years of my life, but then I changed it to Edward when I found that out. That was kind of interesting, to say the least. And that’s the way I usually tell that story. So on January 30, 1932 nothing happened, so they call it John Frazier. (Laughs)

Finchum

How did your family come to be in Corpus Christi?

Frazier

At that time, my father was a traveling show guy, and we just happened to be there when it was time for me to be born. That's the way all of us were. My sister was born in San Francisco, and they just happened to be there, and my brother was born in Austin, Texas, and they just happened to be there. During those years, Dad was an itinerant sign painter and also a showman, a clown, and whatever, a balancer and so forth. So we traveled constantly. There was no home. We didn't make any roots until, I guess, I was twelve or thirteen years old before we stopped long enough to catch our breath. We rented a place in Indianapolis, Indiana. We stayed there, and they thought it would be a good idea to put us in school—bad idea. (Laughs) For kids who are twelve and thirteen, and raised on the road free as birds, to put you into a school somewhere is like putting you in prison. Well, it didn't work.

I only went to six weeks of Catholic school my whole life, and the rest of my education I got along the way reading books. So I'll say that I wasn't born to the circus business. All of us kids, we were born in the entertainment business and graduated to the circus business as years went by, but we went through the whole bit. My folks were in vaudeville, and my dad was in motion pictures in the early silent days where for a short period of time he was a stunt man, and we, county fairs, night clubs, everything that they use entertainment. The circus business come along quite a bit later, as far as I was concerned. When I say quite a bit later, I was like seven or eight years old the first show I was ever on—first circus I was ever on. I can still remember that to this day. World Brothers Circus, have you ever heard that before?

Finchum

No.

Frazier

That was owned by two guys. One guy's name was Rip Van Winkle, real name, and the other guy's name was Jimmy Harrington. They were the partners in the show, and it was during the tough years. It was during the Depression, of course, and nobody got paid, but you got gas for your vehicle and the cookhouse was open. I don't know of anyone on the show that got a salary. I was just a kid, then, and I heard them talking. But we stayed with that show for quite some time, probably a half a year, getting our gas for our vehicle and the cookhouse. Every day, the cookhouse—it was funny—bologna and rice seemed to be the cook's favorite. We had it three times a day, two times a day, for as long as I can remember, bologna and rice. That was 1937. Yes, I remember that like it was yesterday.

We had a lion act in the show. They had one lion in the arena and then the guy's name was Swede Johnson. If you show this, if anybody sees

what I'm saying here, if there are some older people, they will remember some of these names, that's why I mention them. Swede was a lion tamer and his son Hunky Johnson.

Well, it's kind of interesting to find out how Hugo got started as a show town. I don't know whether anybody's told you this or not, but the first show that was in camp there was Obert Miller. Have you heard that name? Obert?

Finchum

Yes.

Frazier

And his two sons, Kelly and Dory, and, actually, Dory is a nickname. His real name is Does. D-O-R-E-S, and Kelly was the older of the two. That old man went twenty-two seasons without making a dime. They'd bring that show in, what little show he had—they called it a dog and pony show in those days. He was in Springfield, Missouri, was where his winter quarters was at that time, and he never made any money, and not enough to get it out the next season. They had to paint houses and hang paper. He was a paper hanger and house painter, and the two boys would work wherever they could to get enough money to get the show back on the road. A couple of trucks is all they had and a pony and a dog, and finally, they wound up broke in Hugo.

There was a guy there that had the Chevrolet company. His name was Johnny Sturgis, real nice guy. At that time, when I first come to Hugo, his home was the most outstanding home in town. It was beautiful. Anyhow, Johnny, he fronted the money for Obert. I think he let him have eight or ten trucks, new trucks. That was something 'wow' for Obert, and he went on the road, and the twenty-third season, he finally had a season. He made some money, and they wintered there in Hugo. And the old man was a very shrewd dealer, very shrewd guy. The old man and Kelly, they were both shrewd with their money. Anyhow, the show wintered there that winter, and then they came back and Johnny Sturgis, he became like a circus fan. He liked the whole family and so forth. Every season they'd come in, they'd buy a little property and invest a little money and so forth. Then the old man wound up very wealthy.

As time went by, other circuses sprung up. We had the Hugo Brothers Circus. That was Vernon Pratt. He was a local banker. He was attracted to the easy money in the circus—easy money. (Laughs) We had Stevens Brothers Circus, and I'm trying to think of the other two. I'm getting a mental block here, but, anyhow, as time goes on, more people migrated to Hugo because of that. And they were like me, I raised my whole family there. I came to the town in 1946, the first year there was an indoor show operating out of there. The people who have outdoor

circuses, tent circuses, their big dream is to have an indoor circus, because they don't have to put up a tent and have all this regalia that goes along with it. Every winter, somebody in Hugo would try and take a shot at a winter show.

Well, this particular winter, there were five partners in the show. How they expected to make any money, I'll never know, showing in little school gymnasiums, and so forth. (Laughs) They called it Royal Brothers Circus, and I was a performer on that show, and that was my first introduction to Hugo, Oklahoma. That was in 1946. I think I mentioned that. I was seventeen when I got there. I turned eighteen while I was in Hugo, and we trouped, biggest part of the winter, in and out of Hugo, Oklahoma. They didn't show on the weekends. They'd come back to Hugo on the weekends. Why? I don't know. (Laughs) Nobody made any money. We got paid, but the people who owned the show, they didn't make any money.

It's been an interesting town. The banker, Vernon Pratt, him and his brother had supermarkets through southern Oklahoma one time, the Pratt markets. If you look in the archives of some of these old towns, you'll see their name there. He got enthralled with the circus business, because he saw all that cash going. He was the banker. Well, that cash come in that bank in the winter time, boy, he couldn't handle that. So he had to have a circus, so he formed Hugo Brothers Circus and went out on the road and went broke in six weeks. (Laughs) He wasn't much of a showman, Vernon wasn't. His brother stayed in the grocery business. He died when he was forty-one years old, and he was a heavy hitter and good promoter and so forth. He didn't last, the Pratt boys.

Finchum *So from the time you were seven until you rolled into Hugo when you were seventeen, what was going on in those ten years?*

Frazier In the ten years in between the time I was seven and I was seventeen?

Finchum Yes.

Frazier Oh, golly! (Laughs) Not much in the circus, but in the entertainment business, a whole lot. Like I say, we were all entertainers. Maybe my sister [Mary Rawls] told you that. In one form or another, we entertained, and we worked night club circuits and theater circuits. Some of the places that we worked—back in the days when I'm talking about, when they had a string of theaters, well, usually one person owned them, like the Loews Keith Circuit. That was the big one. They owned the Palace Theater and so forth. Well, if you're on the Loews Keith Circuit, you showed all the theaters. It was like fifteen or twenty weeks' work. Well, they had two or three little circuits down in the south where you

just barely got paid on. Let's see, one of them was Charlie Kemp, Charlie Kemp Theaters, and that was the Kemp time. The Loews Keith was the Loews Keith time, and so on and so forth. We worked the theater engagements. We worked county fairs as wire walkers, jugglers, clowns and so forth.

I learned to walk the wire when I was about nine years old, and my sister was ahead of me on the wire act. Years later, we both done the act together, and it was pretty good. It wasn't real good, but it was pretty good. (Laughs) So that's pretty much it as far as the—we done a little tour with a couple circuses like Bud Anderson. Has anybody mentioned that name to you? Bud E. Anderson?

Finchum

No.

Frazier

He was a cowboy from Emporia, Kansas, and he had a method. He would put together a circus, a good circus, not a big one, but maybe ten trucks, and then he'd sell it and get a good price for it. Then he'd build another one. (Laughs) The one that I was with, that he ran himself, was Bud E. Anderson's—get this long winded title—Bud E. Anderson's All-American Victory Circus. That's what he called it, and he couldn't ask for a better title because that's the year we won the war. In August of that year, we dropped the bomb. He done opened the business, but the help was hard to get, gas was hard to get, moving that show was almost impossible, but we got it from town to town. We showed out west, where the jumps are long. It wasn't heavy populated cities like they have in the east. I never will forget on one occasion. I look back on that now, on that show we had it was an eighty-foot wide tent with three middle pieces. Well, that's eighty foot wide this way and then with the three middle pieces that makes the circle, the two ends of the tent, that's eighty feet. Then with three middles, they were three thirty-foot middles, that's ninety more feet. So that's 170 feet long and eighty feet wide, that's how big the tent was we showed in. Now, how we managed to get that tent up every day, I don't know.

My brother and I, we went to work on the tent, besides being performers and candy butchers, because help was so short. We had two working men on that show. That's all we had in the whole crew, and one of them was a draft dodger, and he got arrested like a month after he got there. So now we had one working man, and we used to hire whatever people we could in town. When I say "we," the bosses, they would hire whatever kids they could in town. Most of the time it would be girls because there were no boys available, and they would move that show. And in those days, you have to understand, that there were no stake drivers. The stakes were driven by hand, sledgehammers. There was no canvas spool. You wrapped up the canvas in pieces at night, put a diaper

on it, and picked it up and loaded it up into the truck. Picked it up with an elephant, really, is what they normally used.

They had one elephant on the show. Poor old thing, she worked herself to death. But anyhow, it was so primitive, all that stuff, that I look back now, and I wonder how we done them because we never missed a matinee. Two o'clock shows, every day at two and eight, every day. We didn't show on Sunday, but we never missed a matinee, and we were never late for a matinee. To show you how hungry the people were for entertainment, in Riverton, Wyoming, the chair wagon broke down. We had no chairs. In the front side grandstand, they sold reserve seats for an extra half a buck. They put the maskings up where the seats would normally be, but there were no seats there. They still charged the people a half a buck to go and stand, and the people readily paid for it, happy to see the show. (Laughs)

Well, that was the war years for you. People wanted entertainment, and the circus was tailor made for them, because we brought the entertainment to them. That was Bud E. Anderson's All-American Victory Circus. He was quite a guy. He was a real cowboy. When I say real cowboy, he was a horseman and a rope spinner and the whole bit.

There was another interesting guy in the circus business. Si Rubens owned Rogers Brothers Circus, and we worked on that show. Well, this was during that period of time you're asking about. I wasn't quite ready for the army yet. He had a big show, and he opened down in Florida, which in those days, most of the shows that opened in Florida went broke the first two weeks they were on the road. It just wasn't any good down there. But he had a promotion crew in front of that thing that was terrific, and he done nothing but business, just stacked them and jammed them, Si did.

The Hagen Brothers Circus, anybody mention that to you?

Finchum

No.

Frazier

Well, that's interesting. A guy owned that from Oklahoma City. He started out as a circus fan. He desperately wanted to own a circus. I call him the piccolo player, but he was a clarinet player in a band and a nice guy, heck of a nice guy. I think he was a Jewish fellow, I'm not sure, though—Suesz, Howard Suesz was his name, and his wife's name was Ruth. Her brother owned the Ford Motor Company in Tonkawa. You know where Tonkawa is? So he financed the trucks for Howard's first show. Now, where his first tent come from or the rest of the stuff, I have no idea.

Well, he got that show put together, Hagen Brothers Circus, and he trouped it. I was on that show when I had to go to the army. I was the concession manager on the show, and Howard and I were good friends, and Ruth, very good friends. She made the deal with Howard, she said, "You can have the circus, but every dime from the concessions comes to me. I want the concession money." So, naturally, he'll agree to anything to get a circus so he went for it. Well, I ran the concessions, and every week I'd have to check up with Ruth and the people who were there before me. The concession business in the circus, you've got to understand, was loosely run. I mean, how can you check a joint that's taking in money over the counter in all directions? There is no check. And in most instances, most of the concession managers were as crooked as snakes, and they would throw everything up, and what stayed up, they would give to the boss. (Laughs) That's an expression we have.

Anyhow, the concession managers they had previous to me were pretty good thieves. I knew most of them, and so when I got there, I gave her a straight count. She was amazed. Every week she'd come and get her money, and it'd just knock her out. She said, "I can't understand this. I get so much money now that I didn't get before." And then she began to realize how much money she lost. So I ran the concessions there, and they have an indoor show. He called it Clyde Brothers Circus, and both these shows were headquartered out of Oklahoma City, just north of there. Not Tonkawa, but the other little town, Edmond, Edmond, Oklahoma. That was the winter quarters for them.

The outdoor show became such a headache for Howard that he preferred the indoor show. The Shrine dates worked this way. The Shriners, they'd pay you so much for the performance. They'd give you a flat rate, in those days. I signed a couple contracts for Howard. They were like \$1,450 a show. In other words, he had to produce the whole show out of that. Well, then in turn, the producer got the concessions privileges. Shriners didn't get the concessions. They might have one or two items, but none of the good stuff. No cotton candy, popcorn, stuff like that. So anyhow, that's the way that worked, and so Howard was more attracted to that than he was the outdoor show. So he said nuts to the outdoor show. In fact, I don't even know what become of the Hagen show, whether he sold the equipment or what happened. I don't think he did. I think he just said, "To heck with it." And he put all of his time on the Clyde show, very successful.

He built that Clyde Brothers Circus into one of the [best shows]. He was the second best Shrine producer in the country at the time. His shows were outstanding, and he made a lot of money. When it came time to sell it, he sold his show to his concessioner. He had a guy by the name Larry Carden, and his partner was named Don Johnson, and they operated the

concessions on the show for Howard. He had two units going in all directions. He had about, I don't know, eighty dates, eighty or ninety dates around the country, and they were all very lucrative. So anyhow, the boys bought the show. He said, "I'll sell it to you," and he said, "I'll take"—I forget, now. I think it was \$250,000 for it. "Say you give me X amount now and then every fall when I see you, I want \$50,000 more until it's paid for."

Well, they made the deal. They had no trouble paying for it. They paid for it like the first or second year. They made a lot of money. They were both clever guys. Larry Carden, he was a pretty steady business man. He used to own a pizza joint up in Springfield, Missouri. He would operate these concessions in the summertime when he was away from the restaurant business. But they took the Clyde show and ran with it for, I don't know, until Larry got so sick he couldn't work anymore. Actually, it's his step-son that operates the show now, out of Springfield, Missouri. He doesn't call it the Clyde Brothers Circus. He calls it George Carden Circus.

I've got to mention this along the way. Most of the guys who own circuses have a real ego problem. (Laughs) If they didn't have that circus, they wouldn't have any identity. My nephew is just as guilty as the rest of them. Without that circus, they have no identity. I have a good friend now over in Florida. His name is John Pugh. He owns the Cole Circus. It used to be the Cole Brothers-Clyde Beatty Circus, and he done away with the Clyde Beatty part of it. He calls it now the Cole All-Star Circus, something like that, very successful. He's been successful since he started as the owner of that show.

That brings me to a pretty interesting guy. It's not a Hugo guy, but it's a circus guy. His name was Frank McCloskey. Did anybody mention him to you?

Finchum

I've seen that name.

Frazier

Frank McCloskey. He started out as a prop boy on the Ringling show years ago, young man. When I say a prop boy, each crew takes care of different things on an outdoor circus. You have a tent crew. They have a boss canvasman, a tent crew, and then you have the prop crew that takes care of the inside of the tent, that sets the ring curbs and hangs the rigging. Frank McCloskey was a prop boy and a rigger. In fact, there was a real, kind of a famous circus star. Her name was Lillian Leitzel, maybe you've heard that name before, but he was her personal prop boy when she fell and got killed on the Ringling show.

I want to bring this point up before I go any further. The circus business

has only produced one star. Now, you stop and think about it. They've produced one star. That's Clyde Beatty. He was the only guy that became recognizable. His name was recognized the world over. He made movies. He was on the radio and the whole thing. And he came from the circus business, but there is not another person in the circus business that made it to that point. I point it out, people get mad at me when I tell them that. (Laughs) The circus people do, but it's true. It's this little enclave all the circus people live in, it's a small bubble. I've been a performer so I can talk like one—but most of them, if they're performers, they really get an idea that they're famous. (Laughs) They might be famous in their little circle, but you get outside of the circle and you've never heard of them. That's why I always bring it up about Clyde Beatty because he's the only international star that the circus business has ever produced. Now, within the realm of the circus business, Lillian Leitzel, the Wallendas family, sure, we all know them, but have you ever heard of them? Maybe in the newspaper or something, but that's it.

Anyhow, McCloskey, he was the prop boy on the Ringling show, and then he later on became the manager. Well, when he became the manager, he instituted the gambling on the Ringling show that was like—he used to say Little Monte Carlo. He had one-tenth of the dice game, one-tenth of the card game, over the whole show, and he was in control of that in addition to being the manager. He told me the story himself. I know it's true. I asked him where Walter Kernan come from, that was his partner later on when they bought the Clyde Beatty circus. I said, "How did you guys meet, where at?" He said that they was on the train, the Ringling train one night, raining like hell. He said the train stopped for just a few minutes, and this kid was standing in the doorway of the station, and he started yelling, "Hey, kid, do you want to join the circus?" And the guy said, "Yes," and he jumped on the train. He stayed there and years later, he became Frank's partner. His name was Walter Kernan.

Anyhow, Frank and Walter Kernan and Jerry Collins—you wouldn't hear his name. He was a bank roll guy. He owned dog tracks in Sarasota, Orlando, racetracks, horse race tracks. I think he was involved with the one when they built it out here in Oklahoma City, at one time. They were the three partners that bought the Clyde Beatty Circus from Clyde Beatty. Clyde Beatty was going broke, and they got wind of it, and they thought they could make a go of it so they went out and seen Clyde. They bought the show from him. It was on the train then, and they brought the show into Florida and put it on trucks and took it out. Man, it was nothing but money, every day. It was great.

They sprung two more shows from that. The Sells and Gray Circus and the King Brothers Circus, and they bought all three. The corporation

owned all three of those, and Frank McCloskey was the guy that run them all and heck of a guy.

But getting back to the [Al G.] Kelly [and] Miller [Brothers] show, they didn't make a dime for twenty-two years but that old man stayed with it and made a success of the show. One of the biggest successes—well, one person can make a difference. He had an agent on that show. You know what the agent does, the general agent? He goes and books a town, makes all the arrangements, and so-forth. Not so much anymore, but they did then. Well, he had an old guy from up in—I think he was from Arkansas—booking the show for him, and all he was doing was just taking the show from town to town and making a few bucks. Art Miller, have you heard his name before?

Finchum *No.*

Frazier I didn't think anybody had mentioned him, them rats over there. Art was the key to the whole, to the Kelly Miller Circus, the Al G. Kelly Miller, not this Kelly Miller. This is a pup compared to the big one, big daddy. (Laughs) Anyhow, they brought Art in as a general agent for the thing. He used to be the agent for the Seils-Sterling Circus out of Wisconsin, and he got let go early one year. They closed the show early, and I think that's where he became acquainted with D.R. Miller. D.R. was a wire walker on that show, if you can believe that or not. You've seen pictures of D.R., haven't you?

Finchum *Yes.*

Frazier And his wife, Isla, she walked on the wire with him. He was never a good performer. He was a lousy performer, but at least he done that. He was on Seils-Sterling show. When they closed the show that left Art with nothing to do so he came down, and he started booking the [Al G.] Kelly Miller Circus. And overnight, from the time he stepped into those shoes as the general agent, because he lived and breathed it, he would talk Al G. and Kelly Miller Brothers Circus twenty-four hours a day. "It was the only show in the country, blah, blah," but he went on and on about it. He helmed that show into where it made serious money.

The country itself, it doesn't receive a tent show like it did in those days, but without Art booking that thing, it would have never made the grade like it did. There are not enough people left alive that would tell you that same thing. I didn't think they'd talk much about Art over there because, like I said, he wasn't too well liked by a lot of people, but he was a rip-snorter. Like I say, he lived and breathed the circus business twenty-four hours a day, and he's the one that made the success for that thing.

That was a big show. Good show. It's what they call a war baby. They never made any money until the war started. It was like Bud Anderson, he never made a lot of money until the war started. When the war started, then everybody made money. (Laughs) In those days, the tax business wasn't like it is now. It wasn't as structured the same way, and they had an amusement tax of 20 percent on the tickets. They put the amusement tax on. They didn't take that off until way after the war was over, but they put that on. Well, the way that the circuses operated, they opened the ticket window, and they'd sell tickets for about twenty minutes and shut it down. The rest of the people would pay at the gate, cash, coming through. That really gives you an abundance of cash to put in your little coffee cans and bury under your house somewhere. (Laughs) That's exactly what they done. But if it wasn't for [Al G.] Kelly Miller, there wouldn't have been no Hugo, Circus Town, U.S.A., that's for sure and certain.

Here's something that always amazes me. I had another friend named Dave Hoover, and he wanted to have a lion act. There was a guy out here in Gainesville, Texas. His name was—what was his name? Well, I'll come to that in a minute. Anyhow, they used to have a circus out there they called the Gainesville Community Circus, and this old man that had the Coca-Cola plant, he's the one that financed it and put it together. They would tour the show, but it was all people from Gainesville that worked in the show. Some of them weren't even circus people. They were just amateurs doing their thing. Frankie Schmitz, the guy who owned the Coca-Cola company, he's the one that financed it. He bought the lions, bought the arena, put the whole thing together, and they hired Dave Hoover to work the lion act.

Anyhow, Dave Hoover and I wound up to be co-managers for the Beatty show for Johnny Pugh. We worked together for five or six years over there.

Nykolaiszyn

What are some keys to success, from your perspective, in the circus business? What do you have to do to do a real good job?

Frazier

Your advance. This is one of the problems you have with everybody that wants to get in the circus business. You say, "Okay." They want to buy the trucks, they want to buy the tent, they want to buy all the pretty things. They want to have the toys they can play with. I said, "Okay, now, are you ready to put \$100,000 in the front end of this thing?" "Well, what the hell's that for?" "That's to get the towns booked and to get the paper hung and let the people know what's coming, because if they don't know what's coming, how can they buy a ticket for it?" "Oh, I don't know." They don't want to spend that money. Isn't that stupid?

The Carson and Barnes Circus was not founded by D.R. Miller. The founders of that show were the Moore family. That was Jack Moore, Ann [Angela] Moore, and their two teenaged kids, Wanda and Mike. They had another kid they named Madelyn. Sad story, she committed suicide, but anyhow, he was the founder of that show. Jack Moore was a good businessman. He didn't have a nickel, and he scratched around with an old wrestling bear for a year. He had a little show. He called it "Jack and Kelly's show." That wasn't even a circus. That was just down in Louisiana. He was from east Texas over here, and he was stumbling around with that show. He bumped into D.R. and got D.R. to come up with a little financing to get him a tent and a couple of trucks and so forth and highly successful, because he knew what to do. He was a heavy guy on the advance, and he could run a good, tight ship on the show itself. Good guy, Jack Moore was.

But they're the founders of the Carson and Barnes Circus. That title, that belonged to Jack Moore. Dory tried to run the thing for a very short period of time. Ann [Angela] had it on the road after Jack died, and she didn't have the will to do what she needed to do with that show. D.R. was there trying to help her, and that's like putting a bull in the china shop. Anyhow, she finally threw the towel in and sold her interests to D.R. That's how he got the Carson and Barnes title, and then they put this Kelly Miller title on the little show. I forget what year it was. About twenty-three years ago.

Stevens Brothers Circus. That was one of the other ones in Hugo. Little guy by the name of Bob Stevens. He and his wife were concessioners, and they had the concessions on the original Kelly Miller Circus. They were making good money there, and they had some kind of a riff between the two of them. They divorced, and she kept the concessions on the Kelly Miller show, and he took a little circus out called Stevens Brothers Circus. They got nicknames for all of these, and they were known as a gypsy camp. I mean, it was never a pretty show. Bob was one of those guys that his tie was always crooked, his suit was unpressed, and his circus was the same way. So he stumbled through, but he stayed on the road, I guess, for several years just barely making it from spring until fall, spring until fall. He used to winter down in the valley in Texas. He was quite a guy. She was quite a gal, too. She was the concessioner for the Kelly Miller Circus.

They had Tim McCoy on that show. Do you recognize that name, Tim McCoy? Tim came on the show, this is when Obert was still living. Obert was a shrewd guy. Too shrewd sometimes, but they had Tim McCoy. I forget, now, how he wound up joining that show in the middle of the season, but we used to have on the shows what they call a concert. Anybody mention that to you, the concert? Gosh, they left a lot out,

didn't they? Anyhow, right in the middle of the show, they would stop the show and all these horse riders would come in, these cowboys and cowgirls and hooting and hollering. They would make this big, long-winded announcement that after the show, while the boys were taking down the outside of the tent they would have the after-show, which was called a concert, or after-show, in the big top. It consisted of cowboys, cowgirls, shoot-em-up, and so forth.

So everybody that was in the tent, they could buy a ticket for that show now, and if they weren't sitting in the reserve seats, they could go ahead and move to the reserve seats immediately when they bought their ticket to the concert. Well, then, after the show was over, the main show was over, everybody scrambled out the front door. Well, then they started taking everything down that they could, the seats that weren't filled and so-forth. And, well, Tim McCoy joined that show in the middle of the season, and I don't think anybody realized what an attraction he was going to be. He had just become well-known to another generation of people by being on the *\$64,000 Question* on television. You remember that show? Well, he was on that show, and the publicity from that show made him a star again. He was a movie star in the silent days, and so anyhow, they started making the announcement for the concert, and they said, "We're featuring Tim McCoy." Well, everybody stayed. (Laughs) It just jammed the tent. Everybody that was in there stayed there for, I think it was an extra half a buck for the concert.

Well, Obert couldn't stand that, because he had a deal with Tim that he would get 50 percent of the concert. Well, that lasted until the end of that season, and Obert told him, he said, "We want to protect you so you make sure and get your money every week. We'll give you a salary." Well, Tim McCoy wouldn't go for that. He said, "Take it and stick it," and Jack Moore was smart enough to grab him before he left town, and he said, "Will you come and go with my show? I'll make whatever deal you want to make." And he made him a good deal, good salary and so-forth, and Tim McCoy, he was with Jack, either one or two years. My God, the business that show done, it was outstanding, because he was right smack on top of it, because they had done the *\$64,000 Question*, then he'd done something else. I forget what went right behind that, but Tim McCoy was on everybody's lips from coast to coast.

Jack and I, we got along good. I worked in his show as a superintendent twice. I had to leave the show.

Nykolaiszyn *Do you know much about the boat show?*

Frazier The boat show? Oh, yes.

Nykolaiszyn *Could you tell us a little bit about it?*

Frazier What do you know about it so far?

Nykolaiszyn *Just very little.*

Finchum *That it sank.*

Frazier That was an outstanding idea that D.R. had. Believe me, that would have been the big winner, but like always, he goes in a dollar short. If D.R. was going to build a chain, the chain would be perfect except for this link right in the middle, and he would glue it together with rubber bands. That's what he done with that boat show. He bought a ship down there. He sent an accountant down there, Dale Hammond. I don't know if he's still alive or not, but he was the chief accountant in Hugo, Oklahoma, and he sent him down to look at these ships that were for sale. He came back and told him, he said, "There's a liner down there for," I forget how much. The difference in price between the two boats was ten thousand dollars. I do remember that. I don't know how much it was.

He said, "You can buy the liner. Everything is there, the tablecloths, the silverware. It's a first-class ship, and you can buy it for X amount of dollars," but the other ship was ten thousand dollars cheaper and was a piece of junk. What the hell was the name of that thing? I'll think of it. Anyhow, they couldn't get a captain for it. That's how bad that ship was. They finally got a captain out of—he was a great big black guy. He was out of Haiti. Haiti, we called it then. They call it Haiti now, but he was a captain from there or one of those other South Pacific islands. So away they go with the ship up the coast. (Laughs) When they were loading the thing in Florida, I remember they dropped the light plant in the ocean, and it's still there, to the best of my knowledge. (Laughs) They had to buy another light plant. The boat is leaking. I mean, they've got every bilge pump in there working like hell to keep that water out of there. Anybody talk about Okie or Don Carr?

Nykolaiszyn *No.*

Frazier Okay, well, Don Carr was on that boat show. He was the only guy that I know of. I would have liked to have been on that boat show. I had a circus out, heading for the West Coast at the time when I heard about this. Somebody called me and told me about it and I said, "Well, Dory finally came up with a first-rate, number one idea." He had five years of paper on that thing. When I say paper, I mean billing the towns. And his idea was to show up the East Coast of this country and then go across to Ireland, down there, go around the horn, show everything, and never come back for five or six years. The only problem was he bought the

wrong damn boat. They got up to Nova Scotia, and the thing caught on fire. It was in the harbor and it caught on fire. Okie was trying to get the animals off the thing.

Anyhow, he was in there trying to get these animals off the boat. It was like Noah's ark. They had giraffes, elephants, donkeys, the whole thing, and Okie got everything off. Got them all untied and got them loose, and the last thing was a mule. (Laughs) It was funny because, Okie told me about it. He said the water was coming in so fast from the bottom that it just shot right out the hatch. The mule was on top of the wave and out he went, and he got saved, but the boat hadn't sunk. What I'm telling you is a true story. Everything I've told you so far is true. I wouldn't lie a bit. Anyhow, D.R., he had the boat insured, but he wasn't familiar with maritime insurance at all. He was up crying in his beer in a little restaurant, him and Isla and whoever was with him about the boat, and it was listing off to one side and about ready to sink.

Some guy came in and asked him, he said, "Are you the guy that owns that boat?" He said, "Yes." He said, "Do you have hull insurance?" Dory said, "Hell, I don't know what kind of insurance I've got." He said, "If you ain't got hull insurance, if that boat sinks now, you won't get a nickel from your insurance company." He said, "Do you have hull insurance?" Well, they went frantically looking for what kind of insurance they had. Well, the guy said, "Well, we've got to sink it. If that boat doesn't sink, you won't get paid." So the guy, when it was getting dark, and this was in Halifax, the guy went in the rowboat around the other side and opened all the hatches that were still above the water and sunk the boat. Dory got an insurance check for the boat because of that.

That night, the reason why I know so much about this, the woman that owns the newspaper in Boston, she also owns the newspaper in Halifax. She's kind of like Graham was at the Washington Post. Her husband died not too long after they were married, and she inherited his newspapers. She's done a hell of a job of running them. When I was up in Canada, D.R. asked me, he said, "If you can locate somebody up there that might have some pictures of that boat sinking up there, then I'd like to have them, something, anything." So that's what got me started on the boat thing. Anyhow, that night when the thing sunk, you could see all the guys going out there. They were stealing the brass and the compasses, whatever they could steal off the boat. So there was nothing left the next day.

Anyhow, Dory got his check for the insurance off the thing, and I think one, either a mule or a horse, I think, died in that thing, but everything else got off. Now, here's Dory. All that stuff from the show was on

shore, because he had the show off, the tent and all that stuff, and no way to get it home. So there he sits with all that junk. Brand new concession stuff, new cotton candy machines, popcorn machines, all went down with the ship and didn't have that off there. Anyhow, I hunted up this lady and asked her, I said, "Would you happen to have an old picture lying around of that thing?" She said, "My husband was a circus fan, and he was out there from morning until night shooting pictures of the whole thing. I have no interest in those pictures. I'll give them all to you." And she gave me an album that they had put together of the whole thing from the time the ship got there in Halifax and the time it caught on fire and it sunk, everything. She had it all on film, and she just handed me the whole thing. I sent it down to D.R.

If he would have bought the other ship, of all the good ideas that D.R. has come up with, that was one of them. That would have been just Jim Dandy, because there's so many places you could go with a ship that you can't go with trucks, and that got me started. I was stumbling around with a little circus from coast to coast down here, and I thought, "Well, that's the way to go, is on a boat," because we were fighting the truck battles, then. I mean, they were awful. Every weight station, they would fine you. It was a lot worse than it is today. I was going to buy a barge and go up the river with it. Some guy made a deal with the car companies to bring the boats from Detroit, bring the cars from Detroit down the Mississippi and to southern towns down there. He made one load with these barges, and the government told the car companies, "You put those cars back on the railroad," because the government was involved with the railroad. Well, the barges were sitting in Joplin, Missouri. I went down and looked at them, and they were just perfect for circus, three decks. I could just visualize the circus being on them. I could never bring it to pass, but Dory's boat show—I was trying to think about the name of that boat.

Finchum

Flueris or something, wasn't it?

Frazier

Forteleza? Forteleza. I think it was the Forteleza, yes. When they first started up the coast with it, the engines went afoul and it's out adrift. They were looking for the boat and couldn't find it. The coast guard was looking for it, and Dory went and rented an airplane. He was a pretty good pilot. So he flew out, and he found the ship. He spotted it and then radioed the coast guard. So he flew back, and the coast guard brought it back into the port in Wilmington, North Carolina, and Dory, he's all hot under the collar at the captain. (Laughs) Oh, this is so funny! He fired the captain. He blamed everything [on him]. They were running out of water and everything. Okie was on the show, he said, hell, they were drinking the soda pop and giving it to the elephants. They had no drinking water.

Anyhow, when they got the ship in, the coast guard towed it in for them. When they got it in, well, Dory immediately fired the big black captain, and the captain laughed at him. Dory didn't know why, but he found out later on. He tried to hire somebody else to captain that boat for him. Well, I guess in the boat business it's like the circus business, they have their reputation. Everybody knew that ship, and nobody would go near it. (Laughs) He couldn't hire a captain so he had to go back to the same guy and almost double his salary to get him to go back. That's the story of the boat show. They come stumbling back to Hugo with that stuff. They hired trucks and railroad cars and everything else to get all that junk back here. Everything they had was on the ship. That was, like I say, that would have been one hell of an idea. I wish he would have bought the other boat. They said Dale went down in the hull of the boat that he bought and was chipping at the rust. He said the water started coming through. (Laughs)

Did you hear the term "donniker" from anybody over there?

Finchum *We figured out what that was.*

Frazier You figured out what that was? The reason why I brought that up, there was a family in Hugo, the Loter family. Dick Loter was the patriarch, he was the daddy. They wanted to take a circus on the road, and they called it Don E. Kerr Brothers Circus, and they opened and closed in about ten days. They had about ten spots and that's what he called it, Don E. Kerr Brothers Circus. Vernon Pratt's nephew was involved in that. He was a partner in that show. We were putting a show together at the time, myself and a fellow named Floyd Bradberry, very good organist. He's one of us that's still alive. He's down in Florida, but we were putting together a show to take out of Hugo. I think everybody got the idea, but it was kind of a joke thing. We weren't too serious about it, and the Don E. Kerr Brothers followed right in behind us. Well, we were on the road and took off, and I heard about this Don E. Kerr Brothers Circus and Dick Loter after I left town. We took that little show down to Louisiana and showed about six weeks. I leased a whole bunch of stuff from Herb Walters. Somebody over there must have mentioned Herb Walters to you.

Finchum *Yes.*

Frazier What did they tell you about him?

Finchum *It was Mary that told us a little bit about him.*

Frazier About Herb? Yes. He was a funny old guy. Somebody asked me about

the Showmen's Club, maybe it was B.K [Silverlake]. I ought to set her up straight in a minute, because she told me that Ted Bowman, she thought that he was the instigator of the Showmen's Club. Have you heard the name Ted Bowman?

Finchum *Yes.*

Frazier Well Ted was not the instigator of the Showmen's Club. Hugo had a Showmen's Club long before Ted ever came into town. The original Showmen's Club was upstairs. You know where the Security Bank is downtown in Hugo? You know where the Chamber of Commerce is?

Finchum *Yes.*

Frazier Well, the Chamber of Commerce is here, the Security Bank is here, there's a street here. (Gestures) Well, right across the street, there's a restaurant right over here. (Gestures) I think it's a restaurant now. There have been two or three restaurants in there and went broke, but right above that is where the Showmen's Club was. In 1951, I come blasting into town. I'd just closed with Clyde's show and I come into Hugo, and they were having a big party out there. Herb Walters and his daughter, they were very clever entertainers. They were dramatic show people. Anyhow, they were right in the midst of singing one of their funny little songs when I got there that night, and that's the first time I'd ever met Herb. We talked and so forth. The upstairs, it was just one story above the street. Did anybody over there mention Frank Ellis to you?

Finchum *No.*

Frazier Oh, what a pity. Now we've got to tell a whole new story. (Laughs) The show in the so-called "good old days," had legal adjusters. The legal adjusters were on the grift shows, the shows that had gambling. None of the Hugo shows that I know of ever had gambling on the show. Herb Walters wanted to have it, but he didn't know how. Anyhow, they had what they called a broad mob. The guy, you know the Three Card Monte? That was a broad mob. That was a shell game, and they really had these games in the sideshow, on the shows they had the grift. Bud Anderson was a big grift show. On his show, there were about thirty-five guys on the grift department and two guys putting the tent up, and they all had funny names. (Laughs) Big Roberts, the Colonel, Beef-neck Charlie, they all had nicknames, all these gamblers.

Anyhow, Frank Ellis was the legal adjuster. He was the one that would square the beef if you got a beef in town, and there was another little guy named Jack Turner. He wound up being one of my step-fathers later on, but he was a legal adjuster on a big grift show out west. I'll tell you

about that in a minute. But Frank had a beef with the local gamblers, somehow or another, in Hugo. Hugo used to be kind of a wild town. It was true in gangster-ism on that main street. Well, Frank got in a big beef with gamblers, and they hung him out that window of the Showmen's Club. (Laughs) They said, "You're either going to pay us or we're going to drop you." People think that's just not a real story, but that is a real story. Frank and Jack Turner.

Nykolaiszyn

Well, at what point in your career did you say, "I'm tired of working for a circus, I want to own one?"

Frazier

At what point in my career? Let's see, I guess after I finished the tour with the Hagen Brothers Circus, running the concessions there. That probably planted the seed, because the concession money was so heavy. And then I had my tour in the army. I went into the service for three years. When I got out, considering my career of working for people like Herb Walters, D.R. Miller, and so forth, you'd have to think, "My God, if they can do it, I can do it twice as good." (Laughs) That was really the thoughts. The first legitimate show that I ever had was in Canada. I had a partner up there. I had the concessions on the King Brothers Circus. My brother-in-law was the manager, Harry [Rawls]. This little fat guy came on the lot, and he was looking for a partner for a circus in Canada. Well, I knew Canada well. I've showed two years up there with Jack, for one thing, and the other thing was that I used to study that map constantly, and there had never been a Canadian tent show in Canada. There were places where they never had a tent show in Canada. I used to look at that wistfully. I guess, if you was going to say, at that point in my life was when I said, "I want to have a circus."

Al Stencell is the guy's name, and somebody sent him to me. He came to Harry and then he sent him to me. He said, "They said I should talk to you because I want to take a circus up in Canada." And I listened to what he had to say, and I said, "Tell you what. You go up and you get the first fifty or sixty days, whatever it was, get it booked, and I'll bring your circus to the border." I never expected to see the guy again. Anyhow, I got a phone call about a month later, he said, "I've got thirty days booked." I said, "You're kidding me! Well, that's great." So I started putting the circus together down here. To build a circus in those years took a lot of money, and I didn't have that much money. I borrowed a few bucks here and a few bucks there, but I got a show together and got it up to the border, and we got it open. My God, it was awful. It would just rain every day and colder than hell, but the people never stopped coming. We just packed and jammed that thing, every show.

Nykolaiszyn

And what was it called?

Frazier Royal Brothers.

Nykolaiszyn *Royal Brothers.*

Frazier Royal Brothers Circus. Anyhow, at the end of the season, we were counting the money on Al's coffee table in his mother-in-law's house. Al was quite a bit younger than I was and had never made nothing more than a salary working in a TV joint, and he was just enthralled with this dough. "This is your half and this is my half," and I said, "Well, if this is all there is..." Then he started talking about next year, and I said, "Al, I've got to be truthful with you. If this is all there is to it, I won't be here next year." I said, "We've got to do something different." Well, he said, "You don't want to get any bigger, do you?" I said, "A hell of a lot bigger." He said, "No, I always wanted a small show," and I said, "Small show, small profit, big show, big profit. You figure it out," and I went home. And he called me and told me, he said, "Me and Shirley talked it over. We're willing to go along with it." I said, "Well, that's great." I called D.R. and got myself a great big tent and four or five trucks, and I leased another elephant. We had a big show then, and we took that sucker to Canada, and we did do business. That's the year they made the movie. Not that year, the next year they made the movie of us, *High Grass Circus*. Have you seen it?

Nykolaiszyn *I've seen a little bit on YouTube.*

Frazier Google it. You can see it there. Anyhow, we had a great big tent with a sideshow, had everything. Now, that year when we came in, we counted the money, and we had something to count. I told Al, I said, "Are you still in love with them little bitty circuses?" (Laughs) He said, "No." So the next year, I said, "Well, let's go to Newfoundland. Let's take the show to Newfoundland." There had never been a tent show there, and there hasn't been one since. So I went up and I booked half of Newfoundland. I had to get out of there. A big blizzard was coming, and they were going to close the ferries, and I had to get home in a hurry. So I came back and Al finished booking. We had thirty-something days in Newfoundland. I wish you could've seen that. The people just stood in awe looking at that.

We would roll the sideshow out, and they'd all ooh and ah and hoot and holler and so forth, and the sideshow was kind of small. We'd get that big top and roll it out and put it up and then that really set them on fire. We had a pretty good show, too. We trouped all the way from Newfoundland, all the way out to Saskatchewan, everything in between, and it was highly successful. I enjoyed it. I don't think I would want to have a circus now because everything is different now. That's the

problem. My kids, my oldest boy, he took a shot here eight or ten years ago. I tried to talk him out of it. I said, "It just isn't the same, John, like it used to be. You're going to run into more permits and more regulations and so forth." Well, they blew about sixty grand, and never made a quarter, and made a lot of enemies in the thing. But that's the problem with the circus.

Now, when my kids were all raised in the business, it was great. The best times of their lives, now, when they talk about it, is when we had the show and they were on it and so forth. But it's not that way now. It's as different as night and day to be around these shows now as it was. Then, it was fun.

Finchum

Well, did yours winter in Hugo? This particular one from Canada.

Frazier

I wintered in Hugo, but the show stayed in Canada. Then I sold my interest to Al, which he's never paid me—to this day. (Laughs) He took a little show out the next year and lost his butt with it. My brother, he was wanting to be in the circus business, and I said, "Well, there's a circus for sale down in the [Texas] valley. They're up against it, and the tax people are after them." That's B.K. [Silverlake] and her husband. I said, "Let's go down and buy it. If you want to be in the circus, that's the way to do it." It was a hell of a deal. In fact, I told B.K., I said, "You guys are selling this thing short." Well, I think she wanted out.

Anyhow, we bought that show, Fisher Brothers Circus. That's what Melvin and B.K. called it before. The first year we had it out, let's see, 1976 was the second year. The second year we had it, we wintered in Hugo here, and that's when we put the thing on the road, a 1776 Circus, Fisher Brothers Circus. We won some pretty serious money, and we had the perfect combination because I ran the show, my brother was the agent. He was a terrific—I taught him. He was a good agent. When I say I taught him, he had the personality for it. He could go in and talk to those committees and turn them around and get anything he wanted from them. Whereas, I could get it booked, but I couldn't—not like he could. So we had the perfect combination.

I kept it out all summer like that, forty-something odd weeks, and I wound up closing in Kaufman, Texas, down here. I closed with about eighty-five cents less than what I had when I opened, which was nothing. (Laughs) I never will forget, the last day down there, we had two old bears I worked in the show, they were trained bears, and bears are mean. There is no such thing as a nice bear. We kept them in the back yard, kept them well guarded and so forth. I had a guy that worked for me, his name was Turtle Benson. He's dead now. I said, "For Christ's sake, keep an eye on those bears because if anybody gets back

there, they'll snatch them." Well, sure as hell, some pot-smoking girl come back there, "Oh, I just love these bears!" Well, they chewed her up from one end to the other. She had ninety-six holes when I got her to the hospital. I forget how many stitches that they closed her up with, and I thought, "Here comes a lawsuit. They'll take it all."

I had her on the midway, just blood going everyplace, and the girl wasn't passed out. She was awake and talking, and her mother came over. Her mother started yelling at her, and she looked up at her mother and just—you could see the disgust rolling out of her eyes. She said, "What the hell are you doing here?" She said, "You wouldn't give a damn if I died! So all you're looking for is a lawsuit. Get the hell out of here!" So I never got a lawsuit and, the girl, she knew it was her fault. She said, "I'm the one that went under the guard rope and defied the guy and grabbed the bear and the bear chewed the hell out of me." I went up to the hospital to see her the next day, and she was fine and dandy and all patched up, got bandages from one end to the other. She apologized to me, instead of me to her.

Well, then, Dory Miller walked on my lot. He said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I'm going to Arizona with this show. I'm going to keep it out all winter and next spring, take it back up to Canada." I did not know that Dory was sick. Dory was very, very sick then. He had kidney problems. He said, "Why don't you come out and partner with me. We'll put a big show out. There's another show that I'm going to buy." That's another circus that I forgot all about, James Brothers Circus. It was a big show, and he went broke. He had it all stored up in Ohio, and Dory made him a deal for it, but he needed somebody to run the second show. He needed more than that. I didn't know it.

Anyhow, Dory says, "Now, here's the deal. My show has to be out and running before your show, before you start working on your show." So I had to get this big tub of junk out here down the highway. They were jumping to Austin for the first date. It's snowing like hell. It was awful. We had an awful time getting that thing out of there. He went and then I started collecting my stuff up in Ohio. I had twenty-five trucks up there loaded full to the gills with everything and then brought it down and started working it, to get it to go out that spring. The other part of the deal was, as Dory told me, he said, "Now, my agent has to book both shows." I said, "For God's sake, Dory, your agent can't book your show. You sat beside the highway for nine days up in Pennsylvania last year." Well, he said, "That's okay, he's got some more people now, but that has to be. It's so much a contract, and he books it." Well, that was a big mistake.

Nykolaiszyn

Well, what else do we need to know about Hugo?

Frazier I don't think you really want to know. (Laughter) Most of the people are dead. It wouldn't bother them if I talked about them.

Finchum *Well, compare it to when you first came, like, when you were seventeen or eighteen to...*

Frazier Hugo? My God, it's like New York City and Durant. Hugo was a swinging town when I first got there in 1946. There were two major railroads that crossed in town, one going west and one going south. Five hotels, there were five hotels that stayed busy all the time. In the wintertime, it was great because there were so many show people there.

We started talking about the Showmen's Club a while ago. The Showmen's Club went defunct and Art Miller, the guy I told you was a hotshot agent, he was a member of the Elks Club and so was I. So we sat half-drunk one night and said, "Let's just have an Elks Club and make it a Showmen's Club." So we got ten other guys—you had to have twelve people to get a charter for an Elks Club, so we got ten guys, like, in a few hours. We got the people to come down from Oklahoma City and make us an Elks Club. Well, the Elks Club is where I celebrated my eighteenth birthday many years before and was called Mack's Fish and Chips, or the Bloody Bucket, that's what they called it then. We formed the Elks Club there, and it was really the Showmen's Club. We had the big Christmas party for the kids, and we had Showmen's dances and all that at the Elks Club. That was the real highline Showmen's Club at one time.

Nykolaiszyn *So you had some people outside of circus in the Elks Club, too, right?*

Frazier Oh, yes.

Nykolaiszyn *Like the Baggetts, Mr. Baggett?*

Frazier Yes, Hermon Baggett?

Nykolaiszyn *Yes.*

Frazier He was a good guy. His son is Charles. But Hermon Baggett, all the show people that's where they bought their vehicles in the wintertime, from him. What happened to the Elks Club is the officers of the Elks Club were all show guys when we put it together. Then when we were on the road one summer, they had a meeting in the Elks Club, and they un-elected all the show guys and elected the town guys. Well, that brought it to an end. They don't operate the same way. That's the problem.

If you've been to a meeting to book a circus, I'll give you an idea. You'll get into a meeting with ten or twelve people from the Lion's Club. You'll want them to sponsor the circus, right? Okay, well, you're in there talking, talking, talking, talking, and there's one question. And you know what all the questions are going to be. They all ask the same thing, but there's always one guy, I used to call him the "Coat tail puller." He wouldn't ask a question himself. He'd jab the guy next to him, "Ask him that, ask him this." And you would have to spend several hours to get a decision made to bring a damn circus to town. It was goofy.

It gets worse, now. It's worse now than it's ever been. That's why it's not interesting anymore to do that. Yes, the Elks Club, it went to hell shortly thereafter. The show guys were the ones that kept it going. Not that I've got anything against the town guys, don't get me wrong. They're all good people, but they just don't operate the same way. The Christmas party went to hell and the dances that we had and so forth.

- Finchum** *Do you have any memories of Modern Trailer Park?*
- Frazier** Oh, I've got a lot. Did they tell you much about Willy Rawls, Harry's dad? Harry and I worked together as a team, a comedy team for a long time, and Willy was the father. I doubt very much anybody mentioned him. He was my mentor.
- Nykolaiszyn** *Would you mind talking a little bit about Hazel? We hear some stories about Hazel but nothing real...*
- Frazier** Who told you about Hazel?
- Nykolaiszyn** *I hear she's a heck of a cook. That's what I've heard.*
- Frazier** Yes, she wound up to be a very good cook. (Laughs)
- Nykolaiszyn** *But outside of that, I know very little.*
- Frazier** Is that right?
- Nykolaiszyn** *Yes.*
- Frazier** Well, that's kind of strange. Well, this has little to do with the circus business, but if you want me to...
- Nykolaiszyn** *Yes.*

Frazier

The way that we met, they used to have the dances. They'd have one called the Brown Derby in Antlers [Oklahoma] and one someplace else, and we would go out of town for these dances, because they could buy moonshine liquor there. Anyhow, I had a date with one of the performers. Now, that's kind of stupid. I can't remember her name. I will in a minute. (Laughs) I had a date with her. I said, "Let's go up to so and so." "Okay, and we'll go to the dance," and Hazel, she was just a kid, then. She was about eighteen, I think. She bummed a ride in the same car I was in. Charlie Rex was driving, Charlie and his wife. She said, "Can I ride up with you?" I said, "Sure, why not."

Well, she was going up to meet this boy. The boy's name was, testing my memory on this one, but anyhow, when we got there, Hazel gets out of the car, but my date, the girl that I brought up, she got out of the car, also, and ran over and grabbed the guy that Hazel was supposed to meet, a big hug and a kiss, and went to the dance. (Laughs) So Hazel's standing there, and I said, "Well, I guess it's you and me, kid," and we went to the dance. (Laughs) That's how we met, and then we dated for the rest of that winter, which wasn't too long, because we were getting ready to go on the road.

When I left town with the show, I gave Hazel a route card. It used to have two weeks of towns on it. I said, "Here, if you're serious, then join me before this route card is up, but if you don't show up, I'll know there's nothing to it." Anyhow, Hazel joined the show, and she was a good trouper. We got along real good. I had to leave the show. That was Herb Walters' circus, and he did not have any front end on that show. He had no agents. Nobody knew what the hell they were doing. He made a big announcement in the big top one day, "If the business doesn't pick up, we're going to have to close this show on the Fourth of July." Well, that meant everybody was out of a job. So I went to Herb and I told him, I said, "Let me go out and book this thing. I'll let Hazel stay here and drive my truck. I'll book it and see if we can't get some business going. And we did."

I started booking the good towns and promoting the hell out of it and so forth, and we started packing the people and started making some pretty serious money. Anyhow, we closed that season. That would have been in 1957. I had just come through a rotten divorce. I won the custody of my daughter. My oldest daughter is fifty-five. My youngest daughter is nine. Anyhow, I just won the custody of her through that divorce. I'm trying to think. Then Hazel and I were—we didn't troupe much together in other shows. When the hell was it, '57? Yes. '58 I can't remember much about. In '59, that was the first year I was a recognized agent. I went and got myself a job as a general agent for Herb Walters' circus. That was a mistake.

We had too many partners. One partner wanted to go to California, the other one wanted to go east. I couldn't talk to both partners at the same time. I had to call the one guy on Wednesday and the other one Sunday. Sunday they'd say, "What are you doing in South Dakota? You're supposed to be in so-and-so." Then Wednesday, "What the hell are you doing in Minnesota? You're supposed to be on the way to California." So that went all summer like that. I booked two complete routes, and as fast as I would book them, they'd cancel them. Hazel was with me on that booking. That's where she learned to book. She'd be with me at every meet and everything, and she was sharp as a tack. She was good at it. That was '59.

In '60, we took the unit into Canada. Took the fair unit into Canada, and she was with us. I got so damn mad at Harry. Hazel wanted to be a performer. She wasn't built to be a performer so I got a loop-de-loop rigging. That's the rigging that you plant your feet in, and it's like a trapeze rigging, but it's not ropes. They're stiff pipes that you hold on to, and you can teach anybody to do the loop-de-loop in twenty minutes, because you just pump the thing until you go all the way over. You've got little clicks in your feet, little things in your feet that slide into the bar that hold you there so you can't fall out of it.

Yes, we got along great. The only thing that whipped our marriage was Hazel was insanely jealous. It's funny, when I talk to other people, I have one granddaughter that told me, she said, "The reason why you and Hazel got divorced was because of your jealousy." I've never been jealous in my life, never. And everybody knows that. I guess Hazel told her that. It was one of those things where if you would have stayed in the situation, my kids would have been worthless, I would have been worthless, and so forth, and a decision had to be made. Of course, under the circumstances, I was in Florida around people I'd known for years and years down there and, under the circumstances, the word had it that I was going for another female—furthest thing from the truth.

I was down there with Jim Nordmark, promoting towns, and doing my thing in Florida, and there's no way that I could have continued living like I was living. I'd get up, look in the mirror at myself in the morning and say, "What kind of a fink are you?" And it was going to affect the kids as they grew up. Well, I never said anything to the kids about anything. I told Hazel, I said, "I want to get a divorce," and we divorced. That was that, and all the kids wound up pretty good. No warped heads in the family, and I preached to them constantly as they were growing up, "For Christ's sake, get out of this business." It isn't going to be here like you know it now when you grow up." And it isn't. The circus business is like black and white different now, than what it was then.

Yes, and Hazel, I got so damned mad when I found out what she was doing, because she came down to the valley when I was promoting down there, booking towns and promoting country western shows and whatever, magic shows and that and doing real well, and she wasn't doing nothing. I said, "Why don't you come down here and book these towns for me? Hell, we don't have to stay mad at each other. She said, "Okay." So I gave her a pretty good sized bankroll. My son gets mad at me to this day because of it. I gave her a pretty good sized bankroll, and I said, "Well, just start here and here and here," and she didn't. She drove right to Hugo and got a job with a circus. (Laughs)

The only thing that made me mad about that was she sold herself too cheap. She ran that cookhouse over there for a lousy two hundred bucks a week. That's what they paid her. And believe me, on that show, if you're the cook, that's an awful job. I wouldn't do it for a thousand dollars a week, but I guess she was very good for them—too good for them, really.

Nykolaiszyn

Dr. Eudy said she was a very good cook.

Frazier

She was. Yes, she is. She was a damn good cook. Her mother was a good cook. Her mother cooked on my little show in Canada. That's the reason why I kept a working crew up there all the time, because every morning, she'd have homemade biscuits and gravy and the whole bit for them. And Hazel was a good cook, too. Hazel's a good person. She was okay. If she could have whipped that jealousy streak—it was horrible. Her youngest daughter, Audrey, she's the one that found her dead. She came up to see her and when she came to the house, well, Hazel had died that night on the floor next to the bed, and that was kind of bad. But, like I said, we managed to stay pretty friendly, with some of our beefs that we had. Hazel booked the Kelly Miller show for a while. Did they tell you that?

Nykolaiszyn

No.

Frazier

Yes, when David first got the show, I think the second year that he owned the show, he wanted to go to Canada. Well, he picked the right person. He picked Hazel because she knew every town up there, and she booked it two or three years. Same old story, they don't know how to treat their advance people. They want to take and piece you off with nothing. She booked them into the good towns, good spots and so-forth. Somebody should have come up with something, a bonus or anything, but as it was, they short-sheeted her. She said, "Well, that's that," and she wouldn't go back again. It was really a loss for them, because Hazel was a damn good agent. She was a good agent, but the few towns that

she booked for me before she left completely was down in Texas, and every place where I come in behind her, all the bases were covered and so forth. I never had to worry about it. She was good. She was good.

Finchum *Well, you traveled around a lot. Why settle here or stay put here?*

Frazier In Calera? My son bought a place over here in Calera. It's about five miles south of here, and I said, "Well, if you're going to stay here, maybe I'll go and buy a place sometime." I came and bought this few acres I got over here, and the day that I bought it, the day before I bought that, he sold his place, because he had to transfer and go down to get a little closer to Dallas. He's working down there. He said, "If I had any idea that you were really going to buy that place..." (Laughs) I said, "Well, what the hell could I tell you? I told you I was going to buy it!" He said, "I would have stayed there." He had a real nice home out here on Jackrabbit Alley, they call it. The place he has now is all right, but this is much better, what he had up here. And the commute isn't that far to Dallas, about an hour's drive, hour and a half. Yes, that was a big mistake on his part. And that was the only attraction. Other than that, I could have wound up any place.

My wife is going to graduate as a nurse in May. She wanted to be a nurse with an associate degree and I said, "No, that doesn't work. If you're going to be a nurse, you get the Bachelor's of Science because if you've got that BS, that's about three steps higher. If you're an associate degree nurse, you're just an LPN. Not much bigger." So she went ahead, and she's added language. She's from Mexico. The language problem is brutal, getting her through her first two, two and a half years of college, but she made it. She had a 4.0 average. She's doing well now, and she's got, like I say, she has the rest of this semester, next semester, and then she's done. We were talking about going to Florida, maybe. I don't know how true that is. One thing about it, you can go where you want to go. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *So do people still call you up for circus advice?*

Frazier Once in a while. Once in a while.

Nykolaiszyn *Well, what do you miss most about the business? Or do you miss the business?*

Frazier Yes, I miss it. Staying in one place is difficult for me. I've got, and I'm not complaining about it, I have a daughter that's nine years old and, naturally, she needs a little care and so-forth. She's going to school in Calera. But I miss the traveling. And the things that mean the most to most people that aren't in the business mean very little to me. It's like

the house and the place and so forth, that's just material things. They never have meant too much to me. That's one of the problems that Hazel and I had. If you had a buck, you had a buck. If you didn't, you didn't. It was as simple as that, and it's the same way now.

We have a nice place out there. I call it a nice place. There are pigs and chickens and horses and all that stuff and everything, but it doesn't mean as much to me as it would to somebody else. I know that. One thing you miss—and I don't care if anybody else tells you any different, they're lying—you miss being the boss. The last show that I had up in Canada had eighty-five people on the show. We were feeding them three meals a day, we were sleeping, we were taking care of them, and listening to their psycho-babble, and the whole thing. Naturally, you would miss that because it's like you're close. You're a lot closer to your employees and to everybody, from the lowest working man to the high-line performer. You know all their problems and so forth, and you're their big daddy. You do miss that. I guess that's what you miss most of all. We had trials and tribulations of taking the show from one town to another, and you miss that, too. You miss that, too.

Nykolaiszyn

Well, where do you see the circus headed in the next ten, twenty years?

Frazier

No further than what it is right now. The tent shows will be gone completely. There won't be any tent shows.

The Cole Circus, they had a good season this year. Everybody's trying to figure out why, but if you live long enough, you know why. When times get tough, people go for cheaper entertainment. Going to a circus is cheap. I booked the Carson and Barnes show in here for two days at the Indian place out here, the casino. I put it in their parking lot two years ago, and I had one of my friends take his family out there. He said, "Frazier, this is the best damn entertainment in the world." You can see their point, because the kids get in free nowadays. You give coupons just to attract them. And the guy told me, he said, "I brought fifty bucks with me, we saw the show, everybody had cotton candy, peanuts, and so forth, we rode the elephant, rode the ponies, and I've got three dollars left. You can't go to a movie and do that. So that's the secret to the circus business.

But when times get tough, the circus business gets better. If they had anybody on the front end of that Carson and Barnes show and knew where to take it and what to do with it, they would be doing business now. The Cole Circus, hell, they've had a hell of a season. It's about the same sized show and everything. The little shows, I don't know, Culpepper, that's one of the shows that winter over there. I know that guy. He's not your ordinary showman. Have you met him?

Nykolaiszyn *Not yet.*

Frazier His name is Trey Key. Well, when you meet him, you'll see that he's an exclusive guy. He's kind of in a shell, and he doesn't have much to say about anything, anybody, anytime. (Laughs) But his show keeps plodding along. They've got a new tent this year. I didn't know that. It's a good thing. He had nothing but spider webs last year. (Laughs) But they seem to be making a little bit of money with the thing.

Finchum *In smaller towns?*

Frazier Yes. If I was going to put a show on the road now, if I was twenty years younger, I'd be sixty. Yes, that's young enough. I'll be eighty in January. But if I was going to put a show on the road now, that's exactly what I would do. I would have a tent that would seat about anywhere from six hundred to a thousand people, and I would have it in these smaller towns. You take the people that live where I live, they can't go to a movie. If they've got three kids, you go to a movie, it'll cost you one hundred dollars. The people that live out in these little towns, they can't do that. And the little towns like Bokchito and like Calera and so forth, you have a sponsor, they sell a few tickets, and yes, you can make it.

Here's the difference. I'm glad you asked, because somebody asked me this the other day. When you had the circus, that's all you have. Your whole life was right there on that lot. When we moved from one lot to another lot, then your life was on that lot. There were no homes. There were no schools to go to and so on and so forth. The circus was the whole life. It's not that way, now. You take like, now, if you want to hire a performer—I preached fifteen, twenty years ago to the performers on the same thing. A guy does a trapeze act, maybe he's got a dog act, maybe he's got a trained pony. Okay. He's got three acts. He can put fifteen minutes in your show, tops. Now, he wants you to pay him enough money that he can have a trailer that costs sixty thousand dollars, a truck that costs forty thousand to pull it, a home in Florida, and his kids are going to college. And he only wants to work six months a year. How the hell can you do that? You can't do it. That's the big difference. There's a friend of mine that has a show right here in town tonight. He's producing the show for the Shriners. What time is it?

Finchum *Almost five.*

Frazier But if you wanted to turn the clock back—and I've got a trailer sitting in my backyard now, a Cougar, and I have my truck, and I have an old horse I could break in about a month, and I could go down the highway

with a tent. I've got several tents. I don't know whether they told you or not, I've got a tent rental business in Hugo. My other son, Darren, he works for the Choctaw Electric Company over there. He was eleven years old, and he took care of eleven elephants, eleven full-sized elephants. I had a boss elephant guy and a helper, and they both quit. Darren was a helper, so I said, "It's your cup of tea, my friend. I can't do it." So he took care of the elephants for the rest of the season. He's a lineman for the Choctaw Electric Company and he loves it. That's all he wants to be, and he's good at it, too.

But anyhow, like I say, if your whole life was on that circus like it was then, and you weren't worried about a home and so forth, the money you took in every day was yours, and you go to the Modern Trailer Park and pay thirty bucks a month and that's it or you rented the winter quarters like I done for the whole show. Yes, if you could do it, I would do that again. But that can't be done. Not anymore. Not like it used to be.

Nykolaiszyn *The economics have changed.*

Frazier Oh, yes, definitely.

Finchum *Did you ever blow the arrows?*

Frazier A few times. (Laughs) I got the biggest hiccup in Canada one time. My brother was putting the arrows up for the show. He was the twenty-four hour man for the Canadian show up there. And you know what a twenty-four hour man is. He goes ahead and lays the lot out and so forth. Anyhow, we were on the Queens Expressway and one of them Canadian coppers, don't carry guns and got the high hat and so forth, they came out and said, "Young man, what are you doing?" He said, "Well, we've got a circus coming through." And Cork, he'd been out of the business for a long time. He didn't have the sense to lie. He said, "We've got a circus coming through. We've got to put these arrows up because if they don't follow the arrows, they'll get lost." And the guy reached over and pulled the arrow down, he says, "Not on the Queens Expressway." (Laughs) I got the biggest kick out of that when Cork told me about it.

There was another time that was way up in the jungles in northern Alberta, out in the middle of nowhere and I was coming around the curve in the hills. These highway guys, a crew was all together, and they had one of our arrows, looking at it. They were trying to figure out what that was. You could tell by the quizzical look on their faces, "What is this thing?" They pulled it off the post. It was on the side of the road. I just drove by and let them keep wondering. (Laughs) Yes, the arrows got us in a lot of trouble sometimes. Years ago, they didn't do it that way. Did anybody tell you how they marked the shows a long time ago?

Finchum *Not before the arrows, no.*

Frazier Well, what a bunch of clowns over there. (Laughter) They had a gaff and a truck. Have you seen them put the lines on baseball fields, turn the crank and the line goes out? Well, they built one of those into a truck and when you're going down the highway, when you make a turn, you turn the crank and the white line goes around like that. We had a drunk on the Bud Anderson show. Every morning, he'd get lost. (Laughs) He'd be following this white line now, then all of the sudden—bango—there'd be a big “no” in the middle of the road, and a big U-turn, like that and back. He'd have to go get another road someplace.

I'd forgotten all about that, but that's how they used to mark the roads—the high-class shows, they'd have the line drop. Now, the little bitty shows over in the east, who didn't have much money the way they marked their roads is the candy boxes and popcorn boxes they'd pick up on the lot at night, well, when the guy would make a turn, he'd throw them out the window, and you'd follow the boxes around. Nobody told you that over there?

Finchum *No.*

Frazier Hmm. Strange. That's the difference in an agent nowadays. The guy out on the highway, he goes in and signs the contracts someplace, but in the so-called good old days, it's like the year I first started as an agent, you had to go in and get the sponsor, book the town. You put in all the press. The newspaper, the radio, whatever media there was. In other words, you laid the press. That's what they called it. You had your press portfolios. You made the little sheets and so forth, because in those days, they had lead presses. They didn't have offset and so forth like they do now, and they have the maps and the layout sheets and the whole bit. You get out the newspaper, and then you went and you located where the hay was in town, where you could buy hay for the elephants. Then you went and located the water where they could fill the water tank, and then you drove the route to the next town. If you hit a weight station or something out there that you didn't want to go over, then you'd double back and you drove another route and found another one. The agent done all that.

I look back now and I wonder how the—and then, at the end of the week, you sit there with your little typewriter, and if you're lucky enough to go to a motel, and you order the *Heralds*. That's the little newspaper sheet they send. In those days, they sent it through the mail and you had to get the book from the post office, and you look up the country routes. Star Route and Route 2 and Route 4 and see how many

people are on each one because you had to type that order in and send it to the guy up in Iowa. Then he sent them to the post office, and they sent these little newspapers out about the show coming to town. Then you had to order the paper once a week. That was all done by one guy.

If you asked some guy to do that now, they wouldn't know what the hell you were talking about, I don't think. (Laughs) I don't know how we done it. We had no cell phones, no fax machines. Everything was Western Union or a pay telephone. I used to carry a pocketful of quarters with me all the time so I could call back to the show. And the only way you could call the show is if, like, you book the town, there was a café or something close by or you call the police department and say, "Could you send somebody out and tell them I'm trying to get a hold of them?" They'd come back and call you back at the phone you were at. Or if there was a restaurant nearby, you could get them to do it and so forth. That's how it all worked, then.

Nykolaiszyn *A lot different than today.*

Frazier Oh, yes, a lot different. I don't know how we done it, to tell you the truth. But we did and managed to get drunk on Sundays and have a good time and so forth.

Nykolaiszyn *Well, would you change anything or do anything different?*

Frazier No. I don't know of a thing. I've had five wonderful marriages. I've got a whole bunch of good kids. I don't know. I wouldn't change anything.

Finchum *You might have bought that boat?*

Frazier Yes, I would have bought the boat. That's one thing. Another part of that boat, I was looking at those barges and the guy came down, ask me what I was doing. I said, "I was thinking about putting a circus in one of these things." Well, this guy, he happened to be a dealer that sold what they called a sea-mule, and he said, "These are push barges, but I've invented this thing called a sea-mule, and it's like an outboard motor. It's a great big gigantic diesel engine. It bolts onto the barge. If you're going to get one of those, you're going to need one of these." That made it real. I thought, "Boy." Can't you just see it, though? You have the cookhouse and your performers up on the top part, then the next one down your wagons and so-forth, and the bottom deck would be your stock. Take the lead stock off, then the wagon. It would have been perfect. No highway patrol to bother with. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn *No weigh stations.*

- Frazier** No weigh station. It was a good idea. That's why Dory's idea was so good. I really wish that I could have been with that thing. That might have changed the whole view of it. He didn't have very many people around him then that were movers and shakers, Dory didn't.
- Nykolaiszyn** *Well, I know we just skimmed the surface with you and touched upon many different things, but is there anything else you'd like to share before we end up closing out today? Anything we missed that's big and glaring?*
- Frazier** Well, I tried to think of things about Hugo, or Oklahoma because that's what this is all about. And it might be interesting to know, are you familiar with the 101 Ranch in Oklahoma?
- Nykolaiszyn** *Yes.*
- Frazier** Then you know about—what's his name, Zach and Boyce that had that show? I tell this story, but nobody wants to believe it, but there was a colored guy on that show that threw a bull with his teeth. His name is Bill Pickett.
- Finchum** *From Boley, Oklahoma.*
- Frazier** Yes. You can look that up and find out that's to be a true story. They tie his hand behind him, and they turn the bull loose, and he would grab the bull by the nose and throw him, Bill Pickett. My dad was on that show as a young guy. My father was kind of an interesting guy. Did you ever see a movie called *Tarnished Angels*? Did you ever see a movie called *The Great Waldo Pepper*? (Laughter) Okay, well those are two you've got to Google because that tells a really good story. My dad was a pilot in the First World War, and these guys that flew those kites, I call them, I mean, they were just a motor with a couple of wings on them. The thrill of what they done during the war, they couldn't shake it. When they came home, they were all outlaws because of the way they lived when they were flying those little fly machines.
- Dad put together what he called the *Flying Circus*, Jack Williams, the Human Fly. He used to climb buildings. I've got a picture of him in Oklahoma City, climbing a building years ago. Did Mary show you the scrapbook? She showed you the scrapbook. Well, then, you're familiar with that, yes. When they made that movie, it was so interesting because my dad was a lot like that. He couldn't find himself when he got out of the service. He went in all directions, and it's easy to see why. You're over there every day, you're shooting back and forth at each other, and so forth, with those airplanes and then you get back over here, they discharge you from the army air force, and say, "Okay, you're a civilian

now.” Well, how the hell do you handle that? (Laughs) That’s what the movie *Tarnished Angels* is. When you see that movie, if you ever see it, you’ll understand what I mean.

I don’t think that my dad was the hotshot pilot that he professed to be. When I tell the other kids this, they get madder than hell at me, but I think that he was one hell of a good promoter, and he was that. But when it comes to the flying part of it, I don’t think he did too much. And just from the different tales he told me and so forth. He was a promoter and a good promoter, and that’s why this movie, *The Great Waldo Pepper* is so close to being him. I told my brother a long time ago, I said, “I’ve got a good idea for a movie. I’ve got just the guys to star in it and so and so,” and I was telling them about this on the telephone and about the antique airplanes and the old fashioned cars. I said, “Cliff Robertson is an antique freak for airplanes so we can get him to work in it.”

About three months later, Cork called me and told me, he said, “Have you seen *The Great Waldo Pepper*? It’s your movie. It’s just exactly like you explained it.” So I went and saw the picture show, and I truly think that whoever made that picture knew my father, because he wasn’t a hotshot pilot. He didn’t do a lot of flying overseas or anything, but he was good. He could fly an airplane as good as anybody, and he wanted to prove himself, but didn’t quite know how. Robert Redford played the part in the movie. Go see that movie. You’ll see what I’m talking about, because he never got a chance to show himself as a service pilot, shooting other people and so forth, but he was good.

I wanted to tell you something I know that my cohorts in Hugo haven’t brought up about some finny show. Oh, the Royal Brothers Circus. You know why we named it the Royal Brothers Circus? Because nobody can steal your title because you can’t copyright that name in Canada. It belongs to the queen. When me and my partner split, he named his show Martin and Downs, and it went defunct in a hurry. But the Royal Brothers, he was afraid that I would come back up, I think, and do the Royal Brothers Circus thing again.

That movie helped us out a lot up there. They done another movie before they done *The High Grass Circus*, a TV company. They wanted to try out their new equipment. That’s what it was all about. They had an editing machine on a truck and so forth, and they said, “Can we come and film this show?” And I said, “Sure, why not? As long as we get to see what you’re filming before you turn it loose to the public, nothing derogatory.” So they done a real nice half-hour film. I forget what they call it now, but they had the control of the stations up there, and they could show that film about a week ahead of us. And boy, you talk about big help! It was a big help. *The High Grass Circus*, every spring Al

would call the National Film Board up there and tell them we were coming and where we were going to open. They'd always make sure and show the show before we got there, and it was a big help.

Nykolaiszyn

Good PR piece.

Frazier

Yes it was. Yes it was. *The High Grass Circus*, Canada's only tent show. Well, you could talk forever if you just jump from one thing to another, like this, because there are so many people. It's like Ben Davenport, I could just tell stories about Ben and it would take the next six hours. He was a good showman, Ben was, and the reason why he was a good showman was because he was a fan of the circus. Ben was not materialistic, and he wanted to see the flags wave and the people in the tent and so forth.

There was one particular instance where the health department came out. I forget the name of the town, now, but it was here in the states. But they were going to close his snow cone joint because in Michigan, years ago, the only ice you could buy in Michigan was lake ice. They didn't have the big ice machines in those days, and so you couldn't sell snow cones. So it might have been Michigan that he done this. So while the health inspector was with him, he gave the guy the high sign that had the snow joint and told him to get the snow cones in the tent and sell them a nickel a piece. Get a snow cone in every kid's hand. So he stalled about a half hour with the health guy, then they walked in the tent, and every kid in the tent's got a snow cone. The health guy says, "Oh, to hell with it," and went home. (Laughs) But that's just one of many, many stories about Ben and Willie.

Willie was a grifter on the show. When they had the gambling in the tents, they were normally in the sideshow, and they always had what they called an outside man, the guy that ran the game. Then you'd have somebody out in the public that was acting like one of the town guys. He would prod the guys into betting and also he would take and make a couple of bets himself and so forth. But you couldn't beat those games, believe me. Those guys, they were magical. Like the Three Card Monte thing, they'd crimp that card. The guy would falter and look down like this, and the outside man would grab that card. He would tell the guy betting him, "I'll fix him." And he'd bend the card, that way you'll know, now, when you see it. Well, as he's tossing that card, he'll straighten that crimp out and put a crimp in another one. So the guy that's making the heavy bet, he's just sure he knows, because the crimped card is the red queen. He flips it and it's a black jack. (Laughs) That's some of the things, how it'd work. Interesting, really interesting.

Of course, that was big business in those shows in those days. They

moved those shows, then. Bud Anderson's show, I think I mentioned to you, they had about thirty guys in the grift over there and two or three guys putting the big top up. I'm trying to think of some other grift shows that were interesting. The Ringling show, they never had grifts on the midway. That movie they made about the *Greatest Show on Earth*, they showed that carnival game on the midway and so forth. That was disgusting. That never took place on the Ringling show. They had the gambling, but it wasn't for the public. There was enough people, there were twelve hundred people on that show at one time, and those are the people who done the gambling. I don't think I've overlooked any circus in Hugo.

Nykolaiszyn *What's your favorite part about the circus?*

Frazier My favorite part about the circus?

Nykolaiszyn *Yes.*

Frazier I guess the favorite thing that I would like to do is the announcing and making the pictures and so forth. I enjoy that. I've got a picture. In fact, I just sent it to Toni. It's on her Facebook page. I sent her a whole bunch of pictures. I said, "Put some of these on the Facebook. We'll see what they are." Doing the peanut pitch on a show, anybody told you about the peanut pitch? That's where you sell the little bags of peanuts before the show starts. There are coupons in some of the bags, and they get a prize for them. The whole idea behind that pitch is the guy that's doing the pitch. You're the one that sells the peanuts, the little bags of peanuts. I think we sold them for a dollar when I was doing it.

Well, I'm making the pitch for the peanuts and, of course, you make all kinds of hand gyrations and so forth. This one picture I've got, some circus fan took a picture of me like this while I was talking on the microphone from behind me, and it's when I had all my fingers. It was just before I had my finger bit off by a chimpanzee.

Nykolaiszyn *Do you have any pitches you still remember? Can you still talk through any of your old pitches?*

Frazier Oh yes, yes, yes.

Nykolaiszyn *Will you do one for me?*

Frazier I can make a peanut pitch. Well, it wouldn't be as good as being in the audience, but I can do it for you.

Nykolaiszyn *Sure.*

Frazier Okay, I haven't done this for a long time.

Nykolaiszyn *Putting you on the spot.*

Frazier “We have just a moment or two before the show starts, and during that time we have a very special announcement that will be of interest to each and every one of you, especially all the little boys and the girls in the audience so if I could have your undivided attention. The Cromer Peanut Company of Columbia, South Carolina, is introducing a brand new and different peanut product on the market this summer, and it's going to be known as Cromer's Roasted Peanuts. They're brand new because they're roasted from the inside out in infrared ovens. It's not the old-fashioned way, not the old-fashioned way where they dry the peanut out. It's done the new way with infrared roasting, and all the delicious flavor is trapped right on the inside of that juicy little nut, and when you taste them, you'll say the same thing I've said, 'My, oh, my! That's a good peanut.'”

“Now, in addition, as a special added inducement to get you to try their new product, the Cromer Peanut Company has instructed us to place on the inside of some of the bags—not all of the bags—but some of the bags contain coupons. Upon that coupon it says “Prize.” Now, if you get one of those prize coupons, you can run down to the center ring and give it to Allen Jones, our funny old clown, and he'll give you your prize, a souvenir to take home with you. We have just two minutes for this advertising program. Two minutes only. The vendors are coming through the audience one time, one time only, two minutes, here they come, have your dollars ready, and make sure when you get your package of peanuts you open them up right away. Look on the inside to see if you have a prize coupon. If you do, that makes you a winner. That's right. Just two minutes is all we have. We must hurry along. Hurry along if you will. Get your money ready because the vendors are headed your way.”

Now, the secret to that whole thing—there's a psychology behind it. When you pump those people up, talking about the product—there's a little bit more to it than that, pumping those people up talking about those peanuts—but the whole idea is putting those people into the seats, getting those vendors into the seats. They don't do that now. Even on David's show. I want to throw up. They stand down by the ring and the people have to come out of the seats down to the vendors. Well, you'll sell about half the peanuts you would if you're up there in the seats. You tell the vendors, “Into the seats,” and you'll go right into those seats, right to the top row, and those hands will start coming up. And, hell, nobody wants to get out of the seat and walk all the way down to buy a

bag of peanuts.

Hell, we sold peanuts—I've sold as many as two thousand bags of peanuts in a day, at a buck a piece with that same pitch you just heard. And what you give them is a balloon. And that makes it doubly good, because the kids that don't get a prize in the tent, they'll buy a balloon on the way home. (Laughs) I like that, and I really enjoyed the sideshow openings. Anything where it required moving the people and talking and so forth, because when you make a sideshow opening, you're looking at those faces down there and you can do what they call "turning the tip." If you don't know what you're doing, you will not turn that audience at a proper time. In other words, you won't tell them to start buying tickets at the proper time. There's a moment—in fact, it wouldn't be a moment, it would be a second—that you can look down there and see those eyeballs and you know when, say, this is when they're going to start buying. You have them buy tickets here, buy tickets over there, and go on the inside. That's the way it works. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn

There is an art to it. There's definitely an art to it.

Frazier

It used to be the sideshow was a big item on the circus, but the total circus had to be involved because, see, the people when they come get their tickets to go to the circus, they'll line up at that marquee so they can get in there first. Then it's up to the guy at the sideshow to break that line and get them to come on back down in front of your platform where you can talk to them. If you can break that line and get them down there, then you'll get them into that sideshow. You've got to tell them all. And they think you're lying, but you're not. You're telling the truth, that this is first. That's second. That's what the whole pitch is all about. You tell them what you're doing on the inside and so forth.

I saw this monkey that bit my finger off, this chimpanzee, when I was framing this show. I was building this show for Dick Garden, the guy that's going to open in Mesquite this weekend. I went out to Orange Grove. The guy had a bunch of monkeys. They had this ape, this chimpanzee, and it looked like a gorilla. I mean, it was so big. When he was hunched down, he's still about that high, and black and muscular and so forth. (Gestures) I came running back to Dick, I told him, I said, "If you want an attraction on that midway, believe me, you buy that chimp, I'll frame the show for it. If that thing doesn't get the money back the first weekend on the road, I'll pay you."

Anyhow, he bought the chimp, and we built a big cage on the back end of a truck and a small cage on the front where we could shift him into the small cage and load the show onto the big cage. His name was Tyrone, "Tyrone the Terrible, bigger than Gargantuan," the banners

were painted, I painted them myself. Anyhow, I had a guy working for him, B.K.'s husband, Mel, and I told him, I said, "I'm going to fight this thing into this cage the first couple of times to get him used to going in there, but I don't want you to ever do that. You stand here and watch me because you've got to be Mr. Good Guy. When you open that door, he knows he's going to get a can of soda pop, and you're not going to fight with him. Now, I'm going to have to fight with him for a day or two to get him in there," which I done. I roused that sucker and hit him with a stick and everything else and finally got him in, then the minute we get him in there, we give him a can of soda pop for a reward.

It got to the point where all Mel had to do was just open the door and the chimp would go in, waiting for his soda pop and he closed it. Well, Mel had to leave the show that one day, and I had to put him away. I went in to put the sucker away, and it took me thirty minutes fighting that thing to get him into his little shifting box. I closed the gate on him, and I had the soda pop in my hand. I reached up to give him his soda pop through what we call the slush board, a little thing like that. (Gestures) He didn't want the soda pop. He grabbed my arm—whamo! And he just chomped down on it. Some kid was walking through there, some guy that worked on the show. I'd have lost my whole arm if it hadn't been for him. I was trying to pull back and the chimp was pulling my arm and I said, "Hey, boy." I said, "Get a hold of my arm and help me pull out of there." It came out and it was just a bloody stump. He stripped all the skin off my finger and bit the tip off of this one.

Nykolaiszyn

Wow.

Frazier

Bad news, but it was a good chimp. And it did, it made the money, a buck a pop, a dollar admission to go see it. The first weekend out was in Fort Myers, Florida, and we got over two thousand dollars. The chimp only cost twelve hundred. (Laughs)

Nykolaiszyn

Well, we have a couple more minutes. Anything else, any final comments you'd like to make?

Frazier

Oh, gee whiz. Every time I drive back through Hugo, it's a heartbreak, because the town is so dead now. If it wasn't for the government programs, there wouldn't be a Hugo. The town used to be such a flourishing town. At midnight, the streets were active. The hotels were full and so forth, in the days when we had the shows in there. It was really something.

Nykolaiszyn

Mr. Frazier, thank you so much for your time today. We appreciate it.

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